

# CHUMS OF THE BACKWOODS!

by  
Martin Clifford



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# CHUMS OF THE BACKWOODS!

By Martin Clifford



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## CHAPTER 1.

Called Away from the School.

"HALLO! Who's that?" murmured Bob Lawless.

All Cedar Creek School looked round.

Cedar Creek was at lessons in the big lumber school-room.

Doors and windows were wide open on the warm summer afternoon to let in the breeze from the forest.

The big school-room door had suddenly been darkened, and a long shadow fell across the floor inside.

Miss Meadows glanced round, not looking very pleased.

The Canadian schoolmistress did not like interruptions in lesson-time.

On that point she differed from her pupils. All the members of her class—boys and girls—were quite willing to give geography a rest.

A man in riding-boots stood in the doorway—a rather tall, sunburnt man, with a thick, dark beard and spectacles.

He was looking into the school-room over his glasses, and he raised his Stetson hat as he met Miss Meadows' inquiring eyes.

"Stranger lost his way, you bet!" grinned Chunky Todgers. "He's dropped in to ask the trail to Thompson. Miss Meadows'll scalp him."

"Let's hope he'll take a long time asking questions," yawned Frank Richards. "If some boy's sent to show him the trail, I'm the man."

"No, fear!" murmured Bob Lawless. "I'm the antelope. I'd guide him all the way to Toronto this afternoon with pleasure!"

"Same here!" said Vere Beauclerc, laughing.

"Silence in the class, please!" rapped out Miss Meadows severely.

And Frank Richards & Co. were mute.

The bearded and spectacled stranger advanced into the school-room, hat in hand, his manner very civil and courteous.

"Please excuse this interruption, madam!" he said, addressing Miss Meadows. "I fear that I have interrupted a lesson."

"That is the case!" answered Miss Meadows, a little curtly.

"I beg a thousand pardons. Please allow me to explain. My name is Smith, and I am a stranger in this locality. Some distance from here I came upon a traveller who had been thrown from his horse and hurt. He appears to be a French-Canadian, and speaks only French. I want to convey him to his home, wherever it is, but I cannot understand a word he says. A man on the trail told me that I should find a school here; and I came here, madam, to ask whether any pupil who may be able to speak French would accompany me to where I left the Frenchman, to learn from him where he wishes to be taken."

Miss Meadows' face cleared at once.

"No doubt among your pupils, madam, there is one who understands that language, and can tell me what the poor fellow is trying to say," said Mr. Smith. "In the circumstances, I hope you will excuse this interruption."

"Most certainly!" said Miss Meadows. "Is the man far from here?"

"About three miles," said Mr. Smith. "I intend to convey him on my horse, if I can discover where he wishes to be taken. I simply need an interpreter. Perhaps some lad—"

He glanced at the class.

Up jumped Chunky Todgers at once, and put up a fat hand eagerly.

Chunky knew little more of French than he knew of Sanskrit; but he did not think of that for the moment. What he was thinking of was a pleasant run in the shady woods on that warm afternoon.

"Please, Miss Meadows—"

"Silence, Todgers! I will certainly send someone with you at once, Mr. Smith. Todgers, you may sit down!"

"But I'll go, ma'am!" said Chunky eagerly. "I'm just the antelope the gentleman wants!"

"You do not speak French, Todgers."

"Oh, yes, ma'am; bully!" answered Chunky. "Simply bully, ma'am! Commong

alley voo, mong amey—oui, oui—bonsoir and bonjour—and—and so on, ma'am!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sit down at once, Todgers!" said Miss Meadows, frowning. "Richards!"

"Yes, ma'am!" said Frank Richards rising. "I understand that you studied French in your former school before you came to Canada?"

"Certainly, Miss Meadows!"

"Do you think you could do as Mr. Smith requires?"

"Oh, yes, I think so, Miss Meadows!" answered Frank honestly. "I can speak French quite well enough for that."

"Then you may go with Mr. Smith—if you are willing, of course?" added Miss Meadows considerably.

"Quite willing, ma'am!" answered Frank promptly.

Frank Richards was more than willing.

"Very well, Richards, you may go," said Miss Meadows graciously.

Envious glances followed Frank Richards as he left the class.

Chunky Todgers looked quite wrathful.

The spectacled stranger, after thanking Miss Meadows warmly, followed Frank Richards into the porch; and in Miss Meadows' class geography was again the order of the day.

Frank Richards took his hat from the peg, and walked out of the lumber school-room with Mr. Smith.

"Just wait a minute while I get my pony, sir," he said.

"Very good, my lad!"

Mr. Smith walked down to the gate, where his horse was tethered.

In a couple of minutes Frank had his pony out of the corral and saddled; and he joined the stranger at the gate.

They rode away together down the trail—a familiar trail to Frank Richards, for it led through the timber towards the Lawless ranch, his home, and was, in fact, his customary homeward way.

Until they started together Frank had hardly looked at Mr. Smith; but now, as they rode side by side, he glanced at him rather curiously.

His impression was that Mr. Smith must be a kind-hearted man to be taking so much trouble about a stranger he had found injured on the road.

But as he looked at the bearded man's face he could not help thinking that Mr.

Smith did not look like a specially kind-hearted man.

His features were very hard, and his eyes very sharp and almost hawkish behind his glasses.

Outside the school, too, Mr. Smith allowed his spectacles to slip farther down his nose, and his glance was over them all the time, so that it did not seem very clear why he wore glasses at all.

Apparently he did not need them to assist his vision.

Mr. Smith rode in silence, without a word on the subject of the distressed Frenchman he had left in the wood.

He assuredly did not seem to be a chatty or very amiable man.

Frank Richards did not mind that, however. He was enjoying the canter along the trail under the great trees; it was a very pleasant change from the school-room.

Three miles had been covered before they left the trail.

Then the spectacled gentleman dismounted, and Frank Richards followed his example.

Mr. Smith led his horse into the wood, and Frank followed, leading his pony.

Frank expected at every moment now to come in sight of the distressed traveller, and as they penetrated farther and farther into the wood his surprise grew.

"Didn't you leave the chap near the trail, Mr. Smith?" he asked at last.

"No," answered Mr. Smith.

"But—"

Frank paused.

For the first time a feeling of uneasiness and suspicion came upon him.

If Mr. Smith had come upon a distressed traveller, it must have been upon the trail, not in the heart of the forest, where it was too thick for riding.

It was inconceivable that he had conveyed the injured man so far into the wood as this; there was no motive for having done so.

Yet Mr. Smith was pushing on deeper and deeper into the forest, and they were already nearly half a mile from the trail.

Frank Richards came to a halt.

Mr. Smith looked round, his sharp, searching eyes glinting over his glasses.

"Why are you stopping, my lad?" he asked.

"Where is the man we're looking for?" asked Frank.

Mr. Smith's eyes became sharper and

brighter as he read the vague suspicion that had come into Frank's mind.

He stepped back towards the boy.

"Come!" he said.

"But—"

"You are to come with me," said Mr. Smith quietly. "Do not be alarmed. You will not be hurt, and I will give you a reward, if you wish, for your services. But you must come with me some little distance farther."

Frank breathed sharply.

"It's not a question of 'must'!" he answered.

"You are mistaken; it is. Come, I tell you!" The man's voice rose. "Lose no time—come at once! I repeat that you will not be hurt, and I don't want to use force, but you've got to come!"

Frank Richards sprang back.

A heavy hand caught him by the shoulder as he did so, and the grip of the bearded man was so hard that he almost uttered a cry of pain.

In that muscular grasp the schoolboy was powerless.

"Come!" said Mr. Smith grimly.

And he led the boy on into the wood, and Frank Richards, helpless in that grasp of—on, tramped on, with wildly-beating heart.

## CHAPTER 2.

### The Cabin in the Forest.

**N**OT for a moment did the grasp on Frank's shoulder relax.

Mr. Smith did not speak again.

His eyes were about him, evidently watching for a sign that marked the route he was following through the forest.

The led horses tramped after them, through bush and bramble.

Frank's heart beat fast.

What this strange mystery could possibly mean he had no idea, but he knew that the man's story of an injured traveller on the trail was false.

That he needed an interpreter who could speak French seemed certain enough; otherwise Frank Richards was no use to him.

But it was not to learn from an injured traveller where he wished to be taken.

The French-Canadian, in short, was totally imaginary, and what Mr. Smith wanted was an interpreter for some other and quite different purpose.

What that purpose might be was a mystery, to which Frank Richards had no clue.

More than a mile more was covered before the strangely-assorted pair came to a halt at last.

From the thick forest they emerged into a rough clearing, and Frank saw before him a rudely-built log cabin.

The door of the cabin was closed, and outside it a man sat on a log, smoking a pipe, with a rifle across his knees.

He rose at once as Mr. Smith and Frank Richards emerged from the trees.

"You got him, boss?" he said, with a glance at the schoolboy.

"I reckon!" answered Mr. Smith laconically.

"Kin he talk the lingo?" asked the other, with a rather curious look at Frank.

"So the schoolmistress says!"

"All O.K., then, I reckon!"

"Take the horses, Bill, and then follow me in."

"You bet!"

"Bill" led Mr. Smith's horse and Frank's pony away to the rear of the cabin.

Mr. Smith removed his spectacles, and slipped them carelessly into his pocket.

As Frank Richards had already guessed, he did not need them, and had worn them only to change his appearance.

Frank was already pretty certain, too, that the man's name was anything but Smith, and he suspected that the thick, dark beard would have become detached from the hard face if pulled.

"Now, my lad!" said Mr. Smith quietly, "listen to me. As you know, I've brought you here to interpret between me and a Frenchman. You know now that the Frenchman isn't an injured traveller; that was a yarn, of course, you've guessed."

"A lie, you mean!" said Frank hotly.

Mr. Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"Never mind that," he said. "I wanted an interpreter, and I've got you! You're going to see a man in this cabin. You're going to ask him questions that I shall dictate to you, and tell his answers. Understand?"

"I understand!"

"You're not to tell him anything, or to ask him any questions on your own. Simply translate what I say, and his replies. Savy?"

"Yes."

"Do as I want, and after you've done the business you shall be set free, to return

to your school, or anywhere you like, with twenty dollars in your pocket. I guess that's good pay!"

"I don't want your money!" answered Frank. "I won't touch it, either! You've got me here on false pretences, and if your business was honest, you wouldn't have needed to do that. If you think I'm going to help you in any rascality, you're making a mistake."

Mr. Smith gave him a grim look. "Bocus Bill!" he called out.

"Comin', boss."

The man came round the cabin, having tethered up the horses.

"You've got your gun, Bill?"

"You bet!" grinned Bocus Bill.

A thrill ran through Frank Richards as the ruffian drew the "gun" from his leather belt—a large-sized Colt's revolver.

"You see that, boy?" said Mr. Smith.

"Well, at a word from me this galoot will let drive a bullet through your head, as if you were a prairie rabbit! Get that into your brain, and think it over!"

Frank's heart thumped.

"You're in desperate hands, my boy," said Mr. Smith. "But I tell you, once more, that if you serve me faithfully you shall not suffer. But no more of your chin-music, or you will be sorry for it!"

Frank Richards did not reply.

Mr. Smith unbarred the cabin door—it was barred outside—and threw it open, and stepped in.

Frank Richards followed him, and after him came Bocus Bill, with the gun in his hand.

Frank Richards looked quickly round him, inside the cabin.

It had an occupant.

A man seated on a rough stool, to which he was bound by a strong knotted cord.

His hands were shackled by a rope looped to his wrists, allowing him to move them to some extent, but not to get them free.

A bandage was tied over his head and part of his forehead, and there was a dark stain on the bandage, showing that he had been wounded.

His face was pale and worn, and it had the dark complexion and Gallic features of the French-Canadian.

He looked about twenty-five, a sturdy and rather handsome fellow.

His dark eyes glittered as the three came in.

He did not speak, but the look he cast at Mr. Smith spoke volumes.

"I have returned, you see," said Mr. Smith grimly.

"Je ne comprends pas."

"I think you understand some English, my buck," said Mr. Smith, "whether you can speak it or not."

The French-Canadian wrenched at the bonds on his wrists. But they held fast.

"Coquin—lache!" he muttered. "Quelque jour, je——"

"That's enough! Now, Richards—your name's Richards, I guess?"

"Yes," said Frank.

"Listen to me, Richards. You will repeat my questions to this man in French. You understand?"

"I understand."

The French-Canadian seemed to observe Frank Richards for the first time, and his glance dwelt on the schoolboy in evident astonishment.

"Mais vous!" he exclaimed. "Vous etes garcon—ecolier, je crois—vous n'etes pas——"

"Silence!"

Bocus Bill thrust his revolver forward, till the muzzle jammed on the mouth of the French-Canadian.

"Cut it out!" he snapped.

The man was perforce silent.

Frank Richards clenched his hands hard.

"Monsieur——" he began quickly.

He wanted to tell the prisoner of the log cabin that he was a friend, and not an enemy.

But the hand of Mr. Smith was thrust across his mouth before he could say more than one word.

"Hold your tongue!" The man's eyes burned at him. "By hokey, if you say a word apart from my orders I'll lay a trail-roppe round you till you can't crawl!"

Frank Richards' eyes gleamed, but he was silent.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### In Merciless Hands.

"SIT down!"

Smith rapped out the words.

Frank Richards sat on the log stool that was pushed forward for him facing the prisoner.

"Now repeat my questions to him," growled Smith. "Mind, I know enough of

the lingo to tell whether you do it correct or not, and whether you put anything in."

Frank Richards had his own opinion about that.

If the man had had even a smattering of French, he would not have been likely to take the trouble and risk of bringing an interpreter to the lonely cabin.

It was, in fact, a falsehood, and it betrayed that Smith was uneasy as to what Frank Richards might say in the tongue unknown to him.

But Frank did not allow his face to express his thoughts. It was more prudent to leave the rascal in the belief that the schoolboy interpreter was quite amenable to his orders.

"First, ask him: 'Are you willing now to tell me what I want to know?'" said Smith.

Frank Richards put the question into French.

"Monsieur, voulez vous dire maintenant ce que monsieur desire savoir?"

"Non!" rapped out the Canadian.

That reply did not need translating.

Smith scowled.

"Tell him he will die here if he does not answer, boy."

"Monsieur dit, repondez, ou vous mourrez ici."

"Alors, je meurs ici," said the Canadian.

"What does he say, boy?"

"He says he will die here, then."

"Obstinate fool! Tell him that I must have the ten thousand dollars, or his life."

"Monsieur demande les dix mille dollars ou la vie," said Frank.

"Monsieur peut demander," was the answer.

"He says you can ask," translated Frank.

Bocus Bill uttered an oath, and Smith clenched his hands savagely.

The worn, bandaged face of the French-Canadian was quite calm.

His eyes met those of the two rascals with intrepid defiance.

Question and answer had already given Frank Richards an inkling of how matters stood.

Evidently Smith and his companion were planning to rob the French-Canadian, but had not succeeded, and their interpreter was required to extract the necessary information from him.

Even at the risk of his life, Frank Richards would not have lent himself to

such a purpose, but for the present he followed the instructions of the kidnapper.

A plan was already forming in his mind for learning more of the prisoner, with a view to helping him if opportunity came.

"Tell him," said Smith, after a pause, "that he is in the hands of a desperate man, who will not hesitate to kill him if he does not tell us where the dollars are."

By this time Frank was quite satisfied that Smith could not follow the French, and he repeated the question in that language, with an addition of his own.

"Monsieur, vous etes dans les mains d'un scelerat qui n'hesite pas de vous oter la vie—Je suis ami."

The last three words, "I am a friend," added to the rest of the sentence, were lost upon Smith, as Frank expected, but they were not lost on the Frenchman.

His eyes gleamed with intelligence.

He understood at once Frank's object in seeking to get into communication with him under cover of question and answer, and he "played up" at once.

"Il peut me tuer—Je vous remerci, mon garçon."

"He says you can kill him," said Frank, without translating the last part of the sentence, which was, "Thank you, my boy."

That addition passed quite unnoticed by Smith, who was evidently quite ignorant of French.

It was clear, therefore, that it was safe for Frank to proceed on the same line.

"Monsieur sait que vous avez laisse le sac d'argent dans le foret—votre nom?" said Frank, the last words being "your name?"

"Alors, monsieur sait assez—Jules Clement."

"He says you know enough," said Frank.

He did not add that the Canadian had told him his name was Jules Clement.

"We want to know more," said Smith savagely. "We want to know all about it."

"On veut tout savoir," said Frank. "Peut-on faire quelque-chose pour vous?"

He kept one eye on Smith as he spoke, but it was quite evident that the kidnapper did not suspect that the second sentence meant "Can I do anything for you?"

Frank Richards felt quite certain of his ground now, and to every question from that moment he added something of his own.

To give only the English, question and answer now ran as follows, the first part

of the sentence being dictated by Smith, the second part being added by the school-boy interpreter.

"They want to know just where you left the bag of money. Where are you from?"

"Let them find it if they can. I am from the Cascade mines."

"They will force you to speak. How did you get here?"

"They cannot force me. I received news that my father was ill in Quebec, and I sold my claim and started home with the money."

"Your life is at stake. Are you wounded?"

"Let them take it. These scoundrels followed me from the mines, and yesterday they attacked me in the forest. I have a cut on the head."

"You are warned that they are in deadly earnest. Have you any friends in this section?"

"I defy them. I am a stranger here, on my way to the railway."

"You are lost if you do not answer. Don't trust them. They will not release you if you give up the money."

"Let it be so. I know that, my boy; I hid the bag safely while they were tracking me in the wood, and they will never find it."

"For the last time, will you speak? What can I do to help you?"

"I will not speak. If you are allowed to go free, take information to the nearest sheriff."

"Their patience is running out. I will do so if I can."

"I repeat that I will tell them nothing. Be careful. He is watching you."

"He says he will put you to the torture to make you speak. If I am kept a prisoner, too, my friends will search for me, and may find us both."

"His tortures will not open my lips. I hope it may be so."

"You will speak under the torture. Is the bag hidden far from here?"

"I will not speak. About ten miles."

"No food will be given you. Could you not put them on a false scent to gain time?"

"I will starve, then. That is a good idea. Let me think. But if they find the money, I fear they will murder us both."

"You will be beaten with a trail-roped till you tell them where the bag is hidden. Spin them a yarn to keep them busy until



to-morrow. If I do not return to-night, there will be a search."

At this point the French-Canadian's eyes gleamed, and Frank could see that the suggested idea was working in his mind.

"Tell them I could find the place where I hid the money, but only in the daylight."

Smith's scowling face cleared a little when that reply was translated.

From the looks of the two ruffians, it was easy to see that they believed that the threat of torture had caused the French-Canadian to weaken.

"I guessed the galoot would come to his senses," remarked Bocus Bill.

"I reckoned so," said Smith.

Question and answer in French went on.

"They want you to give directions, not to guide them. Don't agree."

"It is impossible to give directions, but I could find the place. This will gain time till to-morrow, at least."

"If you lead them on a wild-goose chase your punishment will be terrible. Until they have found the money I believe both our lives are safe."

"I will guide them to-morrow if they promise me my liberty. Be satisfied that they will never find it."

"You shall have your liberty as soon as they have the bag of money. Don't trust them."

"If they keep their word I am satisfied. I know they would take my life for their safety if they found the money."

"I guess that's a cinch," said Smith, rising to his feet. "Tell the galoot he shall guide us at sun-up, and if he doesn't take us to the right spot, Heaven help him!"

Frank translated that threat into French, adding:

"There's a good chance that my pals may find me before morning; and you, too."

"This way, younker!" said Smith roughly.

Frank Richards was led from the cabin.

The door closed and was barred again on the outside.

Bocus Bill proceeded to knot the end of a trail-rope about the schoolboy, with the evident intention of securing him for the night.

"You told me I was to go after we had finished, Mr. Smith!" exclaimed Frank.

The man grinned evilly.

"I guess I can't spare you yet," he answered. "The galoot may be fooling,

and if he is you'll be wanted to talk again, sonny. But don't you be afraid. After we've done with you all your troubles will be over."

Frank's face did not betray his feelings as he heard that remark, the hidden meaning of which was not hidden from his quick intelligence.

"You want me to stay here to-night?" he asked.

"Correct!"

"Where can I sleep, then?"

"I guess the earth's good enough for you!" answered Smith. "Fasten him to that tree, Bill."

"You bet, boss!"

"Well, I don't mind camping out on a summer's night," said Frank, with an assumption of cheerfulness. "I've done it before."

The rope was knotted behind Frank's back where he could not reach it, and the other end fastened to a trunk above the reach of his hands.

He was a secure prisoner.

A blanket was thrown to him, and when the two ruffians prepared their supper a portion was given to the schoolboy, and he ate it with what appetite he could.

But it needed all his nerve and courage to keep up an appearance of unsuspecting confidence.

For he knew that he was in the hands of utterly desperate and unscrupulous rascals, and that his life and the other prisoner's were not worth a pin's head in comparison with their safety.

If the two rascals who had tracked the unfortunate Canadian from the mines, to rob him on his homeward way, succeeded in getting possession of the bag of money, what would follow?

The returning miner, tracked by the two desperadoes, had hidden the bag in the forest before they had run him down, and thus made it impossible for them to silence him for ever without losing their plunder.

But when the plunder was safe in their hands, would they leave these two witnesses to bring them to justice?

As he looked at the two evil, brutal faces Frank Richards felt that there was only one answer to that question.

Time had been gained—until to-morrow.

On that interval and what happened in it depended the life of Frank Richards and the prisoner of the log cabin.

## CHAPTER 4.

## Missing!

"QUEER that Frank's not back!"  
 "Jolly queer!" said Beauclerc,  
 with a troubled look.

Cedar Creek School had long  
 been dismissed.

Boys and girls had gone their homeward  
 ways, but Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc  
 remained.

They had waited for Frank Richards to  
 return; but the dusk of the Canadian even-  
 ing was thickening, and he had not come.

What could be detaining him was a  
 mystery to his chums.

From what "Mr. Smith" had said, they  
 had supposed that Frank had only to ride  
 a few miles down the trail, and then return.

He should have been back at Cedar Creek  
 soon after lessons were over.

The chums stood at the gates, looking  
 away down the dusky trail, with anxiety  
 growing in their faces.

Black Sam came out to bar the gate for  
 the night, and he blinked at the two in  
 surprise as he found them still there.

"Mass' Lawless go home," said the negro.  
 "Mass' Beauclerc, you go home!"

"Oh, bother!" said Bob. "Let's go and  
 speak to Miss Meadows, Cherub. This is  
 jolly queer about Frank!"

The chums went into the school-house  
 again, and found Miss Meadows sitting in  
 the porch, chatting with Mr. Slimmey.

The schoolmistress looked at them in sur-  
 prise.

"My dear boys, why have you not gone  
 home?" she exclaimed.

"Frank hasn't come back, ma'am," said  
 Bob.

"Richards has not returned?"

"No."

"That is extraordinary!" exclaimed Miss  
 Meadows, in astonishment. "But probably  
 he has gone straight home, instead of  
 coming back here."

"I—I don't guess he would, as we didn't  
 know," said Bob. "He wouldn't leave us  
 waiting for him."

"My dear Lawless, he must have gone  
 home, as he has not come back here," said  
 Miss Meadows. "His talk with the French-  
 Canadian traveller cannot have occupied  
 him long."

"I—I suppose not."

"You had better go home at once, or  
 your parents will be anxious," said Miss

Meadows. "You should not have waited  
 so long."

"Very well, ma'am."

The two schoolboys went for their  
 horses.

A dim crescent of moon was showing  
 above the forest as they rode away from  
 Cedar Creek School.

Both of them were looking troubled.

"I—I guess nothing can have happened  
 to Frank!" said Bob Lawless at last.

"What do you think, Cherub?"

Beauclerc knitted his brows.

"I don't see how anything could hap-  
 pen," he answered. "It beats me! But I  
 feel sure Frank wouldn't go home and leave  
 us waiting. Of course, he might have  
 thought we should guess."

"It's possible, I suppose."

"He couldn't have had an accident,"  
 said Beauclerc. "If he had been thrown  
 from his pony, the pony would come home.  
 He knows his way."

"But he'd go to the ranch," said Bob,  
 "not to the school."

"Yes, that's so. Let's get on, and we  
 shall see whether Frank's at the ranch, at  
 any rate. I think I'll ride home with  
 you, Bob."

"Hustle, then!" said Bob.

They broke into a gallop, and covered  
 the distance quickly enough.

Lights were gleaming from the Lawless  
 ranch-house when they arrived there with  
 a clatter of hoofs.

Mr. Lawless looked out, frowning.

"Oh, you've come home, you young ras-  
 cals!" he exclaimed. "I was just thinking  
 of sending a man to look for you. Hallo!  
 Where's Frank?"

The rancher noted that Bob's companion  
 was Beauclerc, and not his English cousin.

Bob's heart sank.

"Isn't Frank home yet, popper?" he  
 asked.

"Home? No!"

"Oh!"

"What does this mean?" asked the  
 rancher. "Why hasn't Frank come home  
 with you, Bob? Has anything happened?"

"Has his pony come home, popper?"

"No. What's happened, I say?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Bob dismally.

"But something's happened to Franky;  
 that's jolly clear!"

"Come in and tell me!" said the  
 rancher shortly.

The two schoolboys followed him into the house.

There Bob Lawless explained what had happened in the afternoon—the visit of Mr. Smith to the lumber school in search of someone who could speak French for the purpose of aiding a French-Canadian traveller injured on the trail.

"Was the man known?" interjected the rancher.

"No; I guess he was a stranger in this section."

The rancher knitted his brows. "I guess it must have been O.K.," he said. "A stranger couldn't be supposed to have any grudge against Frank. I suppose Frank hadn't anything about him worth stealing?"

"Only his pony," said Bob. The rancher smiled. "It's not a hoss-thief job," he said. "That's clear enough. Besides, Frank could have got home on foot long ago if it was that."

"I know, father. But—but what can have become of Frank?"

"I guess that beats me—unless he's been thrown."

"His pony would have come home, popper. He's found his way home alone before now."

"True! Get your suppers, boys, and I'll send Bill Cook and some of the Kootenays to look for him," said Mr. Lawless abruptly.

"You're going to stay, Cherub?" asked Bob, as his father quitted the room.

"I'd like to, if a message could be sent to my father."

"I can fix that."

"Then I'll be glad to stay. I'm anxious about Frank."

The chums sat down to a rather dismal supper.

Frank Richards did not appear. Mr. Lawless came in, after despatching Billy Cook, the foreman of the ranch, with half a dozen of the cattlemen, to search the trails for the missing lad.

The rancher was puzzled and anxious, and Mrs. Lawless shared his anxiety.

Bob and Beauclerc would gladly have joined in the search, but Mr. Lawless bade them remain at the ranch.

If the missing boy could be found, the cattlemen could find him.

But they did not find him.

It was long past the schoolboys' usual bed-time when Bill Cook rode up to the ranch with the information that no sign had been found of Frank Richards.

It was evident that nothing more could be done till the morning, and Bob and Vere Beauclerc went to bed with heavy hearts.

Where was their chum? What had happened to him?

These were questions that troubled their thoughts incessantly, and for a long time kept them from slumber.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Could Help Come?

FRANK RICHARDS was thinking of his chums in those hours.

He lay in the thick grass close by the log-cabin, in the heart of the forest, sleepless.

Within a log-cabin the French-Canadian miner lay a bound prisoner, with the cabin door barred upon him.

Bocus Bill was in the cabin, sleeping in a blanket on the floor.

Outside, in the grass, the man Smith was camped.

After supper and a cigar, the rascal had looked at Frank Richards' rope, and then rolled himself in a blanket to sleep.

He lay only a few yards from the school-boy, and in the deep silence of the night Frank could hear his steady breathing.

But there was no sleep for Frank.

The terrible danger of his position was more than enough to keep him wide awake and restless.

Escape was impossible.

He had already tried to reach the knotted rope behind his back, but the work had been thoroughly done, and he could not even get his fingers on the knots.

He was a helpless prisoner where he lay. The danger had been averted till the morrow.

When the rascals found that Clement was leading them on a false scent—what then?

If they found him resolute in his refusal to place the money in their hands, his life would be worth little, and Frank's no more.

Unless help came in the interval there was but slight hope for him.

Could help come?

Frank knew that his chums would be thinking of him, that they would be alarmed by his failure to return, and that he would be searched for.

But the search would be on the trail; they had no reason to suppose that he had penetrated miles into the forest.

Midnight had come, and faintly through the great branches overhead glimmers of moonlight filtered down.

There was a sound on the grass near Frank Richards, and he turned his head quickly, a thrill running through him at the thought that it might be a wild animal.

But a soft muzzle was thrust into his hand, and there was a low, affectionate whinny.

Frank's heart throbbed.

It was his pony, Brownie.

A length of rope still trailed from Brownie's neck.

Frank sat up, his heart beating.

The intelligent animal, tethered in a strange place, had known that something was amiss, and he had gnawed through the tether-rope.

He had found his master, and was showing equine delight at having found him, snuggling his soft muzzle into Frank's hand as he sat in the grass.

Frank Richards cast a quick look towards the motionless figure rolled in a blanket a few yards from him.

Smith did not move; he was evidently sleeping soundly.

Frank's hand were free, and he stroked the pony's nose softly, murmuring endearing words.

But there was no time to lose—every second was precious.

Brownie was free, if he was not, and that knowledge had brought into Frank's mind like a flash a new hope and a new plan.

He rose softly and cautiously to his feet, still stroking the horse's neck and murmuring to him.

Silently he turned the pony, patted his head, and pointed to the forest.

The pony's intelligent eyes turned upon him questioningly; he knew that something was wanted, but he did not understand what.

The bridle jingled, and Frank's heart thumped.

He looked quickly, almost in agony, towards the sleeping ruffian.

But the man did not move.

Frank pushed the pony away from him, and struck him a smart blow on the flank with his hand.

Brownie ewered away, whinnying.

He turned back, and there was reproach in his glistening eyes.

Frank Richards raised his hand again.

Then the pony understood the gesture.

He threw up his head and trotted away into the forest, his footfalls almost inaudible on the grass.

Frank laid down again, his heart beating almost to suffocation.

He listened with tense anxiety.

A rustle came from the forest—a sound of brushing twigs and brambles, and it died away.

Brownie was gone.

A fear oppressed him that the affectionate animal might creep back to him, but Brownie evidently understood at last.

The last faint sound of the pony brushing through the thickets died away in the silence of the night.

Frank's throbbing heart grew calmer.

Far away in the forest, the pony was threading his way homeward, and as soon as he reached the plain he would gallop.

Long before morning he would be at the Lawless Ranch, and he would come as a messenger from the prisoner at the log-cabin.

From the lone cabin in the heart of the forest to the corral of the Lawless Ranch would lie the fresh trail of the pony's hoofs.

Where Brownie forced his way through the underwood the broken twigs and crushed foliage would tell their tale, and on the open plain, wet now with the night-dews, the tracks would remain to reward the keen eyes of a skilled trailer.

Would Bob understand?

Frank Richards thought that he would. There was the gnawed rope still round Brownie's neck to show that he had been tied up, and had freed himself, and that would show that the pony had been in strange hands.

And where the pony had been tied up Bob would expect to find traces, at least, of Brownie's master, and, if he followed the trail—

Perhaps the hope was faint, but Frank knew well his Canadian cousin's skill, and he trusted to it.

There was hope—a gleam where all had been darkness.

Frank Richards closed his eyes at last.

Sleep came fitfully to him through the long hours, but ever, sleeping or waking, the hope was in his breast that even in this terrible extremity his chums would find him and save him.

## CHAPTER 6.

### Two on the Trail.

THE full, round moon was high in the sky, and the light fell in a silvery flood upon the Lawless Ranch and the wide green grasslands.

It wanted only a couple of hours to dawn.

But there was one at least in the silent ranch-house who was not sleeping.

Bob Lawless stood at his open window, looking out upon the moonlit plain, and the dim mountains in the distance, and the dark, silent patches of timber.

Bob could not sleep.

He was thinking of his chum, Frank Richards, and his anxiety for his missing chum was too keen to allow him to close his eyes.

Where was Frank?

He had ridden away from Cedar Creek School the previous day, and ridden into the unknown.

From that hour nothing had been seen or heard of him.

The shadowy forest had swallowed him up, and hid his fate from all human eyes.

"Bob!"

The rancher's son turned from the window as Vere Beauclerc's voice spoke in the dim room behind him.

Beauclerc had thrown himself on Frank's bed.

"Yes, Cherub?" said Bob in a low voice. "You're awake, then?"

"I haven't slept," answered Beauclerc quietly. "Can you hear anything, Bob?"

"Only the wind in the larches."

"I thought I heard a horse."

"Only the hesses in the corral, then, old chap."

"I don't think so."

Vere Beauclerc slipped from the bed and joined his chum at the window.

His eyes swept the moonlit plain without.

"Listen!" he muttered.

He held up his hand. Bob Lawless strained his ears to hear.

Faintly, from afar, came a low sound, and as it drew nearer, it could be recognised as the tattoo of horse's hoofs.

"By gum, you weren't mistaken, Cherub!" muttered Bob, his eyes gleaming.

"It—it can't be Frank, surely?"

The two schoolboys watched eagerly from the window.

Closer and closer came the tattoo on the plain, and at last a dim form loomed up in the moonlight.

It was a riderless horse, heading for the ranch-house, as if well knowing its way.

Bob caught Vere Beauclerc by the arm. "Frank's pony!" he muttered.

"It's Brownie!" said Beauclerc, with a nod. "And without Frank!"

"I guess I'm going down!"

"Quiet!" said Beauclerc. "No need to wake the house, Bob."

The chums of Cedar Creek quitted the room silently and crept down the stairs.

Cautiously Bob Lawless removed bolt and chain on the massive door of the ranch-house.

The fresh night wind blew in as he drew back the door.

Outside, the pony was whinnying softly.

"Brownie!" called Beauclerc.

He ran out and caught the horse.

Brownie rubbed his soft muzzle on the arm of his master's chum.

Beauclerc stroked the pony's glossy neck.

"It's Frank's pony, right enough," muttered Bob Lawless. "But where's Frank? If the brute could only speak!"

Beauclerc was examining the pony attentively.

"If Franky's been thrown and hurt, Beau, it's curious that the hoss didn't get home before this," said Bob.

"It's not that, Bob," said Beauclerc quietly. "Frank's being kept away."

"How do you know that, Cherub?"

"Look at Brownie. His bridle's been taken off; he's been roped up. There's the trail-rope loose round his neck," said Beauclerc. "He's been tied up, and he's gnawed through the rope. Look at it!"

"By gum! You're right, Cherub!"

"Whoever roped in Brownie knows what's become of Frank," said Beauclerc. "Brownie was captured, and Frank was

with him then. Brownie's got away, and Frank hasn't."

"But who? Why?"

"Goodness knows. But that man, Mr. Smith, with whom Frank rode away from Cedar Creek, must be at the bottom of it," said Beauclerc.

Bob knitted his brows.

"He looked a harmless galoot enough, Cherub. He comes into the school to ask after a chap who can speak French to interpret for him, because he's found a French-Canadian hurt on the trail." Bob shook his head. "It was sheer chance that Frank went with him. Miss Meadows called him out from the class. Smith couldn't have known Frank would come with him, Cherub. So it couldn't have been a trick by somebody who had it up against Frank."

Beauclerc nodded.

"No, it couldn't," he agreed.

"Well, then, if the man was a stranger to Frank, why should he hurt him?"

"I don't know," admitted Beauclerc.

"But I know that Frank rode away from school with this man Smith, and that he's not been seen since. I believe that if we found Smith we should find Frank."

"We're going to find Frank," said Bob, setting his teeth. "If Brownie was taken along with him, and it looks like it, Brownie's come from where Frank is now. And he's left a trail, Cherub."

"I was thinking of that."

"The dew's thick on the prairie," said Bob, his eyes glistening, "and this light is as good as daylight. If I can't pick up the trail you can call me a Chinaman. We'll leave Brownie with Billy Cook, and take the trail, Cherub. What do you say?"

"Good man," said Beauclerc. "That's my idea, too. We'll borrow a gun from Billy Cook."

Bob Lawless led the pony away towards the ranch foreman's cabin, Beauclerc following.

He knocked lightly at Billy Cook's door.

The chums did not want to awaken Mr. Lawless, who might very possibly have demurred when he learned of Bob's scheme; in fact, it was very probable that he would.

"Hallo!" came from within the cabin.

"Wake up, Billy!"

"You, Bob! Has Franky come home?"

"No; but his pony has."

"Gee-whiz!"

The door opened, and Billy Cook looked out, rubbing his eyes.

"Here's the pony, Bill," said Bob Lawless. "We're going to try and pick up his trail. Tell popper, will you, and you can come after us. I believe Frank's in bad hands."

"You get back to bed," advised Billy Cook. "Leave this hyer business to your elders, Bob Lawless."

"Take the pony," answered Bob.

"I guess I'll wake your popper, and put it to him," said the ranch foreman. "And I reckon he won't let you go humping on any trail before morning, and on your own, you young scallywag!"

Billy Cook led the pony away, and Bob slipped into the cabin.

He knew where the ranchman kept his rifle and cartridges, and in a few seconds he emerged with the rifle under his arm and the cartridge-belt slung over his shoulder.

"Come on, Cherub!"

"I'm with you, Bob!"

The two schoolboys started at a run.

Where the pony's hoofs had trampled the dewy grass the trail was plain and glistening in the moonlight, and they were able to proceed at a trot and keep it under observation.

For a mile or more the trail led them without a pause, and they did not stop.

Then a patch of stony ground brought them to a pause.

Beauclerc scanned the ground in vain.

Bob Lawless was deeply learned in the lore of the woods and the prairie, and he was not long at fault.

In a few minutes the young Canadian was following the trail again, but it was at a snail's pace now.

For some distance they proceeded slowly and cautiously, till the stony patch was passed.

"Here we are again!" said Beauclerc.

Bob's eyes gleamed.

"Lucky we started at once, Cherub! It will be sun-up in an hour, and then the dew will dry. I guess this trail won't be easy to follow then. Put it on, kid! We can run here!"

And they ran on, without a pause or a fault, till the sombre shadows of the timber received them.

Then Bob Lawless halted again.

"Sign" was difficult to find amid the tangled undergrowth of the wood.

But here and there the snapped twigs and trampled herbage showed where the pony had forced his way, and even so slight a sign as the dew shaken from a bush was enough for the keen-eyed Canadian.

Even when the moon had set Bob Lawless still pushed on, though slowly now, and with hesitation.

But as the early rays of the rising sun penetrated the shadows of the wood his task was easier.

Slowly but steadily the chums of Cedar Creek School pushed on into the sombre depths of the almost untrodden forest.

## CHAPTER 7.

### The Last Hope.

**F**RANK RICHARDS stirred and awoke. Towards dawn the school-boy prisoner had fallen into an uneasy slumber, rolled in the blanket on the grass.

The sound of movements awakened him. He sat up in the grass.

For a moment or two Frank expected to see about him the familiar walls of his room at his uncle's ranch.

But recollection came quickly of the strange adventure of the preceding day.

Before his eyes was the log-cabin, in which the French-Canadian miner, Jules Clement, lay bound a prisoner.

"Mr. Smith" and his companion, Bocus Bill, were talking in low tones near him, taking no heed of the schoolboy.

Frank glanced at them, and then looked away towards the sombre woods that surrounded the lonely cabin.

He thought of Brownie, and wondered whether he had reached the ranch, and whether the trail he had left would help his friends to find him.

Upon that faint hope everything depended, even life itself.

Bocus Bill left his companion and went round the cabin.

A minute later there was a loud exclamation, and the ruffian came hurrying back.

"The pony's gone, boss!"

"The pony?" repeated Smith.

"The kid's pony."

"You fool! Didn't you tether him?" growled Smith.

"I guess I put the trail-rope on the

critter!" snarled Bocus Bill. "The brute's bitten it through and vamoosed!"

Smith strode over to where Frank Richards lay in the grass.

Quickly he examined the rope that shackled the schoolboy to the trunk of the big tree close at hand.

"The kid had no hand in it," he said. "He's safe enough. He hasn't moved."

"Don't I tell you the critter gnawed through the rope?" answered Bocus Bill. "I guess he's fur enough off by this time."

"Well, it matters little. We're after bigger game than a horse," said Smith.

"I guess that critter would have fetched two hundred dollars in the United States!" grunted the ruffian.

Smith uttered an impatient exclamation. "Don't chew the rag about that, Bill. This isn't a horse-thief game," he said.

"Our critters are safe, I suppose?"

"Yep."

"Then it's all O.K."

Frank Richards did not speak. His heart was heavy.

His hope that Brownie's trail might lead the rescuers to the lonely log-cabin in the forest was faint, but it was fainter now that he saw that the thought did not even occur to the two kidnapers.

His hope of safety was their danger, but the danger was too slight to trouble them.

As the sunlight strengthened Smith and Bocus Bill sat down to a hurried breakfast outside the cabin.

They did not heed Frank Richards.

When the hasty meal was finished Bocus Bill untied the rope that fastened Frank Richards to the tree.

The door of the cabin was opened, and Smith strode in.

The French-Canadian miner was lying on the earthen floor, bound securely.

His pale face turned towards the adventurer when he entered.

"Bring the boy here, Bill."

"Yep."

Frank Richards was brought in.

"I guess I want you to talk to the galoot again, sonny," said Smith. "Last night the critter agreed to lead us to the place where he hid the bag of dollars. We're taking him along with us now. Tell him in his lingo that if he tries any gum-game on us it will be the last gum-game he will ever play on this earth!"

"Qu'est que c'est?" asked the Frenchman.

Frank Richards translated the threat.

Clement shrugged his shoulders.

"On verra," he said.

"What does he say?" growled Smith.

"He says you will see."

"I guess we will, and I guess he will wish he'd never been born if he tries to pull the wool over our eyes!"

At a sign from the adventurer Bocus Bill unbound the Canadian and led him from the cabin, with his arms, however, still secured behind his back.

Smith proceeded to bind Frank Richards to the log-bench in the cabin.

Evidently the schoolboy was to be left there while Clement was taken away by the two rascals.

Bocus Bill looked in at the doorway, his hand resting on the butt of his revolver in his belt.

Frank shivered as he caught the expression on the face of the ruffian.

"What's the good, boss?" muttered Bocus Bill. "I reckon we're through with the younker."

"We may want him again," answered Smith.

"He's done the talking for us, I guess."

Smith shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"The Frenchmen may be fooling us," he answered. "Haven't you any sense? If we don't find the dollars we shall want the kid to talk again."

"Correct!" assented Bocus Bill.

Smith followed him from the cabin, and the door was closed, and wedged fast with a chip of wood outside.

Frank Richards sat on the bench, shivering.

His life hung on a thread in the hands of the two desperadoes from the mines.

Only the fact that he might still be wanted to translate between them and their victim had saved him so far.

When he had served his term, and was wanted no longer, he knew what to expect. The life of a schoolboy would not stand between the thieves and safety.

Ten years in prison waited for them, if Frank Richards could help in bringing them to justice, and they did not mean to run that risk.

How was this to end?

Frank listened to the sound of receding footsteps, and the rustling of the under-wood as the two rascals departed with their prisoner.

Then silence fell.

Dimly through the interstices in the rough walls of the cabin the sunlight penetrated.

From without came the chirping of birds, the sounds of the awakening of life of the new day.

Frank Richards thought of Cedar-Creek School, of the boys and girls who would soon be arriving there for lessons, little dreaming of the terrible peril in which their schoolfellow lay.

He thought of his chums, too—his chums who would not have shrunk from any danger, however great, to save him.

What were they doing.

Had Brownie arrived at the ranch—had the gnawed trail-ropes told them the tale? And where they even then seeking to pick up the trail of the pony in the grassy plain and the tangled woods?

The hope was slight, but it was all he had, and it did not leave him.

For some time he made attempts to loosen his bonds, but the roping had been done too carefully, and he desisted at last, with aching arms and heavy heart.

Weary and restless, he sat and waited, expecting soon to hear the sound of the kidnappers returning, but hoping against hope that he would hear the voices of his friends.

Suddenly he started.

Outside the cabin there was a sound—a low, faint sound—but he knew that it was a cautious footfall.

His heart beat almost to suffocation.

Was it the footstep of friend or of foe?

## CHAPTER 8.

### Tracked Down.

"HANG it!" Bob Lawless muttered the words savagely.

Beauclerc did not speak; he watched his chum in silence.

To him the woods told nothing. He was not so skilled as the Canadian lad in woodcraft.

And even Bob seemed beaten at last.

Twice he had lost the trail, and found it again, but now, for the third time, he was at a loss.

Right and left he tried, but no "sign" met his penetrating gaze.



"Hang it!" he repeated.

The trailers had had good luck so far, but it seemed that their luck was too good to last.

For half an hour now Bob had been seeking "sign," and had found none.

He stopped at last, leaning against a tree-trunk, his hands driven into his pockets, Billy Cook's rifle in the hollow of his arm.

"I guess it looks as if we come out at the little end of the horn this time, Cherub!" he muttered. "But we're not giving in. We've beaten Billy Cook, anyhow. I reckon he's on the trail long ago with popper, but he's lost it before this, or he'd have been up with us."

Beauclerc nodded.

"We've got to find it, Bob," he said.

"By thunder, we're going to find it!" said Bob, between his teeth. "Hallo, What's that?"

He started forward, as his eyes fell upon a tiny object in the herbage.

It was a small green lizard, wriggling painfully on the ground.

"Poor thing!" said Beauclerc compassionately. "It's hurt."

Bob Lawless nodded.

"I guess I'm sorry for Mr. Lizard," he said. "But here's luck. Put him out of his pain, Cherub."

Bob's face was brighter.

"That poor little beast was hurt," he said. "He's been trodden on, Cherub.

What was it trod on him?"

Beauclerc started.

"I guess," said Bob, "that we're on the track again. I guess, old Cherub, that it was a hoss put his foot on that poor old lizard—Brownie, in fact. He's passed this way, though the ground's too hard just here to keep a trace of him. Brownie was heading for the ranch—that's west of here. So I reckon, Cherub, that if we look east of here we shall pick up Brownie's trail again."

"Let's try," said Beauclerc hopefully.

Bob Lawless glanced up at the sky, and started. One glance was enough to give him his direction.

Slowly and carefully he searched through the wood, eastward of the spot where the unfortunate lizard had been found.

A sudden exclamation of satisfaction escaped him.

"Look here, Cherub!"

He had reached a spot where the under-

woods were thicker, and he triumphantly pointed out a broken twig.

"Something's passed," he said.

He pushed on.

"Jerusalem crickets!" he exclaimed, a few minutes later.

In a soft hollow of the ground a hoof-mark showed up clearly.

"That's Brownie's size, hay?" grinned Bob. "Come on, Cherub; this is where we rake in the stakes."

Thicker and thicker the wood lay before them, and they had to push their way through, but that was all to the good, for in the thick underwoods there were ample traces where a horse had forced its way.

Bob Lawless halted suddenly.

"Quiet!" he whispered.

Beauclerc looked at him.

The rancher's son raised his hand and pointed.

Through the opening of the trees they made out part of the outline of a log-cabin in a little glade ahead.

"A cabin!" muttered Beauclerc breathlessly.

Bob nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"I guess that shebang belonged to some trapper in the old days," he whispered. "But I reckon somebody else is using it now—eh? This looks like the end of the trail, Cherub. Quite— If Frank's there, I reckon somebody else is there with him, and it's the shooter we shall want now."

Bob Lawless hurriedly examined the rifle, and held it ready as he pushed on silently and cautiously, Beauclerc at his heels.

They came to the clearing, their eyes looking keenly about them.

There was no sign of life, save a sound of horses moving at the back of the cabin.

Bob scanned the locality carefully before venturing out into the open.

Two horses were tethered behind the cabin, but there was no sign of a human being.

"Two of them, then!" muttered Beauclerc. "They must be in the cabin, Bob."

Bob shook his head.

"Look at it!" he whispered. "There's a wedge jammed under the door outside. Somebody's shut up there, but whoever it is is a prisoner."

Beauclerc's eyes glistened.

"Frank!" he muttered breathlessly.

"We're going to see. There's nobody about except the hosses. that's a cert."

The two schoolboys ventured out into the glade at last, and approached the door of the cabin.

Bob's finger was on the trigger of the rifle now; he was prepared for danger.

But it was pretty clear that the place was deserted, save by the prisoner in the log cabin.

The wedged door showed plainly enough that someone was confined within.

Bob Lawless drew away the wedge.

"Open the door while I keep the shooter handy, Cherub—we ain't taking chances," he whispered.

Beauclerc threw open the door, and the barrel of the rifle was levelled in at the little doorway.

There was a shout within.

"Bob! Beau, old man!"

"Frank!"

The two schoolboys rushed in.

Frank Richards' eyes danced.

"Bob!" he panted. "Oh, but I'm glad to see you! Get me loose—get me loose, quick; they may come back!"

Beauclerc's knife was already at work on his bonds.

The rope fell in fragments round him, and Frank Richards sprang to his feet, rubbing his numbed limbs.

"Thank Heaven you've found me!" he panted. "How—how did you— Was it Brownie's trail that led you here, Bob?"

"Correct!" grinned Bob Lawless.

"Bless him!" said Frank. "I—I hoped—but it seemed such a slim chance! Oh, you chaps, it's a treat to see you, and no mistake!"

"Same here, Franky!" said Bob.

Frank Richards looked hastily out of the cabin.

The forest lay silent and deserted round the clearing.

"They're not back yet!" he breathed.

"When they come—"

"I don't know who 'they' are," said Beauclerc. "But hadn't we better clear before they come?"

"No; there's another chap in this fix," said Frank. "A French-Canadian named Clement. We can't leave him to be murdered."

Bob Lawless whistled.

"So bad as that, Frank?"

Frank Richards shivered.

"You've saved my life," he said.

"We've got to save his. You remember that villain Smith, who came to the school

to ask for somebbody who could speak French to interpret for him. He told Miss Meadows it was a French traveller injured on the road. That was a lie."

"I guessed it!" muttered Beauclerc.

"There are two of the rotters," said Frank hurriedly. "They had a French-Canadian miner here—a chap who couldn't speak English. They made me translate for them. They wanted to rob him. As they didn't understand French, I asked him other things, besides what they told me to ask him, and found out all about him."

"That was cute," said Bob.

"He was at the Cascade mines, and had a claim there," explained Frank. "He got news that his father was ill in the East, and sold his claim and started home with the money on him. Those two villains followed him from the mines, and laid for him in the forest. He got away wounded, and hid the bag of dollars in the timber somewhere, and when they ran him down and captured him, they did not know where to look for the money. So they wanted an interpreter to get the information out of him."

"I see."

"They would have tortured him to make him speak," said Frank, with a shudder. "But we worked it between us—speaking in French—that he should pretend to be willing to guide them to where the money was hidden, to gain time. It had to be left till morning. Soon after dawn they started, taking Clement with them. That was four days ago. When—when I heard you, I thought perhaps it was those villains coming back. That would have been the finish."

Bob knitted his brows.

"Then the Frenchy isn't going to let them bag the dollars?" he asked.

"No; he's fooling them."

"When they find that out—"

"I don't think they will hurt him till they've got their hands on the money," said Frank. "Smith told Boeus Bill that I might be wanted again, so they kept me a prisoner here. If they find the dollars, I believe they will shoot him dead, to save their dirty skins; but if they don't find them, they'll bring him back here to torture him."

"My hat!" said Beauclerc, with a deep breath.

"They're a pair of rustlers, the scum of the mines," said Frank. "They will torture him, as they threatened, and keep me to translate what he says. That's the game. But if they find me gone when they get back, I don't know what they'll do. They'll know it's not safe to stay here, and they will have to run for it, and Clement—"

"They couldn't take a prisoner with them if they vamoose out of the section," said Bob. "I reckon Clement would stay here, with a bullet in him, if that's the sort of galoots they are."

"That's what I think," said Frank.

"This is where we take a hand in the game, then," said Bob quietly. "It's up to us, you fellows. You're game?"

"Yes," said Beauclerc.

"You bet!" exclaimed Frank. "I'm glad you've got a rifle, Bob. Mind, those rotters will shoot."

"So shall I," answered Bob laconically.

"It will be a fight," said Vere Beauclerc coolly. "We'd better get hold of something, Frank."

Frank Richards nodded.

In a few minutes the two had cut themselves cudgels from the wood.

It was the best they could do, and then, with beating hearts, but cool heads, the chums of Cedar Creek waited for the return of the rustlers.

## CHAPTER 9.

### For Life or Death!

**B**OB LAWLESS closed the door of the log cabin, and jammed the wedge into place again.

"I guess we'd better let those galoots think it's all as they left it," he said. "They won't know anybody's been here till they see us—and my rifle is the first thing they'll see of us."

"Good!" said Frank Richards.

The three chums, keeping their eyes on the woods about them, moved away from the cabin, to a clump of trees within a dozen yards of the door.

Taking cover in the underwoods, they waited, out of sight, and watching the cabin.

Bob Lawless held the rifle in readiness.

The schoolboys had desperadoes to deal

with, and life itself depended on Bob's quickness with his weapon.

The log cabin presented the same aspect as when the two rascals had left it at sunrise.

They would not discover that any change had taken place during their absence, until they were close at hand, and had opened the cabin door.

By that time they would be under Bob's rifle-muzzle.

The trio waited anxiously.

Not one of them thought of seeking safety and abandoning the French-Canadian miner to his fate; but they were grave and quiet, fully realising the terrible peril they were facing.

They hardly spoke as they waited.

An hour had passed, when a rustling in the wood came faintly to their ears.

Bob gave his comrades a glance.

"I guess they're on hand," he whispered.

He lifted the rifle, and the muzzle looked out from the foliage, directed towards the cabin, the butt resting firmly at his shoulder.

His hand did not tremble.

Frank Richards drew a deep breath, and his hand tightened in its grip upon his cudgel.

The moment was at hand now.

From the wood, at a little distance, three forms emerged into sight.

Bob Lawless and Beauclerc recognised one of them—"Mr. Smith," who had come to the lumber school the day before with his lying tale in quest of an interpreter.

They could guess who the other two were—Bocus Bill and the French-Canadian.

"That's the crowd?" whispered Bob.

"Yes."

"I guess I've got a bead on them."

The French-Canadian was walking between the two rustlers.

He tottered a little as he walked, and his face was deadly pale.

His pallor, and the blood-stained bandage about his head, gave him a ghastly look.

Bob's eyes glinted as he looked at him. Bocus Bill was helping, or, rather, dragging, the miner along by one arm.

The ruffian was evidently in a savage mood, and Smith was scowling furiously.

The search for the hidden bag of dollars had been unsuccessful; probably the two

ruffians realised that Clement had been leading them only on a wild-geese chase.

"Come on, you critter, goldarn you!" growled Bocus Bill, as Clement tottered over a trailing root and almost fell.

He dragged savagely at the prisoner, and Clement uttered a faint cry.

"I guess you'll have suthin' to yapp about soon," muttered the ruffian, with another savage drag at the helpless man.

The French-Canadian did not understand the words, but their tone left no mistake as to the ruffian's meaning.

He tottered on towards the cabin, and Bocus Bill flung him roughly into the grass near the door.

Smith stood looking down upon him, with bitter rage and malice.

"You've had your chance, my buck," he said. "I guess you'll be sorry you've wasted our time. You don't get another chance. I'll make you write it down, with the fire burning your feet, and I guess you'll tell the frozen truth next time."

"Stow the chinwag, boss!" grunted Bocus Bill. "The galoot don't understand."

"I'll make him understand soon!" said Smith savagely. "Get the boy out to interpret, while I build the fire."

"Yep."

The words came clearly to the ears of the hidden schoolboys.

They left no doubt as to the savage intentions of the rustlers.

The threat was not an idle one.

The French-Canadian miner was to be put to the torture till he told the rustlers what they wanted to know.

Smith began to gather a heap of brushwood in a little pile close to where the prisoner lay, while Bocus Bill dragged at the wedge under the cabin door.

"You know what that's for, whether you speak English or not, you coyote!" hissed the adventurer, as he threw down the brushwood beside the bound man.

"Vous ne savez jamais," said the French-Canadian faintly.

"Oh, stow your lingo! Bring the boy out, Bill."

Bocus Bill strode into the log cabin, and disappeared from view.

Next moment he came striding out of the little doorway.

A revolver glittered in his hand now,

and his savage eyes swept round the clearing.

"Boss, he's vamooseed!" he exclaimed. Smith turned back, his arms full of brushwood.

"What?" he shouted.

"The kid's gone!"

"Impossible! The door was fastened!" yelled Smith.

"He's lit out, I tell you! Somebody's been here!"

The ruffian was glaring round as he spoke, his revolver raised, evidently ready to shoot at sight.

Bob Lawless hesitated no longer.

Crack!

From the clump of trees came the sharp, ringing report, and it was followed by a fearful yell from Bocus Bill.

The sudden bullet tore through his brawny shoulder, and the ruffian went reeling back into the log cabin, and crashed upon the floor.

Had the rancher's son chosen to aim at his heart it would have been a dead man that rolled on the floor of the cabin.

But even at that terrible moment Bob had spared him.

From the cabin came wild, savage yelling, as the ruffian lay on the floor, drenched in his own blood, and helpless from his wound.

"Thunder!"

Smith spun round, his eyes seeking the smoke of the rifle, to find whence came that sudden shot.

His revolver was raised, ready to shoot.

Over the glittering barrel his eyes were glaring.

The white curl of smoke from the clump of trees caught his eyes at once, and he fired shot after shot without a pause!

Crack, crack, crack!

The bullets tore through leaves and branches.

But the three schoolboys were in cover behind the trunks, and Bob Lawless was hurriedly but deftly jamming a fresh cartridge in the rifle.

Crack, crack!

The rustler was still firing.

Bob peered cautiously round the trunk through the foliage that screened the three from sight.

His rifle was raised again.

Five shots had cracked out almost in as many seconds, and but for the cover of the

thick tree-trunks the schoolboys would have been riddled.

The rustler was reserving his last shot, and springing for cover himself.

But he was too late.

Even as he sprang towards the nearest tree Bob's rifle rang out sharply, and his right leg curled under him, and he went with a crash to the ground.

He stirred, and lay groaning.

"I guess he's got that in the leg," said Bob Lawless coolly, as he put in a fresh cartridge.

"Come on!" muttered Frank.

The three schoolboys ran out of cover swiftly towards the cabin.

"Amis—mes amis!" cried the French-Canadian joyfully.

Smith raised himself on his elbow.

His leg had been broken by Bob Lawless' bullet, and he was unable to rise; but he supported himself on one elbow, and in the other hand he gripped his six-shooter, his eyes blazing over it.

"Drop that!" shouted Bob Lawless, thrusting forward his rifle.

Whiz!

Frank Richards hurled his cudgel even as Bob spoke.

The heavy billet of wood crashed into Smith's face, and he rolled over, his revolver exploding harmlessly as he fell.

"Look out for the other!" exclaimed Beauclerc.

Bocus Bill was still groaning just inside the log cabin.

Bob Lawless led the way, and his rifle covered the wounded ruffian. Bocus Bill half raised his revolver, but lowered it again as the rifle-barrel bore full upon him.

"Let up!" he panted. "Let up! I guess I pass!"

"You'd better!" said Bob Lawless grimly. "Take away his shooter, Frank! I'll give him one to get on with if he tries to use it!"

But Bocus Bill did not try to use the revolver.

He was almost fainting from loss of blood, and the rifle-muzzle within a yard of his face was too much for him.

Frank Richards took away his revolver and the knife from his belt.

Bocus Bill groaned deeply.

"I guess I'm a gone coon!" he said hoarsely. "Winged—winged by a gold-darned schoolboy! Oh, great gophers!"

"Winged—and a good shot, too!" said Bob Lawless. "But you're not done for yet, my buck! You'll live to serve your sentence; but you'll be lucky if you're ever able to use your right arm again!"

The ruffian groaned.

"A moi! A moi!" the French-Canadian was calling.

The three schoolboys hurried out to him. Smith, wounded as he was, was trying to creep away into the forest; but he was very quickly stopped.

Beauclerc opened his knife and cut the Frenchman loose. Smith's hands were tied with the same cord.

He lay in the grass, white with pain and loss of blood, and his eyes glittering at Frank Richards & Co. like a reptile's.

"I guess this is our win!" grinned Bob Lawless.

Frank Richards helped the French-Canadian to his feet as soon as he was freed from the rope.

"All serene!" he said, smiling. "Voici mes amis, Monsieur Clement. Maintenant vous etes libre."

"Je vous remercie, mon enfant," said the French-Canadian quietly. "Mon Dieu! Bons enfants, tout trois!"

Bob Lawless grinned.

"I guess I savvy that much French," he said. "Right-ho, old scout! We're three of the most bon—is that right, Franky?—I mean, three of the best!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The chap doesn't seem fit to travel," remarked Bob. "I guess you'd better look after him here while I fetch somebody from the ranch. I reckon I shall find the popper and Billy Cook hunting for the trail. See that those two galoots don't get away, Franky. I'll leave you the rifle, and if they give the least trouble, make 'em fit for the coyotes' supper."

"You bet!" answered Frank.

And Bob Lawless started on the home trail.

Jules Clement sat in the grass, his back resting against a tree, his white face very bright in the sunlight.

He had passed through the valley of the shadow of death, and in his relief and joy he scarcely felt exhaustion and pain.

Frank Richards searched the log cabin, and found food for the Canadian, which Clement ate ravenously.

And then Frank gave Lis attention to the two wounded rustlers.

"I suppose we ought to do something for them, Beau," he said.

Beauclerc nodded.

"I think so," he answered.

And the schoolboys bound up the wounds as well as they could of the two rascals, receiving in return curses and savage scowling, which did not trouble them, however.

It was an hour later that Bob Lawless returned.

He did not come alone. Mr. Lawless and Billy Cook and a couple of the ranch cattlemen were with him.

"Safe, Frank?" exclaimed Mr. Lawless.

"Yes, uncle; thanks to Bob!" answered Frank Richards. "If he hadn't followed the trail, though—"

"When I found he was gone I promised him the biggest trail-roping of his life!" growled the rancher. "But, as it's turned out, I'm glad he tried it."

He turned to the French-Canadian, and spoke to him in his own tongue. Then he gave directions to his men.

"Get those two rustlers down to Thompson, and hand them over to the sheriff. Better stick them on their horses and lead them. You boys can come with me. We're going to help Mr. Clement get back his dollars."

"Good!" said Bob.

And while Smith and Bocus Bill were taken away by the cattlemen, the rancher and the schoolboys started with the French-Canadian through the forest.

Clement was smiling and joyful now. In company with the rustlers he had failed to find the hiding-place of the bag of money; but he did not fail now.

Within an hour they stopped at a hollow tree in the heart of the timber, and Clement turned to Frank.

"Ici," he said. "Voulez vous—"

"You bet!" answered Frank.

He squeezed himself into the hollow trunk and groped for the bag. In a couple of minutes it was handed out to the miner.

"Good!" said Mr. Lawless. "Maintenant, monsieur, vous allez chez moi."

"Merci, monsieur!" answered Clement gratefully.

And the miner from Cascade was taken to the Lawless ranch for the attention he so badly needed.

Bob Lawless rubbed his eyes when he rose from the dinner-table.

"We didn't get much sleep last night," he remarked. "I feel sleepy! Hallo, popper! What is it?"

The rancher pointed to the clock.

"School!" he answered.

"Oh, Jerusalem!" said Bob Lawless. "Blessed if I hadn't forgotten school. I say, popper, we shall be a bit late for afternoon lessons."

"Better late than never!" answered Mr. Lawless cheerfully.

And Frank Richards & Co. rode away to Cedar Creek School, and the rest of the afternoon was spent in Miss Meadows' class.

## CHAPTER 10.

### A Mysterious Message.

"FRANKY!" called out Chunky Todgers, as Frank Richards & Co. rode up to the gate of Cedar Creek School in the morning.

"Hallo, Fatty!" answered Frank Richards cheerily.

"There's a galoot here waiting to see you."

Frank jumped off his pony.

"Chap to see me?" he asked, in surprise, Chunky Todgers grinned and nodded.

"Yep! It's Injun Dick, from Thompson, and he's got a note for you."

"Blessed if I know whom it can be from, then," said Frank. "I don't know anybody at Thompson to send me notes. Take my pony, Bob, old chap."

"Right you are," said Bob Lawless.

Frank Richards walked towards the lumber schoolhouse, while Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc put the horses in the corral.

Frank was surprised and puzzled.

He knew Injun Dick, the Redskin loafer of Thompson, who was often employed to carry messages; but it was a puzzle who could have sent the Redskin over to Cedar Creek School with a letter for him.

He found the Apache sitting outside the porch, basking in the morning sunshine, his tattered blanket draped round him.

Injun Dick rose to his feet as Frank came up.

"You've got a note for me?" asked Frank.

"You bet! Paleface give red chief letter

for young white chief," answered Injun Dick. "You give Injun Dick twenty-five cents."

"Let's see the letter first," said Frank, smiling. "It may not be worth it."

Injun Dick fumbled among his rags, and produced a decidedly soiled envelope.

Scrawled on the outside was "Mister Frank Richards, Cedar Creek Skool."

The handwriting was rough and stubby, and quite unknown to Frank Richards.

"Injun thirsty," remarked the Apache. "Plenty of water in the pump, old man!" said Frank.

The Redskin made a wry face. He wanted something stronger to quench his thirst.

"You give Injun twenty-five cents," he said, in an injured tone. "Injun hump it long way on trail to bring letter to young white chief. Injun thirsty."

Frank Richards found a quarter in his pocket, and tossed it to the Redskin.

He had no doubt that Injun Dick had been paid for bringing it on the chance of a tip at the end.

But Injun Dick had been a great chief once, in the far-away land of Arizona, and Frank had some compassion for the fallen warrior.

The Apache grabbed the quarter, draped his tattered blanket round him, and stalked away with great dignity.

Frank Richards opened the soiled envelope.

There was a rough sheet of paper folded within; not notepaper, however, but evidently part of the paper wrapping of a whisky bottle.

Upon it a message was scribbled in pencil. Frank read it, and jumped.

He read it again, staring blankly at the rough scrawl, and then he rubbed his eyes.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated, in blank astonishment.

"Hallo, what's the trouble?" asked Bob Lawless, joining him with Beauclerc.

"Somebody sent in a little bill?"

"Nunno!"

"By gum!" chimed in Kern Gunten, the Swiss schoolboy. "You getting bills from the Red Dog saloon, Richards? Better not let Miss Meadows see it."

Frank gave the Swiss an angry glance.

The Red Dog in Thompson was a decidedly malodorous establishment, which was very carefully avoided by the respectable citizens of Thompson.

Any Cedar Creek fellow who had visited the place would certainly have had the vials of wrath poured out upon him, if discovered by the schoolmistress.

"Nothing of the sort, Gunten, as you know jolly well!" exclaimed Frank.

"Well, you looked knocked into a heap," grinned Gunten. "Fellows here don't often get letters from the Red Dog."

"Oh, rats!"

Frank Richards walked away with his chums, leaving Gunten looking after him very curiously.

"You fellows had better read this," said Frank, stopping in the playground. "I'm blessed if I can make head or tail of it. Some chap off his rocker, I should think!"

Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc read the letter together, and whistled.

It ran:

"Deer Mister Richards,—You ain't come yar like you promised. This yar won't do, and so I tell you plane. If you'd rather I come to your skool and see the missus, you can bet your sox that I'll come. Now, no pesky nonsense! You come yar this evening, or thar'll be trouble.

"Yours trooly,  
"FOUR KINGS."

"Great jumping gophers!" exclaimed Bob Lawless. "What does that mean, Franky?"

"That's what I want to know, Bob."

"Who's Four Kings?" asked Beauclerc.

"Ask me another!"

"You don't know him?"

"No. Never heard of the name, if it is a name," said Frank Richards. "I suppose it's a name, or a nickname."

"Four kings is a hand at poker," said Bob Lawless. "It's the nickname of some chap, of course. Some loafer at the Red Dog, I suppose, as he's sent Injun Dick with this letter. He wants you to go to the Red Dog and see him."

Frank Richards knitted his brows. The letter simply bewildered him.

He had passed the Red Dog in the street at Thompson, but certainly he had never crossed the threshold of that establishment.

So far as he knew, he was unacquainted with any of the shady habitués of the place, with the exception of Injun Dick.

Why the gentleman who rejoiced in the peculiar name of Four Kings should write him such a letter as this was a deep mystery to him.

"He says you promised to go there," said Beauclerc, with another glance at the letter.

"He says so," agreed Frank. "Potty, I suppose. I don't even know the man."

"And if you don't go, he's coming to the school to see Miss Meadows," said Bob Lawless, in wonder.

"He can come if he likes."

"It's an invitation for this evening, anyhow," grinned Bob. "Chance for you to go on a bender, and paint the town red, Franky."

Frank Richards laughed.

"The man must be mad," he said. "If my name wasn't written here, I should think the Indian had given me a letter intended for somebody else. Gunten's much more likely to know people at the Red Dog."

"I guess that's so."

"But here's the name. What on earth can it all mean?" exclaimed Frank Richards, in utter perplexity.

"The man's mistaken somebody else for you, I should think," remarked Vere Beauclerc. "That's the only explanation. Anyway, you're not going?"

"No fear!"

"Perhaps Injun Dick knows something about it," suggested Bob Lawless. "Let's see whether he's gone."

"Good idea!"

The three chums ran down to the gates to look for the messenger.

But Injun Dick had vanished.

Doubtless the noble red man was in a hurry to get back to the Red Dog with his twenty-five cents, and expend it in the purchase of the potent fire-water.

"Hallo, there's the bell!" said Bob.

Frank Richards & Co. turned back to the lumber school, and went in with the rest of the Cedar Creek crowd for morning lessons.

The letter from Four Kings was left in the playground, torn into a dozen pieces and scattered on the wind.

But Frank was thinking a good deal about it during the day.

The incident was quite inexplicable.

He did not know Four Kings, but it was clear that the man knew him, or believed that he knew him, and expected him at the Red Dog that evening.

Frank Richards, of course, had not the slightest intention of going there.

But he wondered what step Four Kings would take, if he did not come.

If the man carried out his threat of visiting the lumber school there would be a scene, and Frank wondered what would come of it.

## CHAPTER 11.

### Four Kings Means Business.

"MAYBE there'll be a visitor for you, Franky," grinned Bob Lawless, as the chums of Cedar Creek trotted up to the lumber school on the following morning.

"I wonder!" said Frank.

Frank Richards was feeling just a little excited as he arrived at the lumber school.

He glanced round quickly as he entered the gates.

But there was no stranger in sight.

If Four Kings intended to carry out his threat he had not done so yet, at all events.

There was a group of fellows inside the gates, engaged in an animated discussion, and Frank Richards & Co. joined them.

"Anything on?" asked Bob Lawless.

"I guess there's somethin' on at Thompson," said Eben Hacke. "It's that claim-robber again."

"Haven't they caught him yet?"

"Nope."

"What's that?" asked Frank Richards.

"It's been going on for two or three weeks, from what I hear," explained Hacke. "Some galoot goes moseying round the claims on the creek at night, lifting the dust from the cradles. I guess there'll be shooting if the boys spot him."

"It's a dirty trick," said Tom Lawrence. "The miners can't be watching their claims all night. When the pay-dirt's left in the cradles overnight, there's a chance for a claim-robber. One of the Red Dog gang, very likely. They've called in Sheriff Henderson, but he hasn't found the man."

"Injun Dick, very likely," remarked Kern Gunten. "He's the sort of galoot that would rob a claim, or anything else."

Frank Richards frowned.

"It's not quite fair to say it's Injun Dick, if there isn't any evidence on the subject," he said.

Gunten grinned.

"Sorry; I forgot he was a friend of



yours!" he answered. And there was a laugh from the Cedar Creek fellows.

"Bosh!" said Frank. "He's not a friend of mine; but I don't see why a theft should be put down to him. There are a good many fellows in Thompson who might be doing it."

"Some galoot who's had hard luck at poker, and wants to raise the wind, perhaps, Gunten," said Bob Lawless, with a grin.

Gunten flushed crimson.

He was about to make an angry reply, but he turned away instead, and left the group.

Bob looked after him rather curiously.

Gunten's gambling propensities were well known, and Bob had been making a playful allusion to them, but without any serious intention.

He had no thought for a moment of connecting Kern Gunten with the mysterious claim-robber.

But the startled flush of the Swiss struck him very strangely.

"My word!" murmured Bob, as he left the group of schoolboys with his chums.

"It isn't possible that Gunten——"

He paused.

"Impossible!" said Beauclere hastily.

"He seemed struck all of a heap with what I said, and I was only joking," said Bob; "and he seems jolly keen to give the impression that it's the Redskin who moseys round at night lifting pay-dust from the claims. But I guess even Gunten would draw the line at that."

"I should hope so," said Frank Richards.

"Your visitor isn't here this morning, Franky. Looks as if Four Kings is going to neglect you, after all," said Bob, laughing.

"Well, I'm rather glad," said Frank. "We don't want a scene here, though I suppose if the man came he would see that he's made a mistake."

Frank dismissed the matter from his mind as he went in to lessons.

But before morning lessons were over at Cedar Creek there came an interruption.

A coppery face and a tattered blanket appeared in the open doorway of the school-room.

"Injun Dick!" murmured Bob Lawless.

Miss Meadows looked round sharply.

"Please go away at once!" she exclaimed. "You have no business here!"

"Injun bring letter," explained the Redskin, ducking his head to the schoolmistress.

"A letter for me?" asked Miss Meadows.

"Letter for young white chief," answered Injun Dick, pointing a grubby forefinger at Frank Richards.

"You must not come here during lesson time," said Miss Meadows severely. "You must leave the letter on the table in the passage."

"Injun want answer."

"Then you must wait."

"All O.K., missy!" said Injun Dick. "Injun wait, you bet! Injun Dick bully boy with a glass eye. Thirsty."

Miss Meadows took no notice of that strong hint, but turned back to her class.

Injun Dick gave her a sorrowful look, and stepped out of the doorway, and sat down on the bench in the porch to wait.

The lesson went on.

A good many glances were turned upon Frank Richards, who sat with a slightly flushed face.

This was the second time Injun Dick had brought him a letter, and the fact was enough to excite curiosity.

Frank did not need telling whom the letter was from, and he was feeling puzzled and angry.

He was glad when lessons were over that morning, and he left the school-room with the rest.

Injun Dick was leaning back on the bench, his head resting on the wall of the porch, snoring.

It was probable that the Apache had already sampled the tanglefoot at the Red Dog that day, early as it was.

Bob Lawless shook him by the shoulder, and the Indian awoke.

"You've got a letter for me," said Frank, rather gruffly.

"Cor-rect!" answered Injun Dick, dividing the word in the middle, in the slangy way of the mining-camps.

"Hand it over, then."

Injun Dick handed over the letter, and his brown hand remained extended.

"You give Injun twenty-five cents," he suggested.

Frank Richards did not heed. He had no more quarters to bestow upon the fallen chief of the Apaches.

He stepped out of the porch with the

letter, and opened it hastily. Injun Dick followed him out.

"You give Injun answer," he said.

"Wait a minute."

"Injun wait. All O.K. I Injun Dick bully rook!" said the red man.

Frank Richards read the letter, and passed it to Bob and Beauclerc, his face dark with anger.

"That galoot again?" asked Bob.

"Yes; read it."

The two schoolboys read the letter with keen interest, and its contents made them open their eyes. It was as surprising as the former missive:

"Deer Mister Richards,—You ain't come and you ain't wrote. Wort sort of a game do you call this yar? You better not furgit that I ain't foolin'. I meen business from the word go, and don't you furgit it! I'm waiting for you at seven o'clock to-day at the Red Dog, expectking you arter skool. If you don't come, you watch out for me and bad trouble.

"FOUR KINGS."

"Note beney.—The barer of this yar will bring me your anser."

"Mysteriouser and mysteriouser," grinned Bob Lawless. "Frankly, old scout, this is some old pal you've forgotten."

Frank's eyes gleamed.

"I don't know the man, and I don't want to!" he said. "But there's going to be a stopper put on his writing to me!"

He turned to the Indian, who was waiting in stolid silence.

"Who gave you this letter, Injun Dick?" he asked.

"Mister Four Kings."

"Who is he?"

"Bully boy with a tin ear," answered the Red man.

"What does he mean, Bob?"

Bob Lawless laughed.

"That's Western lingo, my innocent bird," he replied. "It only means a first-chop galoot—a real sport. I dare say Injun Dick's idea of a bully boy is a bit different from ours, though."

"You come?" asked the Indian.

Frank Richards hesitated.

"You won't go, Frank, surely?" exclaimed Vere Beauclerc.

"Well," said Frank slowly. "I'm fed up

with getting letters from the man. If I seek him, perhaps he'll see that he's making a mistake. And, anyway, I can tell him to chuck it. Suppose we ride over there after lessons? The fact is, I'd like to know what claim the man thinks he has on me. It looks to me as if somebody's been using my name in some way."

"Well, it won't do any harm to see him, I suppose," said Bob thoughtfully.

Beauclerc nodded.

He was a little curious, too. The matter was so strange and inexplicable that all three of the chums were curious to know who Four Kings was, and what he wanted.

"I'm coming, Injun Dick," said Frank, making up his mind. "Tell Four Kings that I'm coming at seven, and my friends with me."

"You bet!"

"That's all!" said Frank.

"Injun thirsty!"

"There's the creek," said Bob Lawless, jerking his thumb towards it.

Injun Dick gave him a reproachful look, and stalked away.

Gunten joined the three chums.

"Do you mind if I give you a tip, Richards?" he said, in quite a friendly way. "Miss Meadows has been keeping an eye on you."

"I don't see why!" answered Frank tartly.

"Well, of course, she knows that Injun Dick hands out at the Red Dog," said Gunten. "It's a bit queer for a fellow here to be receiving letters from that rotten caboose. Of course, you know your own business best, but if I were you I'd keep it a bit dark."

Frank Richards flushed with anger.

"I'm not receiving letters from the Red Dog!" he exclaimed hotly. "I don't know a soul there! I've been written to twice by a man I've never even heard of before, and that's all."

Gunten whistled.

"That's a queer yarn," he said. "I don't think Miss Meadows would swallow that. If you've been on a bend, and got mixed up with the Red Dog crowd, it would be only wise to keep it dark. That's my advice."

"Keep your advice till I ask for it, then!" exclaimed Frank angrily. "You know perfectly well that I've done nothing of the sort!"

"I guess I'm only going by what it looks like," answered Gunten, with a shrug of the shoulders. And he walked away.

Frank Richards breathed hard.

"You fellows can see that this man Four Kings has got to be bottled up," he said. "At this rate, I shall have all the fellows thinking that I've been playing faro at the Red Dog."

"We'll bottle him up!" said Bob Lawless cheerily. "Keep your wool on, Franky. We'll take a trail-rope, and lay it round the galoot if you like!"

Frank Richards laughed, and the matter dropped.

## CHAPTER 12.

### Not Nice for Frank.

FRANK RICHARDS could not help observing that day that there was a good deal of curiosity in the lumber school on the subject of Injun Dick's visits.

Perhaps Gunten had been spreading his own peculiar view of the matter. It was very probable that Frank's old enemy was not letting this opportunity pass him by.

After lessons Chunky Todgers rolled up to the chums as they were going to the corral for their horses.

Chunky's fat face wore a very serious expression—an expression that was quite owl-like in its solemnity.

"Going home, Richards?" he asked.

"Not now," answered Frank.

"Look here, I wouldn't do it if I were you, Franky," said Todgers.

"Eh? You wouldn't do what?"

"You won't get any good at the Red Dog," said Chunky, wagging his head sagely. "Go straight home, old fellow, and let it slide."

Frank Richards gave him an angry look, but Chunky's evident concern for him disarmed him.

Chunky was intending to give him a friendly warning.

"You ass!" exclaimed Frank, half amused and half vexed. "What do you think I am going to do, then?"

"Well, folks go to the Red Dog to play faro, I believe," answered Chunky. "I guess I've heard that old Boss-Eye runs a faro-table there."

"Who's old Boss-Eye, you duffer?"

"The galoot that keeps the place,"

answered Chunky. "Don't you know him?"

"Of course I don't!" roared Frank.

"Yet you're going there!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Don't do it, old chap!" urged Chunky.

"Oh, dry up, and don't be a silly young ass!" exclaimed Frank Richards irritably.

"Well, I reckon I've only spoken to you as a friend," said Chunky, in an injured tone. "Gunten says——"

"Bother Gunten!"

Tom and Molly Lawrence passed them, leading their horses from the corral.

Lawrence gave Frank Richards a rather odd look, and Molly coloured as she caught his glance.

Frank set his lips.

It was evident that the story was going round the school that he had boon companions at the Red Dog, and the thought that Molly Lawrence had heard it, and believed it, was bitterly annoying to him.

He stepped quickly towards Tom and his sister.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "I suppose you've heard the silly talk about me, and about Injun Dick bringing me letters?"

"I don't believe it, Frank," said Molly Lawrence quickly. "I'm sure you don't know any of those wretched people at the Red Dog."

"I don't," said Frank.

"You're going there," Tom Lawrence said. "You told Injun Dick you'd be there at seven, I've heard some fellows say."

"That's true," assented Frank. "Some rotter has written to me from there, threatening me, and I'm going to see what he means by it. My friends are going with me. I suppose you don't think I'm going to play faro?"

"Fancy old Franky painting the town red and bucking the tiger in the Red Dog saloon!" chuckled Bob Lawless.

"Better keep out of the place, anyhow," said Lawrence. "Miss Meadows would be mad if she heard of it, I guess."

"Look at that letter, both of you," said Frank. He held up the second letter from Four Kings.

"Do you mean to say you don't know the man who wrote this?" exclaimed Lawrence, in astonishment.

"Not from Adam!"

"He knows you."

"He thinks he does," admitted Frank. "I think somebody's been using my name, and I'm going to find out."

Lawrence nodded.

"No harm in that," he assented.

"You must be careful not to get into a quarrel there, Frank," said Molly Lawrence anxiously. "They're a very rough crowd."

"Oh, I shall be very careful, of course!" said Frank.

Frank Richards' brows were knitted as he led his pony out to the trail.

It was evidently high time that Four Kings and his correspondence were nipped in the bud, if Frank did not want to earn a reputation as shady as Kern Gunten's.

Frank was silent as he rode up the Thompson trail with his chums.

The whole affair mystified and worried him, and he was very anxious to have an explanation with his unknown correspondent.

Gunten and Keller, who lived at Thompson, rode up the trail after the three chums, and kept them in sight all the way to the town.

They rode into Thompson close on the track of Frank Richards & Co., and watched them in the street as the trio stopped outside the Red Dog Saloon.

Frank Richards & Co. had no eyes for the two Swiss; they were not thinking just then of their two prying schoolfellows.

They dismounted outside the Red Dog, where Injun Dick was leaning up against a post, draped in his blanket.

The Redskin was half asleep, but his black eyes opened alertly as the three riders dismounted.

"Injun hold hoss!" he ejaculated. "You put your dust on Injun Dick! Bully boy with a glass eye, you bet! Wah!"

And the Apache took the reins of the three horses, while the schoolboys went into the saloon.

A man with inflamed face and dreadfully squinting eyes was behind the bar, serving two or three cattlemen with drinks.

This was evidently the gentleman who bore the descriptive appellation of "Boss-Eye."

The habitues of the Red Dog glanced curiously at the schoolboys, whose faces were rather red as they came up to the bar.

Boss-Eye looked at them, appearing to be looking out of the window, owing to his affliction.

"What's yours, gents?" he asked.

Bob Lawless grinned at the idea of being served with mountain whisky over the bar of the Red Dog.

"We don't want anything, thanks!" said Frank Richards hastily. "We've called to see someone here—a man named Four Kings. Do you know him?"

"Do I know my own face?" answered Boss-Eye, this apparently being an emphatic answer in the affirmative.

"Is he about?" asked Frank.

"I reckon."

"Well, can we see him? We've called to see him."

"You'll find him in the parlour," said Boss-Eye; and he turned away to serve another customer.

The Red Dog did not look as if it possessed such a thing as a parlour, but the schoolboys discerned a door at the farther end of the bar-room, and they passed through it into an apartment which was evidently the parlour.

It was a small room, with a dirty window overlooking a yard piled with logs, and an atmosphere of stale spirits and smoke.

The room had only one occupant—a man in rough garb and red shirt, with a Stetson hat on the back of his head.

As he was the only person there they guessed that he was Four Kings, and they looked at him with some interest.

He was not a pleasant man to look at.

His clothing showed that he was not well off in this world's goods, and there were signs that even soap-and-water were beyond his means—or, at least, beyond his inclinations.

There were several scars on his stubby face, and one of his ears was partly gone, probably "chewed" in some bar-room brawl.

He was smoking a black pipe and sipping from a tumbler of whisky-and-water when the schoolboys entered.

He returned their glance with interest.

Frank Richards came up to the rough table at which the man was sitting, his chums following him.

"Are you Four Kings?" he asked directly.

"I guess I'm that same galoot," drawled the man with the bitten ear.

"Then you're the man who wrote to me at Cedar Creek School! I'm Frank Richards!"

## CHAPTER 13.

## A Startling Accusation.

FOUR KINGS rose to his feet as Frank Richards gave his name, his glance resting very keenly on the schoolboy of Cedar Creek.

"Ho! You're young Richards, are you?" he said.

"Yes. You've written to me twice," said Frank. "I've come here——"

"I reckoned you'd have hoss-sense enough to come hyer," said Four Kings. "You'd have done wiser to come yesterday, 'cording to your promise, my antelope. I ain't a galoot to be played with, and don't you furgit it!"

"I've come here to ask you what the dickens you mean by it!" exclaimed Frank hotly. "What do you mean by saying that I promised to come here? I've never seen you before!"

Four Kings grinned.

"Come off!" he answered. "I guess we know one another pretty well, Mister Frank Richards. But what have you brought these hyer fellows along for? They ain't no business here."

"They've come with me to see what it means," said Frank. "I want to know what fool-game you're playing!"

"You ain't keeping it secret, then?"

"Keeping what secret?"

"That business that I know about."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Frank hotly. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Four Kings stared at him.

The man was evidently as surprised as Frank himself.

Amazing as it was, it was clear that he believed there was a secret between Frank Richards and himself.

"Suppose you explain, Mr. Four Kings," suggested Bob Lawless. "You can go ahead. Frank hasn't any secrets from his pals."

"There's a mistake somewhere," said Beauclerc quietly.

"I guess there ain't nary mistake," said Four Kings. "I s'pose Frank Richards is Frank Richards, ain't he? But you take my advice, Mr. Richards, and don't let these pilgrims into it. I know that young feller—he's the son of Rancher Lawless, and he ain't the galoot to know about it. You take my word."

Frank Richards almost gasped with astonishment.

"Bob Lawless is my cousin, and Rancher Lawless is my uncle!" he exclaimed.

"Oh! Then I reckon you'd better keep your gum-game dark from your uncle," said Four Kings. "From what I've heered of Rancher Lawless he's the man to give you thunder if he knowed about it."

"I've never done anything that I'm afraid to let my uncle know," said Frank disdainfully. "You seem to be making some fatheaded mistake. Perhaps you've mistaken me for somebody else."

Four Kings chuckled.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" he exclaimed. "You're goin' to deny it? I calculate that rooster won't fight, my young buck."

"Deny what?" shouted Frank.

"Waal, if you will have it out afore these two, I don't mind," said Four Kings, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You owe me fifty dollars. Where's the money?"

"Fifty dollars?"

"Cor-rect!"

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Frank.

"What do I owe you fifty dollars for?"

"For not taking you to the sheriff the night I spotted you down by the creek," answered Four Kings.

Frank Richards stared at the man dumb-founded.

"The—the—the night you spotted me down by the creek!" he stuttered.

"I guess so."

"I didn't know you'd been down to the creek at night, Franky," said Bob Lawless, in wonder.

"I haven't!"

"Look here, Four Kings, what do you mean?" demanded Bob. "Get out a plain yarn!"

"I guess I'll do that. I spotted Mister Frank Richards down on the creek on Monday night," answered Four Kings. "I'd have took him to the sheriff instanter, but he begged off, and promised to come hyer with fifty dollars. He never did come, so I sent a letter by Injun Dick. That's the hull story."

"I think you must be out of your mind!" said Frank. "I certainly wasn't anywhere near the creek on Monday night. You know that I was in bed at the ranch, Boh."

"I guess so," assented Bob.

"But suppose I was down by the creek,

why should you take me to the sheriff?" continued Frank. "I suppose I've a right to go along the creek if I like."

"Cor-rect!" grinned Four Kings. "But I guess you haven't a right to lift the dust out of the miners' cradles, sonny."

"What!" yelled Frank.

"Lift the dust!" shouted Bob Lawless.

The man with the bitten ear nodded coolly.

"I guess that was the game," he answered. "I reckon I was noseying 'long the creek when I heard him shifting the cradles. I reckoned at once what he was doing, and I collared him in the dark. I'd heard a good bit about the claim-robber, and I got my hands on him spry."

"You dare to accuse me of being the claim-robber?" shouted Frank Richards, hardly believing his ears.

"I guess so."

"You lying hound!"

Four Kings' eyes glittered.

"Not so much of your chin-wag," he said.

"I ain't the galoot to be called names, pardner. Stow it! I've shot a man for less than that!"

"Hold on," said Vere Beauclerc, in his quiet voice. "There's a mistake here, Frank. Keep cool. You say you collared Frank Richards by the creek, Four Kings?"

"Yep."

"In the dark?"

"Cor-rect. There wasn't a moon on Monday. I guess that's why he was monkeying there."

"And the fellow you collared gave you Frank's name?"

"Yep, his own name, and he told me he belonged to Cedar Creek," grinned Four Kings. "He begged me to let him off, because of the disgrace. Well, I'm not a bad cove, and I let him off, he promising to call hyer and bring me fifty dollars. One good turn deserves another, I guess. Fifty dollars is the figure, and I'm waiting for it."

The rascal was evidently speaking the truth, so far as he knew it. But what he knew was not quite the truth.

"It's plain enough, Frank," said Beauclerc. "This man found some fellow robbing the claims, and it was some fellow who knows you, for he gave your name."

"I suppose that's it," said Frank slowly.

"That's it, plain enough," said Bob Lawless. "Must have been a Cedar Creek

chap, I should say, to have your name so pat."

Four Kings laughed derisively.

"Is that the yarn you're going to spin, Mister Richards?" he jeered. "That cock won't fight, and so I tell yer! I let you off for fifty dollars, and you told me you could raise the money easy the next day. Wot's the good of telling lies? I'm waiting for that fifty!"

Frank Richards gave the man a look of utter contempt.

"On your own showing you are acting like a scoundrel," he said. "If you found a fellow robbing the claims, you ought to have informed the sheriff at once. You were willing to let off a thief for a bribe. Well, you've made a mistake. The fellow you collared was not me, and he gave you my name to get clear himself. If you hadn't been a fool, you wouldn't have expected him to give his right name."

"I guess that's enough chin-wag. I'm waiting for the spondulicks," said Four Kings.

"You won't get a cent out of me!" answered Frank contemptuously. "Go and tell your yarn to whom you like; I don't mind. Come on, you fellows, let's get out of this! That fellow makes me sick!"

The three schoolboys turned to the door.

For a moment Four Kings stood still, his brutal face inflamed with rage, enraged more by the schoolboys's scorn than by the loss of the expected reward.

Then he made a sudden spring, and placed himself between the chums of Cedar Creek and the doorway.

"I guess you don't go without ponying up!" he said between his teeth. "I let you off, Mister Richards, for fifty dollars, and now you come hyer with a lying tale. It ain't good enough, I guess. Hand over the durocks, or you're booked for bad trouble!" "Get out of the way!" shouted Bob Lawless.

"I guess not!"

"Then we'll jolly soon shift you!"

The chums of Cedar Creek advanced on the man.

Four Kings' hand went to his back, and came up again with a weapon in it.

The schoolboys started back at the sight of the rifle.

At that moment they realised their recklessness in having entered the Red Dog at all.

## CHAPTER 14.

## Injun Dick Takes a Hand.

**F**RANK RICHARDS & CO. stood, breathing hard, facing the ruffian.

Four Kings' eyes gleamed at them savagely over the repeater.

"I guess you'll pony up!" he said between his teeth.

"Don't be a fool, man!" said Bob Lawless, as calmly as he could.

"I mean business!" said Four Kings grimly. "I let the galoot off for fifty dollars on his word. I'm going to finger them spondulicks, or I'll know the reason why!"

"I tell you it was not I you found at the creek!" exclaimed Frank.

"I reckon that's a lie!"

"Will you let us pass?" exclaimed Beauclerc.

"Not till Mr. Richards ponies up," said Four Kings. "And if he don't pony up right smart, this hyer shooting-iron will begin to talk. I ain't the galoot to be swindled, I tell you! Pony up!"

Frank Richards clenched his hands hard.

Whether the ruffian would carry out his threat he did not feel at all sure; but he realised that he and his comrades were shut up in the roughest den in the frontier town at the mercy of the rascal.

It was not much use calling for help, for the men in the bar-room were the Red Dog crowd, hand-in-glove with Four Kings—rascals of the same kidney.

"You'll hand over them dollars now," continued Four Kings; "and arter that you'll hand over more, if I ask for them, and don't you forget it!"

"If you rob us here we shall go directly to the sheriff," said Bob.

"I guess I'll come, too, and tell him where to look for the claim-robber," said Four Kings.

"You won't get a cent out of us!" said Frank Richards. "And you can't frighten us with your rifle, either! You may as well put it away!"

He spoke with assurance, but he did not feel so assured within.

Four Kings had been drinking, and he was in an ugly mood. His disappointment had aroused all the evil in his brutal nature.

The three schoolboys kept their eyes steady on the levelled revolver.

The ruffian's finger was on the trigger, and with so much of the fiery Red Dog

whisky inside him, it was quite possible that the pistol might go off, under his clumsy finger, without his intending it.

"I ain't waiting long," said Four Kings, with a savage scowl. "I'm going to count three, Mister Richards, and if you ain't ponied up then, I'm goin' out for your ear. You won't look quite so handsome with a ear missin'! That's your funeral! Pay-up and look pleasant!"

Frank Richards shivered a little.

The ruffian's hand was far from steady, and it was more than possible that a bullet intended for his ear might go through his head.

"One!" snarled Four Kings.

Frank Richards & Co. exchanged a look.

They were calculating the chances of making a rush.

But the peril was terrible, for it was pretty certain that the repeater would explode in the struggle.

"Two!" said Four Kings.

His eyes gleamed savagely over the rifle.

That he intended to carry out his threat was evident.

At that moment a shadow loomed up in the doorway behind the ruffian.

Four Kings, with his back to the doorway, did not see it.

Frank Richards drew a quick breath.

Behind the ruffian, Injun Dick, the Apache, looked into the room, with a faint surprise, showing for once in his stolid face.

Frank's eyes met those of the Apache over Four Kings' shoulder.

The Indian nodded silently.

With the stealthy tread of a panther he came into the doorway, close up behind the ruffian.

The word "three" was on Four Kings' lips when a dusky hand was thrust over his shoulder, and his wrist was grasped in a clutch of iron.

The fire-water had not deprived the faller chief of his strength.

Four Kings gave a yell of surprise and pain as his wrist was enclosed in that iron grip and forced upward.

Crack!

The rifle exploded, the bullet whizzing up to the smoke-stained plank ceiling.

The Redskin's left arm was thrown round Four Kings' neck, and the ruffian was dragged backwards to the floor.

The next moment the Indian's knee was on his chest, and the rifle wrenched

away from his hand, was looking its owner in the face.

Four Kings dodged his head frantically. "Let up!" he yelled. "Let up, Injun! That shooter may go off. Let up, I say! I guess I pass, pardner!"

"Bad Paleface!" said Injun Dick, in his guttural tones. "No shoot. Great white chief Henderson come with rope, you bet."

"Let up!" groaned Four Kings. "I ain't no hog; I know when I've had enough. I pass in this hyer deal. Let up!"

"Young Palefaces vamoose the ranch," said Injun Dick, glancing round at the schoolboys. "Bad place for young Palefaces. You light out. Wah!"

"Good man!" said Bob Lawless. "You come along, Injun Dick. Let that trash alone. He won't do any damage now."

The Indian nodded, and released Four Kings.

The ruffian promptly placed the table between himself and the Redskin, keeping a scared eye on the repeater.

Injun Dick made a threatening motion with the weapon, and Four Kings dodged down behind the table with a howl.

"The Apache motioned to the boys to quit the room, and followed them out, Four Kings' rifle disappearing among his rags as he did so.

Glad enough were Frank Richards & Co. to get into the street again.

"We were silly asses to go there!" muttered Frank Richards. "Thank you, Injun Dick! You've done us a jolly good turn, old chap!"

"Injun good Injun!" said the Apache. "Bully boy with a glass eye, you bet. You give Injun dollar. I have spoken."

Frank Richards laughed, and felt in his pocket. He had a five-dollar bill there, and he placed it in the Redskin's coppery hand.

Injun Dick's black eyes snapped as he saw it, and without another word he made a bee-line for the saloon doorway.

Frank Richards & Co. mounted their horses and rode away. They breathed more freely when they were well clear of the Red Dog.

"I guess we're well out of that, Franky," said Bob Lawless. "That Injun is the real white article, and no mistake. I guess you'd have left an ear there but for him. But"—Bob paused—"I say, Frank, that galoot Four Kings believes right enough that you were the pilgrim he collared rob-

bing the claims on Monday night. He won't let it go at this. We shall hear from him again, I guess."

"At the school," said Beauclerc, with a nod.

Frank Richards' eyes gleamed.

"Let him come to Cedar Creek!" he exclaimed. "We can deal with him there—and I'll be glad of the chance!"

And that chance was soon to come!

## CHAPTER 15.

### Under Suspicion.

"WHAT'S on?"

Bob Lawless asked that question.

Frank Richards & Co. had just arrived at school, and as they joined the group of Cedar Creek fellows in the playground there was a sudden silence.

Kern Gunten, the Swiss schoolboy, had been speaking, and several other fellows, too. A discussion was going on when the three chums came up.

But the arrival of Frank and Bob and Vere Beauclerc had the effect of a cold douche.

"What's on?" repeated Bob, looking at the group in surprised inquiry. "You were chewing the rag pretty lively a minute ago."

"Ahem!" grunted Chunky Todgers.

Gunten grinned sarcastically.

"I guess I'll tell you, if you like," he said.

"It's all rot!" said Tom Lawrence. "I don't believe a word of it! Richards ought to be told, though."

"Little me?" said Frank Richards, with a smile. "Well, go ahead!"

"Cut in, Gunten!" said Eben Hacke.

"I don't say I believe it myself, exactly," said Gunten cautiously. "But the galoot is coming here, that's a cert.!"

"What galoot?" asked Bob.

"Four Kings, of Thompson."

Frank Richards started. He had reason to remember that peculiar name.

"Four Kings!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, you know the man?" grinned Gunten.

"I've met him once," answered Frank Richards. "He's a thorough rascal!"

"That's a cinch," remarked Chunky Todgers. "He's a bad man, and the sheriff has had an eye on him for a long time.



He'll be ridden on a rail out of town one of these days."

"The sooner the better!" exclaimed Vere Beauclerc. "You say that he is coming here, Gunten?"

"Correct!"

"To see Frank?"

"That's it."

"Well, let him come," said Frank Richards quietly. "But I don't see how you know anything about it, Gunten—unless that ruffian is an acquaintance of yours."

"Oh, I see the fellow about Thompson, of course!" said Gunten carelessly. "He was starting on the trail when I came to school this morning. I passed him, as he was on foot. He spoke to me, that's all. He told me he was coming here to show you up."

"The rotten mugwump!" growled Bob Lawless.

"He says you're the chap who's been lifting gold from the claims at night, and he knows it," continued Gunten. "He says he caught you at it. He's going to give you away all round."

Frank Richards' cheeks reddened.

Very curious glances were thrown at him by the Cedar Creek fellows.

It was easy to see that that few, if any, believed that allegation; but it was odd, to say the least, that Four Kings should come to the school with such a story if there was no foundation at all for it.

The unknown claim-robber was a subject of much discussion in the section, but no one had thought of suspecting that a school-boy of Cedar Creek was the guilty party.

"He says that you called on him at the Red Dog, in Thompson, to buy him off," went on Gunten. "He wouldn't touch your money."

"Oh, Jerusalem!" ejaculated Bob Lawless. "He says that, does he?"

"You went to the Red Dog yesterday, Richards," remarked Chunky Todgers.

"That's so," assented Frank. He looked round at the curious schoolboys, his colour deepening. "I'll tell you fellows how the matter stands. This man, Four Kings as he calls himself, wrote to me here. You saw Injun Dick bring me his letters. I showed you one of them, Lawrence. I went to the Red Dog to see what his game was. He wanted to get money out of me."

"What for?" grunted Gunten. "He's got no claim on you unless—"

"He thought I was the claim-robber."

said Frank quietly. "He was prowling round the creek one night, he explained to me, and he caught a boy there who was robbing the claims. He couldn't see him clearly in the dark, but the fellow told him that he belonged to this school, and gave him my name. Of course, he gave a false name."

"Isn't that a rather steep yarn?" said Gunten.

"I don't think so. If Four Kings hadn't been a fool, he wouldn't have supposed that the thief would give him his own name."

"Why should he pick on your name especially?" sneered Gunten.

Frank Richards looked steadily at the Swiss.

"I think he picked on my name because he's an enemy of mine," he answered quietly. "I can't think of any other reason. The thief must have been a fellow who knew me and my name, and had a grudge against me. You are the only fellow here who answers to that description, Gunten!"

"What!"

"Don't I speak plainly?" said Frank coolly. "That's what I suspect. I suspect that you are the claim-robber, Gunten, and that you gave my name when you were caught."

Gunten's face was almost livid.

There was no mistaking Frank Richards' meaning.

There was a buzz among the Cedar Creek fellows.

Bob Lawless grinned. He rather liked plain speaking himself.

"You—you dare to accuse me?" panted Gunten at last.

"I'm not accusing you," said Frank. "I think it's very probable. I shouldn't have spoken my suspicions if you hadn't taken this line, Gunten. But you're trying to throw suspicion on me, and so I feel entitled to speak out, though, of course, I haven't any proof. But one thing's certain—if the claim-robber was a Cedar Creek fellow at all, it was you!"

"Straight from the shoulder, by gum!" chuckled Bob.

Kern Gunten clenched his hands hard.

He had been "out" to make as much capital as he could out of this story against the English schoolboy, but he certainly had not expected the tables to be turned in this way.

"It's a lie!" said the Swiss thickly. "You know it's a lie, Richards!"

"Nothing of the sort! Someone gave my name instead of his own, and you're the fellow likeliest to do it," said Frank. "It's just one of your rotten tricks, in fact."

Some of the Cedar Creek fellows chuckled.

Kern Gunten's face was quite entertaining at that moment.

"As for this fellow Four Kings," went on Frank, "he is a scoundrel! He wanted to get money out of me to keep it dark, believing that I was the chap he had caught lifting dust from the claims. When I found out what he wanted I answered him plain enough. And then he tried to rob us in the Red Dog, and there would have been bad trouble if Injun Dick hadn't chipped in and taken his revolver away. He's no business to come here. If he thinks I am the claim-robber, he should go to the sheriff about it."

"I guess so," agreed Lawrence.

"If he comes here, it will be to stick me for money if he can," said Frank. "He will get a plain answer, too. Let him come if he likes."

"Talk of angels!" grinned Hopkins. "Ere he comes!"

A burly man had appeared in the gateway, and the schoolboys recognised at once Four Kings, the loafer of Thompson.

He strode straight towards the group.

Frank Richards and his chums eyed him calmly as he came up.

The ruffian fixed his eyes on Frank with a threatening stare.

"I guess you're my mutton!" he announced. "I guess I've nosed along to see you, Mister Frank Richards. This hyer is your last chance to pony up the fifty dollars you owe me!"

## CHAPTER 16.

### Frank Richards' Answer.

**T**HERE was a dead silence when Four Kings had spoken.

Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc drew nearer to their chum, in anticipation of trouble.

The other fellows looked on, wondering what was going to happen.

Frank Richards set his lips hard.

The ruffian evidently believed his own story, and that Frank was the fellow he had caught on the claims at night.

But that was no justification for his

attempt to obtain money from the school-boy. His duty was to make his statement to the sheriff of Thompson.

"I guess you'd better pay up," continued Four Kings. "Mind, I'm here on cold business. I'm going to the school-marm. Arter that, I guess I'm going to nosy round to Sheriff Henderson. Now, what's the verdict, hay?"

"You want an answer to that?" asked Frank.

"Cor-rect."

"Here it is, then!"

Frank rushed forward as he spoke and struck out.

The blow caught Four Kings on the point of his bristly chin, and he went backwards like a sack of coal.

Crash!

There was a roar of rage from the ruffian as he went down on his back.

His hand flew to his belt, evidently for a weapon, but he had no chance of drawing it.

Bob Lawless was too quick for him, and his heavy boot clumped on the rascal's wrist in time.

A revolver went whirling through the air and Four Kings uttered a howl of pain.

The next moment Frank Richards' knee was on the ruffian's chest.

Bob Lawless grasped his wrists and held them fast.

Four Kings struggled, but in vain.

"Get a trail-rope, Cherub!" shouted Bob.

"What-ho!"

Beauclerc ran up with the trail-rope.

With the excited crowd of schoolboys buzzing round him, Four Kings had his hands bound securely together.

He kicked out furiously, but Bob stamped on his legs without mercy, and he soon gave that up.

"Now, you brute," said Frank Richards, "you could be sent to the calaboose for drawing a weapon here! Chuck that pistol into the creek, Chunky!"

"You bet!" grinned Chunky-Todgers.

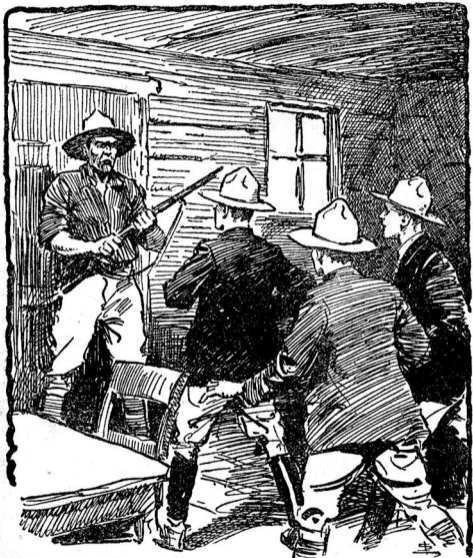
"Now you're going to be cleared out," continued Frank Richards. "You've tried to get money out of me, and you claim to have information about the claim-robber. You're going to the sheriff."

Four Kings panted.

"Trot out the horses, Bob!"

"I—I say, Frank——"

"I'm going to take him to Sheriff Henderson," said Frank Richards resolutely. "He's accusing me of robbing the claims.



The three chums sprang back as Four Kings backed against the door of the parlour, and took a businesslike grip of his rifle.

He can make that accusation again before the sheriff. You fellows can come if you like."

"Oh, we'll come; but the bell goes in a minute."

"Can't be helped."

"Oh, all O.K.," said Bob. "Then we'd better get off before Miss Meadows sees this beauty."

Beaulere was already leading the horses out of the corral.

"Come along!" said Frank, dragging on the rope that bound Four Kings' wrists together.

"I guess I'll have your life for this!" yelled Four Kings.

"Will you come?"

"Nope."

"You'll be dragged, then."

The two schoolboys put force on the rope, and the ruffian was yanked along into the gateway.

The excited crowd followed.

Korn Gunten was looking on with a sneering grin. But he did not venture to interfere.

Beaulere had the horses outside the gates, and Frank Richards fastened the loose end of the trail-rope to the saddle of his pony.

Then he mounted.

Four Kings yelled furiously as the pony started.

As he refused to rise to his feet and walk, he was dragged along on the rough trail in a series of bumps.

Naturally, he very soon had enough of that.

He jumped to his feet and ran after the rider, to keep pace with the pony, panting with rage.

His face was inflamed with fury, and if his hands had been free just then, and he had had a weapon, there was no doubt that Four Kings would have earned a noose upon the spot.

Fortunately, he was not able to do any damage.

Miss Meadows had come out of the schoolhouse, but the three chums were gone before she could reach the spot.

Tom Lawrence explained the matter to the schoolmistress, and the Cedar Creek fellows went in to morning lessons in a state of great excitement.

Meanwhile, Frank Richards & Co. were

trotting along the Thompson trail. Four Kings following at the end of the trail-rope.

Half-way to Thompson the ruffian was panting breathlessly.

The strong fire-water of the Red Dog did not conduce to physical fitness, and Four Kings was feeling the strain of the long run.

And as they drew nearer and nearer to the sheriff's residence the ruffian's fury gave place more and more to uneasiness.

He had no proof against Frank in the matter of the claim-robbing, for his word was quite worthless, and his attempts at blackmail showed that his interest in the matter was only a rascally one.

Sheriff Henderson was, in fact, the very last man in the Thompson Valley whom Four Kings was desirous of meeting.

"Let up, gents!" he gasped at last, as he trotted wearily after the horses. "Give a galoot a chance!"

"Oh, keep it up," said Bob Lawless, glancing back. "This will do you good."

"I guess I don't want to go to any old sheriff," gasped Four Kings.

"It's too late to think of that," answered Frank Richards. "You've accused me of claim-robbing, and you've got to stick to it."

"I—I guess I made a mistake," mumbled the ruffian. "I never seed you in the dark that night. I took it as it was you, seeing as the galoot gave your name. How was I to know?"

"That's no excuse for extorting money, you scoundrel!"

"I calculate I was hard up. I've had bad luck with the keerds, gents. Look hyer, you let up on a pilgrim, and I'll take it all back."

Evidently Frank Richards' determination to take him to the sheriff had caused doubts to enter the ruffian's mind.

That certainly was not a step that a guilty party would be likely to take.

Frank did not answer him, and the ruffian lumbered on wearily after the trotting horses.

The town of Thompson came in sight at last.

Then Four Kings made another appeal. "Let up, sir!" he gasped. "I take it back, and I pollygize! A galoot can't do no more than that."

Frank Richards hesitated, but he shook his head.

"You tried to rob us at the Red Dog,"

he said. "You drew a weapon at the school. You're a dangerous ruffian, and you ought to be shut up where you can't do any harm."

"The calaboose for you, old man," said Bob Lawless.

Four Kings groaned.

"Don't be hard on a galoot, gents," he pleaded. "I own up I made a mistake in the dark. That young galoot gave me your name, and I see now as he was lying. I guess I got the wrong antelope by the tail. Let up! I'll clear out of the section, if you like. I'll go over the line. Honest!"

Frank Richards slackened rein.

The ruffian had angered him, but his complete surrender disarmed the good-natured schoolboy.

Four Kings had evidently come to his senses, and was convinced now that the unknown claim-robber had fooled him by using a borrowed name.

And he had many little accounts to answer for, if once he was placed in the hands of the sheriff on a serious charge.

Frank looked at his chum.

"Oh, let him go through with it," said Bob. "The sheriff will be glad of a chance of nailing him. We don't want his sort loose in this section."

"I'll light out!" gasped Four Kings.

Frank halted.

"Let's give him a chance," he said. "If he clears out of Canada, that's good enough."

"Oh, all right," said Bob. "You're a soft-hearted duffer, Frank. But let the brute go, if you like." And Vere Beauclerc nodded assent.

Frank Richards gave the panting ruffian a stern look.

"You'll clear out of this section, over the line?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Mind, we shall look for you to-morrow, and if you're still in Thompson, we go to the sheriff and make a charge against you," said Frank.

"I guess I'll vamoose instanter," said the ruffian. "I ain't no hog. I know when I've had enough."

"You can clear, then!" said Frank contemptuously.

He untied the trail-ropes, and the ruffian stood free.

The run after the horses had exhausted him, and he staggered away in the direction of Thompson.

Frank Richards & Co. wheeled their horses, and rode back to the lumber school.

They arrived there an hour late for lessons.

Miss Meadows quietly told them to go to their places, and nothing more was said just then, but after lessons the schoolmistress called the chums into her study, and Frank had to give an explanation of the whole affair.

He did so quite candidly.

"I am sorry you let the man go," said Miss Meadows quietly. "I do not believe one word against you, Richards, but I am afraid some suspicion will cling until the claim-robber is caught. However, it cannot be helped now. You may go."

Frank Richards looked very thoughtful as he left the schoolmistress.

He soon found that Miss Meadows was right.

A crowd of fellows wanted to know what had been done with Four Kings; and when Frank explained that he had been allowed to escape, there was a mocking laugh from Kern Gunten.

The Swiss did his best to spread the impression that Frank had allowed Four Kings to go free because he feared to take him to the sheriff, and, although he did not quite succeed, there was a lingering doubt in a good many minds.

Frank Richards for once was under a cloud at the backwoods school, and he was very silent and thoughtful for the remainder of that day.

## CHAPTER 17.

### Three on the Track.

"PENNY for 'em, Franky!" said Bob Lawless, when the three chums were leaving Cedar Creek School after lessons.

"I've been thinking——" began Frank Richards, as they trotted down the trail into the timber.

"My dear chap, you've been looking like a moulting crow all day!" chuckled Bob Lawless. "Are you worrying about Gunten's rotten yarns?"

"I was thinking of knocking these yarns on the head, and perhaps Gunten, too!" said Frank.

"I was thinking of that," said Beauclerc quietly. "The claim-robber has got to be found, Frank."

"That's it," said Frank. "Look here, you fellows. There's no doubt that Four Kings actually found a kid about my age and size at the claims the other night, who gave him my name. I can't help suspecting Gunten. It was just one of his tricks. Who else would have thought of giving my name? Only a fellow who had a grudge against me, and Gunten's the only enemy I've ever had."

"True, O chief!" said Bob.

"As Gunten lives at Thompson, it's easy enough for him to sneak out to the creeks at night," continued Frank. "We know he's a gambling rotter, and often gets hard-up through losing his money. Then there's the way he's making the most of this yarn against me—partly from dislike, I dare say. But I can't help thinking that he feels it safer to have suspicion fixed on somebody. And he didn't look innocent when I spoke out to him; he looked like a fellow found out."

"Correct!"

"Well, I don't say it's Gunten, but I think very likely it is," said Frank. "But Gunten or not, the rotter's got to be found, or this yarn will cling to me. We're going to find him if we can."

"My idea exactly," said Vere Beauclerc.

"How are you going to work the raffle, though?" asked Bob thoughtfully. "We live a thumping long way from the creeks, at the ranch. It won't be easy to keep a watch on the claims."

"That's the only way, though."

Bob whistled.

"But that isn't all," said Frank. "Three of us could keep watch, but the claims go a long way along the creeks, and we couldn't watch a tenth part of the ground the robber might come to. But we suspect Gunten—at least, I do!"

"Same here! Cut on!"

"Well, my idea is to watch Gunten's place in Thompson, and see whether he sneaks out at night," said Frank. "We can't watch all the claims, but if Gunten gets out at night to go there, we can watch him, and catch him at it. I think that's justifiable, in the circumstances."

"I guess so!" Bob Lawless nodded. "But the claim-robber isn't at work every night; not more than once or twice in the week. It looks as if it may be a big job."

"That's so; but there hasn't been a robbery at the claims for nearly a week now," said Frank. "That's a long interval,

and it looks as if the thief has had a scare—and he has, of course, from Four Kings having collared him that night. Well, Gunten knows now that Four Kings has been cleared out of Thompson, and that will make him feel easy in his mind again, if it's Gunten. Well, then, if it's Gunten, he's jolly likely to try again to-night!"

Bob nodded.

"That's so; he'll know the coast is clear, so far as that spying bulldozer is concerned," he remarked.

"There's another reason, too," added Frank. "Gunten was playing poker in the old corral to-day, and he lost money. If he makes good his losses by robbing the placers, he will be at it again soon."

"Likely enough."

"But if we don't spot him one night we may another," said Frank. "I'm ready to watch for a week to catch him at it. He's tried to throw it on me, and it's up to us to put the guilt where it belongs. I don't know what your pater will say about our going out to-night, that's all, Bob. Uncle will have to know, I suppose."

"I can fix that," said Beauclerc. "My father's away at Kamloops, and I'm alone at the shack now. Stay with me to-night."

"Good man!" exclaimed Bob Lawless.

"That's a cinch! Look here, I'll out home and tell popper that we're staying the night at Beau's shack. No need to worry him with details. And I'll get my lasso, in case we come on the claim-robber."

"Good!" said Frank.

And so it was arranged.

Frank Richards rode home with Vere Beauclerc, while Bob galloped on to the Lawless Ranch.

Beauclerc's home—the little wooden shack by the creek, was deserted now. The remittance-man was away, and was likely to be absent for some days.

Few fellows would have cared to sleep alone in the lonely shack, surrounded by whispering woods. But Vere Beauclerc did not mind. He was not troubled with nerves.

But he was glad to have his chums with him, all the same, and it was certain that Mr. Lawless would heartily approve of Frank and Bob keeping him company while his father was away.

Beauclerc and Frank Richards had supper ready at the shack by the time Bob came trotting back from the ranch.

He had brought a bag with him, and his

lasso, as well as permission from Mr. Lawless for the two boys to remain at the shack.

"We'll turn in early and get some sleep," said Bob, as they sat down to supper. "We can get two or three hours' snooze before it's necessary to get a move on. We don't want to nod off in class to-morrow, you know."

"No fear!" agreed Frank. "If we don't catch Gunten to-night, we've got to try again. If he spotted us nodding in class he might smell a rat."

After supper the chums turned into the bunks, and it was eleven o'clock when Bob Lawless rose and called his companions.

They turned out at once.

Outside there was a glimmer of moonlight above the trees, and the creek glistened as it murmured by the reedy banks.

The three horses were saddled, and the chums mounted, and rode away in the direction of Thompson.

They came out of the woods into the trail that ran from Cedar Camp to the town.

A few minutes later a tramping figure loomed up in the dim light ahead.

"Somebody on the trail," remarked Bob.

"Four Kings," said Beauclerc quietly.

"By gum, so it is!"

The chums halted as they came up with the ruffian.

Four Kings was tramping towards them, his back to the town.

He scowled savagely at the sight of the three schoolboys.

"So you're off, my pippin!" said Bob Lawless.

"I guess I'm lighting out!" growled Four Kings, eyeing them with lowering brows. "Comin' to look for me—hey?"

"Well, I'm glad to see you're going," said Frank Richards.

Four Kings gritted his teeth, and tramped on, and the shadows of the distance swallowed up the sullen ruffian.

The schoolboys rode on till the buildings of Thompson were visible in the distance.

Then they dismounted, and the horses were tethered in a thicket.

"Shanks' pony now," said Bob.

It was close on midnight when the chums entered the sleeping town of Thompson.

There was still a glare of naphtha-lights from the Red Dog saloon, and a distant echo of a drinking chorus came to their ears.

They gave the Red Dog a wide berth, however,

Gunten's Store was closed long ago, and both the store and the house were dark.

Bob Lawless led the way to the rear of the store.

Behind the store there were several out-buildings—stables, sheds, and storerooms.

Among them lay a path which led from the back of the store to the waste land outside the town.

If Gunten came out it was certain, of course, that he would not venture by way of the street in front, where he might meet a belated pedestrian or a roysterer reeling home to his cabin.

If he came he would come cautiously by the back way, stealing along in the shadow of the out-buildings.

In an open shed, where a cart was up-ended, the three chums stopped to watch the path.

They were in complete shadow, and from where they stood they could see every possible way of leaving the store from the rear.

"I guess this is where we hang on," murmured Bob Lawless. "You galoots can squat down if you like, and I'll keep watch."

But his chums were too keen for that, and all three of them remained watching from the shed and listening for the sound of footsteps.

## CHAPTER 18.

### Caught!

"HARK!"

Bob Lawless whispered the word under his breath.

It was just one o'clock now.

The lights were out in the Red Dog now, away across the main street of Thompson, and only occasionally came an echo from the street of the footsteps of some belated citizen tramping home.

It was a sound closer at hand that had caught Bob's keen ear.

Frank Richards and Beauclerc did not speak; they breathed hard, listening intently.

There was a faint footfall close at hand.

From the deep darkness of the shed they watched the moonlight without, and their eyes gleamed as a dark figure flitted by.

Dim as the light was, they recognised Kern Gunten.

He passed within six yards of the hidden

schoolboys, and tramped on quietly and cautiously.

Had not the chums suspected Gunten before they would have suspected him now, so stealthy were his movements, and the glances he threw to right and left as he stole on.

"Follow on!" murmured Bob Lawless. "Keep in cover! He's bound to look back!"

"Right-ho!" breathed Frank.

Silently the chums stepped from the shed and followed on Kern Gunten's track.

They kept in the cover of the buildings till the latter were left behind, and then took advantage of trees and bushes to cover their movements.

Once or twice Gunten disappeared from sight, but they knew he was making for the creek, and it was easy to pick up the track again.

Near the creek there was a bunch of miners' shacks, and Gunten made a wide detour to avoid them.

Bob dragged his comrades into the shadow of a cabin as Gunten stopped and looked round him.

The claim-robber did not suspect that he was followed, but he was cautious, and probably in a state of nerves.

But the three chums were not likely to let the rascal spot them.

Gunten moved on again, and disappeared into the shadows.

Frank Richards drew a deep breath.

"There's no doubt about it now," he said in a low voice. "He's gone straight to the placer claims, Bob."

"Straight as a string!" murmured Bob, preparing his lasso for a cast, and seeing that it was in perfect order. "I guess that galoot is going to have the surprise of his life. Come on, and not a sound!"

The moon had disappeared behind a cloud, and darkness lay upon the scene.

As the chums crept on in the gloom, close now to the mining creek, a faint sound came to their ears from ahead.

It was the jarring of a cradle.

The gold-thief was evidently at work.

Bob Lawless' hand tightened on his lasso as they crept closer on the creek in the dark.

Their hearts were beating with excitement now.

Close by the bank, they were within a short distance of the claim-robber, but the darkness hid him from sight.

As soon as the moon emerged from the bank of clouds they would see him. He was near enough for them to hear his movements.

With tense feelings they waited for the light.

A dim, silvery glimmer came from above as the clouds sailed slowly from under the moon.

The light strengthened.

It glimmered on the shallow creek, and on the beds of sand exposed by the wooden dams built out into the stream.

Many of the cradles, mostly built of osiers from the woods, were full of "dirt," as the miners called the auriferous sand from the bed of the creek.

With long and laborious toil the pan-dirt had been gathered up for the golden grains to be washed out in the cradles.

All was as it had been left by the placer-miners when they knocked off work at sundown.

Faintly from the creek came the creaking of the cradle where the gold thief was at work, reaping the fruit of the labour of others.

The chums watched till the figure of the claim-robber was clear to their view in the strengthening light.

Gunten had his back to them, standing ankle deep in wet sand as he worked the cradle.

Bob Lawless grasped his lasso.

He was almost near enough for a cast.

Signing to his comrades to remain where they were, Bob tiptoed towards the creek, lariat in hand.

He made no sound, but if he had done so the creaking of the cradle was sufficient to drown it.

Frank and Beauclerc watched him breathlessly.

They caught their breath as his right arm rose for the cast of the noosed rope.

Whiz!

Gunten heard the sound as he bent at his nefarious occupation, and he sprang round, with a panting exclamation of alarm.

As he did so the noose descended upon him.

Before he knew what was happening the loop was over his shoulders, and Bob Lawless was dragging it taut.

It tightened round Gunten, pinning his arms to his sides, and holding him a helpless prisoner.

He made a terrific, desperate wrench at



the rope, and Bob dragged it harder, and Gunten went sprawling over in the wet sand.

"Caught!" shouted Bob.

Frank and Vere Beauclerc ran forward.

From the bank the three chums looked down upon the wet sand, where Gunten lay sprawling helplessly in the grip of the lasso.

He was covered from head to foot with sand and mud, and panting with fear.

As yet he did not know who his captors were, and he was in deadly fear for his life.

Some at least of the placer-miners would not have hesitated to drive a bullet through the gold thief if they had caught him at his work.

"Our game!" grinned Frank Richards. "Hurrah!"

Gunten ceased to struggle with the rope, and looked up at the trio on the bank, recognising Frank Richards' voice, and then the chums themselves.

"You!" he panted. "Frank Richards!"

"We've caught the claim-robber!" chuckled Bob.

Gunten staggered to his feet.

"Don't try to unloosen that rope, Gunten!" called out Bob. "I'll have you over if you do so before you can say 'no sugar in mine'!"

"It—it's you, Lawless?"

"I guess so. Come out of the creek, you pesky rotter!" said Bob. "I'm going to walk you along to the cabins. The placer-men will be glad to see you."

Gunten panted as he clambered up the bank.

His face was white with terror.

"You—you won't give me up?" he breathed.

"Won't we!" grinned Bob. "I reckon that's what we're here for, you thief! You're going to get your deserts now! Bring him along, you fellows!"

Gunten fell on his knees.

"Lawless," he muttered hoarsely, "stop! They'll murder me—you know they will!"

"What do you deserve?" said Frank.

"You don't want to see murder done!" panted Gunten. "Take me to the sheriff, if you like—not to the miners!"

Bob Lawless nodded.

"I guess that's so," he agreed. "I reckon they'd drown you in the creek like a mangy dog if they got their hands on you, Gunten. You can come along and see the sheriff."

"Let me loose!"

"No fear!" grinned Bob. "You mosey along with us, my pippin, just as you are—mud and sand and all. When you start telling lies, you can explain how you got wet and sandy all over. Come on!"

Gunten quavered miserably as he followed the chums, the lasso still pinning his arms to his side.

He was glad, however, to get farther away from the miners' cabins by the creek.

It was only too possible that his life would have been in peril if he had been handed over to the hard-working placer-miners whom he had robbed.

With Gunten sinking in the rear, the chums of Cedar Creek drew nearer to the town.

Frank Richards was looking very bright now.

The dastardly suspicion Gunten had attempted to throw upon him was done with now; the guilt was coming home to roost on the right shoulders.

But Kern Gunten, as he slunk after his captors, was overwhelmed with despair.

He was at the end of his tether.

## CHAPTER 19.

### Gunten Makes Amends.

"RICHARDS,"

Kern Gunten gasped out Frank's name as they reached the outskirts of Thompson. Frank glanced back at him.

Much as the wretched Swiss had injured him, Frank could not help feeling a little compassion as he looked at his white, terrified face.

"Let me off, Richards!" muttered Gunten. "For mercy's sake, don't take me to the sheriff! Think of my people—what they'll think!"

"It's too late now," said Frank. "You've tried to make the fellows at Cedar Creek believe that I was the claim-robber, Gunten. You've got to take the consequences of what you've done!"

"I'll take back all I said!" exclaimed Gunten eagerly. "I'll clear you at Cedar Creek, Richards! I—I never meant to mix you up in it. But when that brute Four Kings collared me that night I dared not give my own name. Your name came into my head, and I gave it."

"Possibly. But since then you've done

your best to make all Cedar Creek believe that I was the claim-robber," said Frank. "And there's only one way of undoing that, and that's showing up the real thief. I'm sorry, Gunten, for your people's sake; but you should have thought of that before you became a thief!"

"I'll undo what I've done! I'll—I'll own up at the school!" panted Gunten. "I—I don't mind that so much; only don't take me to the sheriff. I'll tell all Cedar Creek the truth, if you like. They won't give me away!"

Frank Richards hesitated, and glanced at his chums.

Vere Beauclerc did not speak, but Bob Lawless gave utterance to an angry growl.

"Rot!" he exclaimed. "Pesky rot! The galoot's tackling you, Franky, because he knows you're a soft-hearted duffer; and you're the fellow he's tried to injure. He's going to the sheriff!"

"But—I say, Bob—"

"Can't you see he's lying?" exclaimed Bob impatiently. "He'll say anything now; but if we let him loose he will deny it all to-morrow. We've got to nail him down while we've got proof."

"I suppose that's so," admitted Frank. "We can't trust you, Gunten. I'd let you off if I could, but you're too false."

"I swear it!" panted Gunten. "Look here, Richards! Take me to the school as I am—you needn't let me loose. I'll stand that—I'll stand anything. It's not long to daylight now. Take me as I am to Cedar Creek, and tell the fellows everything when they come to school!"

"Oh, Jerusalem!" murmured Bob Lawless.

"He's no right to ask anything of the kind," said Vere Beauclerc. "But—but there's his people, Bob. They would feel this. I don't think Gunten will try claim-robbery again, so far as that goes. He's rascal enough, but he hasn't courage enough—after this!"

"I swear I won't!" groaned Gunten. "I'm sorry I ever thought of it! I'd been losing money at cards, or I'd never have done it! I'll never go near the claims again!"

Bob Lawless hesitated.

"I guess it means a night out for us," he said. "No reason why we should take so much trouble over a rotten thief!"

"Richards—" began Gunten.

"Oh, let Franky alone!" exclaimed Bob

sharply. "He's a soft duffer, and he's going to let you off if I let him. Look here, Gunten, we'll do it. But if you try to hedge at the school you go straight to Sheriff Henderson. If you don't own up to the whole story without beating about the bush, I'll yank you right away to the sheriff without giving you another chance. Savy?"

"I mean business!" faltered Gunten.

"Mind you keep to that, then!"

Gunten almost sobbed with relief as the chums turned from the road into Thompson.

The disgrace and shame at the school he could face, so long as he escaped the worse fate of being taken by the strong arm of the law and punished as he deserved.

"You cut off and get the hosses, Franky," said Bob. "I'll keep the pilgrim in charge, and I'll take care he don't get loose."

Bob and Beauclerc walked along the trail towards Cedar Creek with the captured claim robber, while Frank went for the horses.

He overtook them an hour later, riding his own pony and leading the other two.

Then the chums kept on towards Cedar Creek.

There was a glimmer of dawn in the sky when they reached the school, but no sign of life was yet about the place.

They had a long wait before them ere the earliest scholars arrived at Cedar Creek.

Gunten was still securely confined by the lasso.

The wretched rogue of the lumber school threw himself wearily at the foot of a tree to rest.

Bob took another turn of the lasso round him and knotted it.

He did not mean to give the cunning Swiss the hair's-breadth of a chance for trickery.

Then the chums threw themselves in the grass, to rest in the growing warmth of the rising sun.

Frank Richards sat up, rubbing his eyes, as there was a clatter of hoofs on the trail.

Tom Lawrence and his sister Molly came in sight, riding towards the school, with Chunky Todgers and Keller and Dick Dawson.

Frank Richards and Co. jumped up, and Gunten struggled to his feet, his face crimson.

The riders halted in astonishment at the sight of the strange group.

"What the thunder's this game?" exclaimed Lawrence.

"Wait a bit," grinned Bob. "Gunten's got a yarn to tell as soon as there's enough to hear it. Take a little rest."

In great curiosity the schoolboys dismounted, and soon there was a good crowd on the spot, as more and more of the scholars of Cedar Creek came along the trail.

As soon as the gathering numbered fifteen or sixteen—all in a state of great amazement—Bob Lawless judged that it was time for the climax.

He gave the lasso a jerk. "Go ahead, Gunten," he said. "And remember that, at the first lie, straight you go to the sheriff!"

But the rogue of Cedar Creek was not thinking of lying now, and he faltered out his confession.

He did not look up once. "By gum," said Tom Lawrence, in utter disgust, "so Gunten's the gold-thief! And he was trying to make us think—"

"He tried to make us think it was Frank!" exclaimed Molly Lawrence, her eyes flashing. "He ought to be sent to prison!"

"I guess so!" said Chunky Todgers emphatically.

Gunten gave the chums a haggard look. Bob untied the lasso, and the Swiss stood free.

"You can vamoose!" said Bob contemptuously.

Without a word more Kern Gunten tramped up the trail for home.

Even the thick-skinned Swiss felt that he could not face his schoolfellows at Cedar Creek again. And so the backwoods school knew Kern Gunten no more.

Frank Richards received a good many congratulations that day.

No one had really believed anything against him, but his friends were very glad when the matter was put beyond the shadow of a doubt.

## CHAPTER 20.

"For the sons of gentlemen!"

"HALLO, Gunten!"  
 Bob Lawless called out cheerily. Frank Richards and his Canadian cousin were strolling along Main Street in Thompson, when they caught sight of Kern Gunten.

Gunten was about to enter the office of the "Thompson Press," but he stopped and looked round as his name was called.

His brows knitted at sight of the two cheery chums of Cedar Creek School.

But the two chums nodded genially.

There had been a good deal of trouble between them and Kern Gunten before the Swiss left Cedar Creek School, but they did not bear malice for what was past.

Gunten did, however, to judge by his look.

"Hallo!" he said sulkily. "What are you doing in Thompson?"

"Shopping," said Bob. "We're coming along to your popper's store for some skates. You don't seem very glad to see us," added Bob, with humorous reproach. "You have all the luck; you're not at school, while we have to grind every day with Miss Meadows."

"I guess I'm going to school again," said Gunten.

"Coming back to Cedar Creek?" asked Frank Richards.

Gunten shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't be found dead at Cedar Creek," he answered disdainfully. "No National schools on my plate, thanks!"

"But there isn't any other school in this part," said Bob, in surprise. "You're not going to the boarding-school at New Westminster, are you?"

"Nope. There's going to be a new school in Thompson," explained Gunten loftily. "Something a cut above Cedar Creek."

"I guess it will be a topper, then," said Bob, with a good-humoured laugh. "We reckon Cedar Creek takes the cake, for a backwoods school."

Gunten was smiling now, in a sour way.

He was evidently glad of the chance meeting, which gave him an opportunity of imparting his news, which he expected to have a withering effect upon his former schoolfellows.

"It's a private school," he explained, with a lofty manner which made the chums of Cedar Creek grin. "Mr. Peckover's starting it here."

"Peckover!" ejaculated Frank Richards.

"I guess so. I'm taking his advertisement in to the office now," said Gunten. "You'll see it in the Press this week."

He drew an envelope from his pocket, and opened it, taking a card therefrom.

Bob and Frank looked rather curiously at the card as he held it up for inspection.

Mr. Peckover's advertisement, addressed to the citizens of Thompson and the inhabitants of the section generally, was written there.

It made the chums open their eyes.

It ran:

**"HILLCREST,  
HIGH-CLASS PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR  
THE SONS OF GENTLEMEN.**

**E. PECKOVER, HEADMASTER.**

**MODERATE FEES."**

"Great gophers!" said Bob Lawless, in astonishment. "That is rather high-falutin for the Thompson Valley, isn't it?"

"I dare say common fellows would think so," answered Gunton, elevating his nose a little.

"Common fellows!" repeated Bob.

"Yep! National School galoots, frinstance," said Gunten coolly. "Peckover's Private School will be very select."

"Oh, my hat!" said Frank Richards.

"And I may as well give you the tip that you will not be wanted there," grinned Gunten."

Bob chuckled.

"I guess we shall stick to Cedar Creek," he replied. "I wish you luck in your high-class private school, old scout! Are you the only pupil so far?"

"Not at all. Keller's leaving Cedar Creek, to come with me, and a good many names are down already. Cedar Creek's a good distance out, and most of the Thompson fellows will come to Peckover's school, especially as the winter's just on. I guess Peckover will make a good thing of it," said Gunten. "Of course, all the superior families will send their sons."

"Gunten, old man, you're a funnier jay than I thought," said Bob. "And I reckon that advertisement won't cut much ice in Thompson. Mr. Peckover doesn't know all this section yet."

"I expected you to be jealous!" answered Gunten.

"My hat!"

"You were going to the store, I think you said?"

"Correct!"

"Well, you'd better go," said Gunten.

"Don't take it amiss, but the fact is, I don't care to be seen speaking to you."

"Wha-a-at?"

"At our school we bar your lot," said

Gunten. "I'm afraid Mr. Peckover would be mad if he saw one of his pupils talking to a fellow from a National School."

Bob Lawless stared speechlessly at Gunten.

Such sublime cheek from the son of the Swiss storekeeper, who had to leave Cedar Creek for rascally conduct, took his breath away.

Gunten was evidently enjoying the situation.

He was much given to "swank," his father being the richest man in Thompson, though certainly not the best reputed.

Now there was an opportunity for swank, and Kern Gunten was making the most of it.

"Well, search me!" Bob ejaculated, at last.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Cover!" murmured Bob Lawless.

The first glimmer of dawn was whitening the waters of Cedar Creek and the tops of the pine trees.

It was hours yet before the gates of Cedar Creek School would open to admit the throng of girls and boys, but already three of the boys of the backwoods school were astir.

Frank Richards and his Cousin Bob and Vere Beauclerc were tramping up the bank of the creek, a good distance from their school.

Near the point where the creek widened as it flowed into the Thompson River the ground rose in an acclivity, and on the top of the rise stood the building known as Hillcrest.

It was surrounded by a fence and a hedge of clipped spruce, and over the gateway was a board adorned with gilt letters.

Gilt-lettering was simply unknown in the Thompson Valley. When any of the merchants of Thompson wanted to put up a sign, he generally daubed it himself with paint on a rough board.

But Mr. Peckover, the headmaster of the new school, was doing things in amazing style for a frontier section of British Columbia.

"Down East," in Ontario or Quebec, the gilt-lettered sign would not have attracted a second glance, but in Thompson Valley it was stared at blankly by every "pilgrim" who passed that way.

Indeed, curious "galoots" had tramped out of Thompson Town and Cedar Creek

and Silver Creek just to look at that sign and comment upon it.

Here and there it was a little spotted, showing that playful cattlemen had let off revolvers at it in a humorous mood.

Mr. Peckover had had that sign painted at a town far, far away, and sent up by railway and post wagon. There was no painter in the Thompson Valley who could have produced it.

The gilt letters shone brightly in the rising sun, as Frank Richards & Co. came up the hill.

The sign bore the legend:

"HILLCREST.

PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR THE SONS  
OF GENTLEMEN."

It was Mr. Peckover's strong desire to mark a distinction between his private school and the "national" school at Cedar Creek.

He hoped by that means to attract as pupils the sons of any of the settlers who felt themselves superior to their neighbours, doubtless expecting to find snobbish instincts as well-developed in the great West as in the towns he was accustomed to.

In that, probably, Mr. Peckover had made a miscalculation.

So far, Frank Richards & Co. knew only two of the pupils of Hillcrest—Keller and Gunten, the sons of Swiss emigrants.

Gunten had had to leave Cedar Creek, and he, at least, fully appreciated the distinction of belonging to a school loudly announced as being for the "sons of gentlemen."

He had assumed a lofty and swanky manner towards his former school-fellows, which had an exasperating effect on some of them.

Gunten's absurd swank, in fact, had rather prejudiced the Cedar Creek fellows against the new school, and that was the reason why Frank Richards & Co. had left home before dawn that morning, and were approaching Hillcrest cautiously in the light of early dawn.

Bob Lawless had a can of tar, with a brush sticking in it, in his hand, borrowed from a shed on the ranch at home.

He had also lawless designs upon the

handsome gilt sign that adorned the gateway of Hillcrest.

But just as the three chums came in sight of the glistening sign Bob halted, with a whispered warning, and suddenly dragged his comrades into cover of the timber beside the trail.

"Cover, my infants!" he repeated. "Somebody's coming! We don't want to meet dear old Peckover just now."

"I didn't see—" began Frank Richards.

"Neither did I, my son; but I heard," answered Bob Lawless. "I guess there's somebody coming along from the school, and more than one. Look!"

He pointed through an opening in the thicket.

"Four of them!" murmured Vere Beauclerc. "Chaps belonging to the school, I suppose."

"Queer!" said Frank. "They're early up, like us. What are they doing here at this time in the morning?"

"Blest if I know! But we'd better keep doggo till they're gone by," answered Bob. "They wouldn't like what we're going to do to Peckover's sign."

"Ha, ha! No!"

"Shush!"

Four youths of about their own age were coming down the path towards the creek.

They were sturdy-looking fellows, a good deal like Bob Lawless himself in general appearance.

Bob uttered a muttered exclamation as they came nearer.

"I guess I know those kids," he said. "That chap with the curly hair is young Bird—Dicky Bird."

"My hat! What a merry name!" murmured Frank Richards.

"I don't know him very well, but I've heard he's a good sort," said Bob. "His folk are ranchers, t'other side Thompson. The other three are Watson, Fisher and Blumpy. I've seen them before. Hush! They're close!"

The youth who rejoiced in the peculiar name of Dicky Bird glanced round, as if he had heard something, but the thickets screened the Cedar Creek fellows from view, and he passed on with his companions.

The footsteps died away in the direction of the creek.

"Gone!" said Bob. "Come on!"

The trio stepped out into the trail again, and went on their way towards Hillcrest School.

There was no sign of life about the buildings.

Dicky Bird and his comrades had evidently not come from the schoolhouse, though certainly they must have passed near it.

Bob Lawless halted before the gate and looked up at the sign over it, which formed a sort of wooden arch over the gateway.

It was nearly a dozen feet from the ground, and a good way out of reach of the chums of Cedar Creek.

"We ought to have brought a ladder," said Beauclerc, with a smile.

"I guess we couldn't have toted a ladder all this way, Cherub."

"I don't see how we're going to get at it, though," remarked Frank Richards.

"My dear chap, where there's a will there's a way!" replied Bob Lawless. "We've got to stand on one another's shoulders."

"Phew!"

"I guess I'm the strongest."

"Guess again!" grinned Frank.

"Well, the strongest chap has got to take the ground floor," said Bob.

"You're the strongest, then, by heaps!" said Frank, laughing.

"Fathead! You get on my shoulders, and the Cherub can get on yours, and then he can reach the sign. I'll hand up the tar-pot when you're atop, Cherub."

"Right you are!"

Bob Lawless braced his stalwart form against the gate, and Frank Richards climbed nimbly on his shoulders, first removing his boots.

Standing on Bob's shoulders, he held against the gate to steady himself.

"Ready, Beau?"

Veré Beauclerc had a more difficult task in mounting to Frank's shoulders. But he succeeded, and held on to the sign itself.

Then the tar-pot, which Bob held ready in his hand, was carefully passed up, and Beauclerc took it.

Holding on with his left hand, the tar-pot slung by the handle on his wrist, he wielded the brush with his right.

The beautiful golden inscription was very quickly rendered indecipherable under the huge letters daubed over it in glaring black.

Only the name "Hillcrest" was left in the gold lettering.

Under it appeared the startling announcement in black:

### "PRIVATE ASYLUM FOR THE SONS OF LUNATICS."

"I say, hurry up!" came from Bob Lawless. "Frank's hoofs are getting a bit heavy!"

"So are Beau's!" gasped Frank Richards.

Bob looked up anxiously.

He was feeling the weight, strong as he was, and he was anxious for the painting to be finished.

"Nearly done, Cherub?"

"Quite!" answered Beauclerc.

"Oh, good!"

"Yaroooh!" roared Frank Richards suddenly.

A drop of tar had alighted fairly in his mouth as he looked up, and he gave a sudden jump.

That jump was fatal to the human pyramid.

Beauclerc reeled, and Bob Lawless staggered; and Frank Richards, in the middle, collapsed.

"Oh, great gophers!"

"By Jove! Oh! Ah!"

"Yoooooop!"

Bump!

## CHAPTER 21.

### After the Raiders.

**F**RANK RICHARDS sat up dazedly. He was on the ground, hardly knowing how he had got there, but knowing only too well that he had a collection of bumps about his person.

Bob Lawless was on his back, gasping.

"Beau!" gasped Frank.

Beauclerc had had the biggest fall, and for a moment Frank was alarmed at the idea that he might have broken a limb.

But as he glanced round he saw Beauclerc on his feet, unhurt, and laughing breathlessly.

"All serene! I jumped clear!" said Beauclerc. "I'm not hurt. How are you fellows?"

"Yoooooop!" came from Bob.

"Hurt, old chap?"

Bob sat up.

"Nope!" he gasped. "I'm not hurt—not a bit! I've only had a silly idiot's hoof bunged in my eye, and another silly hoof jammed on my neck, and I've only got about five million bumps—nothing to mention! Of course I'm not hurt! I'm enjoying this! Ow, ow, ow!"

"Oh, dear!" gasped Frank Richards. "Never mind!"

"But I do mind!" howled Bob. "What did you want to roll over for, you silly jay?"

"What did you roll over for, if you come to that?"

"Because a silly idiot on my shoulders rolled over, of course!"

"Well, I did it because a silly idiot under me rolled over."

"Look here, you jay—"

"Look here, you ass—"

"Easy does it!" said Beauclerc, laughing. "Don't begin to slang! Accidents will happen."

"They will, when there's silly jays about!" growled Bob Lawless, as he picked himself up.

"They will, when there's howling asses about!" assented Frank Richards.

"By gum! Where's the tar-pot?" asked Bob.

"Here you are."

The can had fallen right way up, and it was still a third full of tar. Bob Lawless picked it up.

"I guess we're taking that away with us," he said. "It might be recognised as belonging to the Lawless Ranch." Bob rubbed his bruises, but his good humour was restored as he looked up at Mr. Peckover's handsome sign, and he chortled. "I guess that will tickle Peckover to death when he sees it—and his merry pupils, too! School opens to-day, you know, and there'll be quite a sensation when the folks arrive and see that sign!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Quite satisfied with their handiwork, the three chums started on the path down the hill.

They had done successfully what they had come to do, and the little mishap at the finish did not worry them very much; they were used to hard knocks in the rough life of the backwoods.

Suddenly, as they followed the trail

through the timber towards the creek, Bob uttered an exclamation.

"By gum! There are those chaps again!"

Dicky Bird & Co. came round a bend in the trail, and the meeting was too sudden for the Cedar Creek fellows to take cover.

To their surprise, the quartette were carrying a ladder among them.

What they could want with a ladder early in the morning outside their new school was a puzzle to the chums of Cedar Creek.

"Hallo!" called out Dicky Bird, as he sighted them. "What are you fellows doing here?"

"Peekover!" replied Bob Lawless, with a grin.

"W-h-a-a-at?"

"We're doing Peckover—or, rather, we've done him," said Bob. "What are you doing with that ladder?"

"What are you doing with that tar-can?" asked Dicky Bird, in turn.

"You'll see!" grinned Bob.

And the trio passed on, chortling, leaving the four Hillcrest fellows looking puzzled.

"They've been up to some game," said Dicky Bird, casting a suspicious glance after Frank Richards & Co. "I reckoned we were the only early birds astir this morning."

"Never mind them," said Fisher. "Come on, or old Peckover will be awake before we get to work."

"Right-ho! Mosey on!"

The four schoolboys hurried on up the trail with the ladder.

They came out of the timber into the clearing surrounding the private school, and as they did so the daubed sign over the gateway burst upon them.

"Great Scott!"

"Look at that!" yelled Watson.

They dropped the ladder, dumbfounded.

When they had passed the school gate half an hour before, in the earliest rays of dawn, the gilt letters had glistened down at them, for all to read:

"HILLCREST.

PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR THE  
SONS OF GENTLEMEN."

And now, in huge, tarry characters, visible at a great distance, it read:

"HILLCREST.

PRIVATE ASYLUM FOR THE  
SONS OF LUNATICS."

Dicky Bird & Co. simply blinked at it. "Those pesky rotters!" gasped Dicky Bird. "That's what they were up to here!"

"Check!"

Dicky Bird knitted his brows.

"I guess we're not allowing this," he said. "Kern Gunten told us we should have trouble with Cedar Creek, but I never took any stock of it. But I reckon Gunten was right. This is up against us."

"Old Peckover is an old jay!" said Watson. "All the Thompson Valley is chuckling over that silly sign. But this is up against our school, and we're going to make them sit up for it."

"They're gone," said Blumpy.

Dicky Bird looked round.

"They had a can of tar with them," he said. "I guess I know what we're going to do. They've gone to Cedar Creek now, and we can't catch them up on the trail. But I reckon we can get ahead of them on the creek in the canoe—and the canoe's ready. Come on!"

"What about the ladder?"

"Bring it back; no time now for what we were going to do. That blessed sign can wait till to-morrow."

"Right-ho!"

The four schoolboys ran back along the trail to the creek, ladder in hand.

Frank Richards & Co. were long out of sight.

The four hastily thrust the ladder out of view in the thicket near the creek, whence, evidently, they had taken it, and where it had been hidden in readiness—for reasons best known to themselves.

On the bank of the creek lay a bark canoe, and the four rushed it down into the water and jumped in.

Four paddles flashed like lightning as they urged the canoe along against the current.

The canoe seemed almost to flash along till they came near the rapids, where it

was necessary to land and carry the canoe up the bank.

The "portage" did not occupy them many minutes, however.

The canoe was launched again above the rapids, and they paddled on swiftly for Cedar Creek.

Cedar Creek School soon came in sight. A single column of smoke rose from the buildings, showing them someone was astir there.

But the gates were shut, and it was a considerable time yet before the school would open for the morning.

"I reckon we've headed them off!" said Dicky Bird, as the canoe was run ashore in the rushes.

The Hillcrest fellows jumped on shore. Dicky Bird's keen eyes swept the trail before the school, but there was no sign of Frank Richards & Co.

Three horses were tethered to the gate, but their riders were not to be seen.

Frank Richards and his chums had left their horses there when they started up the creek for Hillcrest, and evidently they had not yet returned.

"We're ahead!" grinned Watson. "I guess we can ambush them on the trail, Dicky."

Dicky Bird nodded.

"I reckon!" he answered. "We've beaten them easily in the canoe, and I guess we've got them dead to rights now. Come on!"

The four schoolboys ran into the trail that led up to the school gates, and took cover in the timber.

Thence they watched the trail for the arrival of Frank Richards & Co.

It was a good quarter of an hour later that the three chums came in sight.

They were chatting and laughing as they came along, Bob Lawless swinging the tar-can carelessly in his hand.

Dicky Bird's eyes glistened.

"Quiet!" he murmured. "Jump on them as soon as they come abreast! Take the jays by surprise!"

"You bet!"

Unsuspecting of the ambush ahead, the chums of Cedar Creek came swinging on along the trail.

There was a sudden rush as they came abreast of the ambush.

Before the trio knew what was happen-



ing they were rushed over and sent sprawling into the trail, and three Hillcrest fellows were sitting on them, and Dicky Bird had picked up the tar-can.

CHAPTER 22.  
A Black Deed.

"MY hat!"

"Gerroff!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Hardly knowing what had happened, Frank Richards & Co. lay gasping on their backs in the grass, pinned down by Watson, Fisher and Blumpy.

Their captors grinned down at them.

"Rather a surprise, I guess!" chuckled Dicky Bird.

"Oh!"

"Ow!"

"How the thump did you galoots get here?" ejaculated Bob Lawless. "We left you at Hillcrest."

"We're here, anyhow!" grinned Dicky Bird. "Keep them safe, you chaps! Don't wriggle, Bob Lawless! It's a-cinch!"

"I guess it's our turn to do some tarring," said Fisher, with a chuckle.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dicky Bird was handling the brush in the can of tar with a business-like air.

The chums of Cedar Creek eyed him apprehensively.

"L-l-look here, what are you going to do with that tar?" demanded Bob Lawless uneasily.

"What have you been doing with it?" grinned Dicky Bird. "Painting the sign over our school gate! Well, we're going to paint you."

"Look here——"

"Won't it tickle the kids when they come along to school and see you?" chuckled Dicky.

His companions yelled.

The expressions on the faces of Frank Richards & Co. were very entertaining to their captors.

Dicky Bird, having loaded the brush with tar, knelt beside Bob Lawless, who struggled under the weight of Harold Fisher—but in vain.

His hands were held, and a strong knee was planted on his chest, and Bob was powerless.

"Keep off!" he gasped. "Look here, you pesky gopher—— Grooooh!"

"Better keep your mouth shut," suggested Dicky Bird. "This is jolly good tar, but it's not really fit to eat!"

"Grrruuuuugh!"

"You're bound to get it in your mouth if you open it so wide, you know."

"Grrrr!"

Bob Lawless, with an extraordinary expression on his face, closed his lips tight.

Tar outside was bad enough, but tar inside was a good deal worse—and there was some inside already.

Dicky Bird, with a methodical hand, proceeded to tar Bob's face, from the hair to the chin, laying it on quite thickly enough.

In a few minutes Bob Lawless was as black as the blackest Sambo in South Carolina.

The Hillcrest fellows yelled with laughter as they looked at him.

Bob mumbled faintly, but he did not open his lips.

He had had enough of that.

"What a picture!" said Dicky Bird admiringly. "Black but comely, you know! This will cause quite a sensation in Cedar Creek. Miss Meadows is bound to admire your complexion, Lawless."

"Mmmmmmmmm!"

"You next, old scout!"

"Look here——" gasped Frank Richards. "Oh! Ah! Ooooooch!"

He shut his mouth tightly.

In a few minutes his eyes were gleaming wrath from a face as black as the ace of spades.

Then came Beauclerc's turn.

Vere Beauclerc did not speak; he submitted philosophically to the ordeal, as it could not be helped.

It was only tit for tat, after all, though the "tit" was more severe than the "tat," so to speak.

"There, that just finishes it!" said Dicky Bird, as he completed the tarring of the Cherub's handsome face—which did not look handsome now. "I'd have given you necks to match, but there's no more tar. You oughtn't to have been so extravagant with this tar at Hillcrest, Lawless."

"Mmmmmmmmm!"

"He's trying to talk Chinese or

Kootenay," said Watson. "What does it mean, Lawless?"

"Mummmmmmm!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you rotters!" gasped Frank Richards. "Let us go! It's not long to school now, and we've got to get cleaned, you beasts!"

"No jolly fear!" answered Dicky Bird emphatically. "You're not going to get cleaned, not by long chalks. You're going to school like that."

"What?" yelled Frank.

"Your cheery complexions will match our sign over the gate at Hillcrest, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you rotter! Oh, dear!"

Frank Richards & Co. began to struggle, but it was of no avail.

They were pinned down.

It was close on time for morning school at Cedar Creek now, and the crowd of scholars might begin to arrive at any moment.

There was a crash as Black Sam threw open the school gates from within.

Sam went back to his quarters without looking out, and unconscious of the peculiar scene in the trail a dozen yards from the gateway.

Frank Richards & Co. blinked at one another in dismay.

They had started out from home very early that morning for a "lark" on Hillcrest School, but they were feeling dismally that the lark had turned very much against themselves now.

There was a clatter of hoofs on the trail, and Dicky Bird looked round.

"Here they come!" he grinned.

Up the trail several riders could be seen—Tom Lawrence and his sister Molly, Dick Dawson and Kate Dawson, Chunky Todgers and Harold Hopkins, coming along to school together.

"I guess it's time we vamoosed," said Fisher. "Let's get back to the canoe!"

"Mosey on!" grinned Dicky.

Frank Richards & Co. were suddenly released, and the four Hillcrest fellows ran down to the creek.

They did not want to wait till Cedar Creek arrived in force. There would certainly have been severe reprisals.

In a couple of minutes they were in the

canoe and padding away at a great speed for safety.

In the trail Frank and Bob and Vere Beaulearc sat up, gasping breathlessly.

"Oh, dear!" mumbled Frank.

"Grooogh!"

"Yow-ow-ow! This pesky stuff's in my mouth! Wow-wow!"

The unhappy chums staggered to their feet.

There was a jingling of bridles as the oncoming party of school boys and girls halted in astonishment at the strange sight.

"Hallo! A gang of niggers!" exclaimed Chunky Todgers. "Where did they spring from?"

"Niggers!" said Dawson. "They've got white men's paws! And they smell of tar!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Frank Richards!" shrieked Molly Lawrence. "Is it you, Frank?"

"Yow-ow! Yes, Molly! Oh, dear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tain't a laughing matter!" howled Bob Lawless. "Look at us!"

"We're looking!" yelled Chunky Todgers. "Oh, Jemima! Oh, holy smoke! You look a lovely gang of sambos! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!"

Frank Richards gave Molly quite a reproachful look; but reproach could not be nicely expressed with a tarry face, and his expression was so queer that the girl shrieked with merriment.

"Oh, Frank!" she gasped.

"I suppose it's funny!" grunted Frank Richards.

"Ha, ha! Look at your reflection in the creek, and you'll think so. I'm sorry, Frank, but—Ha, ha, ha!"

"For goodness' sake, get a move on!" exclaimed Bob Lawless. "Don't let Miss Meadows see us before we get this awful stuff off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Other Cedar Creek fellows were arriving now, and they roared with laughter at the sight of the hapless three.

Perhaps the victims had expected sympathy, but for the present sympathy was quite forgotten, and only merriment reigned.

It was useless to think of getting the tar off in the cold water of the creek—hot

water and soap, and plenty of them, were wanted, and, indeed, scrubbing-brushes as well.

The unhappy trio hurried in at the gates of Cedar Creek, followed by roars of laughter.

They hoped to get round to Black Sam's quarters, where they could clean themselves without being seen by Miss Meadows or the masters.

But their hope was in vain.

As they tore across the playground they almost ran into Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd, taking a little walk together before lessons.

"Bless my soul! What—who—what is this?" exclaimed Mr. Slimmey, his glasses almost falling off as he stared at the black-faced three.

"Negroes!" said Mr. Shepherd, in wonder. "Are they new boys in the school? Stop, my boys! Why—what—what—?"

"Lawless!"

"Yes, sir?" gasped Bob.

"Wha-a-at does this mean?"

"I—I—I—" stammered Bob.

"We—we—we—" stuttered Frank.

"You—you see—" mumbled Beauclerc.

"Boys!" Miss Meadows hurried out of the schoolhouse. She had seen the extraordinary trio from a window. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Miss Meadows!"

"Richards!" ejaculated the schoolmistress.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a wild roar from the crowd of schoolboys coming in at the gates.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Miss Meadows. "Richards—Lawless—Beauclerc, this is—is—is amazing. You have deliberately tarred your faces and made yourselves look utterly absurd!"

"N-n-nunno!"

"You utterly foolish boys, why have you played this extraordinary prank?" exclaimed Miss Meadows.

"We—we—we didn't!" gasped Miss Bob Lawless. "We—we—we've been tarred by a gang of hobos for a lark!"

"Four horrid beasts tarred us, Miss Meadows!" groaned Frank. "We—we—we didn't want 'em to. We didn't, really!"

"I—I suppose so. Go and clean yourselves at once!" said Miss Meadows, and her lips were quivering as she went back

to the house, though she did not laugh till she was indoors.

Frank Richards & Co. tramped away dolorously to the stables.

There the grinning Black Sam provided them with a tub of steaming water, plenty of soap, and scrubbing-brushes.

Black Sam's own complexion was a joke to those of the unhappy three.

In steaming water, Frank Richards & Co. rubbed and scrubbed at their faces, till they felt as if the skin were peeling off.

Round them stood a thick circle of schoolboys, howling with laughter, and passing merry remarks on their complexions.

The bell for lessons relieved the hapless victims of their audience at last, and the laughing crowd trooped away.

But Frank Richards & Co were very late for lessons that morning.

When they appeared in the schoolroom at last, their faces were as red as newly-boiled beetroots, excepting where the tar still lingered, and a good deal of it still lingered yet.

There was a gust of chuckling as they took their places, and it was some minutes before Miss Meadows could restore silence.

And all through morning lessons grinning faces surrounded Frank Richards & Co.

In fact, there were only three fellows at Cedar Creek who could not see the humour of the affair, and those three were Frank and his comrades.

## CHAPTER 23.

### Friendly Rivals.

"I GUESS you jays make me smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's some lovely black spots on your chin, Bob."

"And on your ears, Richards."

These remarks, and a good many more of the same kind, pursued Frank Richards & Co. after morning lessons at Cedar Creek.

The Co. were glad to escape into the timber and stroll about there till dinner, to escape the chipping of the Cedar Creek fellows.

"I guess we shall be sniggered to death," said Bob Lawless dolefully. "Even that little Chinese beast Yen Chin is cackling at us! It's too bad! We couldn't help those galoots tarring our faces, could we?"

"We couldn't," agreed Frank.

"I suppose they think it funny," remarked Beauclere. "And—and I suppose it is, really."

"Well, we started out for a stunt on Hillcrest, and we do seem to have come out at the little end of the horn," admitted Bob. "But one swallow doesn't make a summer. We're going to scalp those rotters who tarred us!"

"No doubt about that!" said Frank.

"We'll ride over after lessons," continued Bob. "A jolly good walloping all round will do them good, and relieve our feelings, anyhow."

"The walloping may come our way, if we run into a crowd of them," remarked Frank.

"Oh, I guess they'll give us fair play! Dicky Bird is a white man," said Bob. "Fact is, I guess we've misjudged them a little, owing to that coyote Gunten spinning us yarns. But we've got to keep our end up, or we shall never hear the end of this."

And Bob's comrades assented.

The three returned to school just in time for dinner, and found grinning faces at the board.

In the interval before afternoon school they canoed on the creek, being quite tired of hearing about their misadventures in the playground.

There was another steaming wash before lessons, and that afternoon the victims of Dicky Bird's reprisals showed fewer traces of tar, though here and there a smudge still lingered.

As soon as school was dismissed for the day they took their horses from the corral, but instead of starting for home they followed the trail towards Thompson Town.

Near the town they turned off on the timber trail to Hillcrest.

The winter dusk had fallen on creek and river, but Bob Lawless knew all the trails by light or darkness, and they trotted on at a good speed.

They hoped to arrive while the Hillcrest fellows were still on the spot, or to meet them on their homeward way, but though they passed some of the boys of the new school, Dicky Bird & Co. were not among them.

"Hallo, there's Gunten!" exclaimed Bob suddenly.

Kern Gunten and Keller, the two Swiss,

were walking back to Thompson, their satchels swung over their shoulders.

They grinned at the sight of the Cedar Creek trio.

Evidently they had heard the story of the tarring of their former schoolfellows.

Bob drew rein as Gunten called out to him:

"What are you doing up here, Lawless? Looking for some more tar?"

"Oh, go and chop chips!" grunted Bob.

"Going to Hillcrest?" asked Keller.

"This trail leads nowhere else."

"Yep."

Gunten curled his lip, with a lofty expression of disdain.

"I guess you'd better keep clear," he said. "Your sort are not wanted there. I can tell you that Mr. Peckover has warned us to keep clear of your lot. We don't want to speak to Cedar Creek trash!"

"Low crowd!" remarked Keller.

Bob made his horse prance, and the two Swiss jumped out of the trail into the timber.

"Keep off, you fool!" roared Gunten, his lofty dignity vanishing all of a sudden.

Bob rode after him, with a grim brow, and Gunten fairly bolted through the trees, with Keller at his heels.

"Come on, Bob!" called out Frank Richards. "Never mind those silly asses!"

But Bob's usually sunny face was knitted in a deep frown as he rejoined his chums in the trail.

Gunten's absurd affectation of superiority seemed to have an irritating effect upon him.

"Come on!" he said gruffly. "We'll squash the next Hillcrest galoots we meet on the trail!"

Fortunately, they met no more of the Hillcrest fellows, and they came in sight of the new school at last in the evening shadows.

Lights glimmered from the building, but the school-room was closed; the last of the Hillcrest fellows was gone.

Bob looked puzzled as he dismounted near the gates and threw his reins over a branch.

"Where are those galoots?" he exclaimed. "They haven't left with the rest, or we should have passed them on the trail. Canceing, perhaps."

"They keep a canoe here, I think," said

Frank. "In that case, they'll be coming back this way."

"We'll wait for 'em," said Bob grimly.

The three horses were tethered in the thicket, and the chums took up their stand under the shadow of a tree near the gates.

In the glimmer of starlight they could see the board over the gate, which had been given a new inscription that morning.

Paper had been pasted over it, to hide the tarred inscription, and the name of the school had been freshly painted there, but only in common paint; the glory of the gilt letters had departed.

But though the sign was not so handsome as of old, it still announced to the pine-trees and the gophers that Hillcrest was a private school for the sons of gentlemen.

Bob grinned as he looked up at it.

"After we've finished with Dicky Bird we'll give that sign another touch or two!" he remarked. "Peckover must have been pleased when he saw it this morning. We'll please him again to-morrow morning, the old hunks!"

"Shush! Here comes somebody!"

The three chums remained quiet in the shadow of the big tree, watching the trail of the gates.

Through the gloom, four dim figures came into view, and, to the surprise of the Co., they were carrying a ladder among them, just as when the Cedar Creek fellows had met them in the morning.

"What the dickens are they doing?" muttered Bob Lawless. "Hold on a bit! Let's see what they're up to!"

The chums watched in silence.

Dicky Bird and Co. passed within a few yards of them, evidently without suspecting their presence.

The four schoolboys reared up the ladder in front of the gates, which were locked for the night.

It rested against one of the stout posts supporting the sign over the gateway.

Frank Richards and Co. exchanged surprised glances.

It looked as if Dicky Bird, of Hillcrest, had designs upon that sign himself, and they were puzzled.

"That's right!" It was Dicky's voice.

"You've got the can of oil, Fisher?"

"You bet! Here it is!"

"And the matches?"

"I've got the matches," said Blumpy.

"Got some brushwood while I'm at work," said Dicky Bird. "Hand me that saw, Watson!"

Dicky Bird ascended the ladder, saw in hand, while his comrades proceeded to gather brushwood from the thicket.

The astonishment of the watchers increased.

What the object of the four Hillcrest fellows could be they could not imagine.

But they were soon to see, however.

Dicky Bird sawed away industriously at the sign while his comrades piled brushwood in a heap a few yards from the gate.

The big board was sawn nearly through, first at one end and then at the other, till it was held only by an inch or two of wood.

Then Dicky Bird tied a rope to it, and descended the ladder.

"All O.K.!" he said. "I reckon a pull will do it now! Got the ladder in the trees first; hide it, and we can take it away to-morrow."

The ladder was thrust out of sight in the wood near at hand.

Then the four Hillcrest fellows returned to the gate, and laid hold of the rope that dangled from the sign overhead.

"By gum!" murmured Bob Lawless, in great amazement.

"They—they're going to yank it down!" said Beauclerc. "What the dickens——"

"And burn it, that's clear," remarked Beauclerc. "I'm blest if I catch on to this!"

The chums of Cedar Creek had quite forgotten now their hostile intentions towards Dicky Bird and Co. They were feeling only blank amazement at the peculiar proceedings of the Hillcrest fellows.

The four tugged at the rope; but the sign held on to the posts.

"Put your beef into it!" said Dicky.

Bob Lawless stepped out of the shadows. "Let us lend you a hand, old scout!" he said genially.

The Hillcrest fellows jumped, and spun round, letting go the rope.

"Hallo! You!" ejaculated Dicky Bird.

"Us!" smiled Frank Richards.

"What the thunder are you up to?" asked Bob Lawless. "Blest if I can make you out at all!"

Dicky Bird laughed.

"We're going to make a bonfire of that silly foolery!" he said, pointing to the sign. "Old Peckover doesn't know this section, and he doesn't savvy that he's making the school a standing joke in the town. That kind of thing doesn't wash in the Thompson Valley!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Frank Richards.

"It's making out that we put on airs over Cedar Creek, and so on," explained Dicky. "It's all very well in the East, of course; but I guess we're all on the same footing West, and we're not going to allow Peckover to make us look like asses, not if we know it!"

"Fellows in Thompson have been hooting at us over it," said Blumpy, with a snort. "They think we're putting on side, all because old Peckover is a thumping fool!"

Bob Lawless blushed.

These were the fellows against whom Gunten had incensed him, and whose nonsense he had come over to knock out of them.

"Oh!" he gasped. "I—I—I see!"

"What are you fellows doing here, though?" asked Watson.

"Ahem! We—we came to—to— Never mind!" said Bob hastily. "We—we just came, you know, to—to— Ahem!"

"I guess that's lueid!" remarked Dicky Bird. "Do you always express yourself as clearly as that?"

Bob grinned.

"All serene!" he said. "Never mind what we came for. Now we're here, we'll lend you a hand, if you like, and part good friends—what? We'll forgive you for the business, under the—the circumstances!"

"Done!" said Dicky Bird cheerfully. "We should have done this business this morning, if you hadn't come round. So it's fair for you to help."

"Here goes, then!" said Frank Richards.

Seven strong pairs of hands were laid on the rope, and they dragged hard, keeping well clear of the gate, to give the sign—equally obnoxious to both parties—room to fall.

Creak! Crack! Crack!

With a terrific crash the big board came thundering down, leaving the two posts standing up bare and forlorn.

The fallen sign was seized, and dragged across the huge heap of brushwood.

Two or three blows of an axe separated it into parts, which were piled up on the brushwood; and then the whole heap was drenched with kerosene from a can.

A moment more, and a match was applied.

The schoolboys jumped back, as a sheet of flame soared up.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Bob Lawless. "That will wake up old Peckover, if anything will!"

"He's coming!" gasped Watson.

There was the sound of a furious voice within the gates, and the grating of a key.

The raiders rushed into the shadows of the wood, Frank Richards and Co. unhitching their horses, and leading them along with them.

The trees swallowed them up, as the gate was opened, and Mr. Peckover came rushing out, crimson and furious.

The schoolboys chortled as they fled, and their last glance back from the distance showed them a roaring bonfire, and Mr. Peckover dancing with rage in the lurid flare of the flames.

## CHAPTER 24.

### Black Ingratitude.

"PECKOVER, by gum!"

There had been a heavy fall of snow in the Thompson Valley, and the Cedar Creek trail was thick with the white flakes.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless were trudging through the snow towards Cedar Creek School, when Bob suddenly halted.

Ahead of the two schoolboys on the trail a fur-clad figure had come in sight.

It was Mr. Peckover, the headmaster of Hillcrest School, with his fur-coat turned up round his chin, the flaps of his cap drawn down over his ears, and little more of his face showing than his long, thin, red nose.

But the chums of Cedar Creek knew that nose.

Mr. Peckover's head was bent against the keen wind that blew from the snowy slopes of the Rocky Mountains in the far distance.

He was coming towards the Cedar Creek fellows, but he had not seen them.

"Dear old Peckover!" said Bob Lawless,

with a grin. "And there's plenty of snow handy, Franky."

Frank Richards laughed and shook his head.

"Not good enough, Bob," he answered.

"He will come along to Cedar Creek and complain if we snowball him."

"But it's too good a chance to be lost," urged Bob. "The old bird hasn't seen us, and we can take cover, and snowball him as he moseys by."

"But——"

"He can't come yarning to Miss Meadows if he doesn't see us," argued Bob. "And he's asked for it, hasn't he? Isn't he down on us, nice as we are?"

"Yes; but——"

"Don't but, old chap; get into cover, and get some snowballs ready."

Bob Lawless was evidently determined.

The chums of Cedar Creek had had many rubs with Mr. Peckover, and they had no love for the headmaster of Hillcrest.

And really it did seem too good a chance to be lost.

"Oh, all right!" said Frank. "But——"

"Hallo!" ejaculated Bob suddenly.

Mr. Peckover was about a dozen yards away now, but with his head still bent and his eyes on the trail, he had not seen the chums of Cedar Creek, so far.

But, all of a sudden, as he came abreast of a thick patch of spruce beside the trail, Mr. Peckover gave a wild jump.

From the spruce thicket a snowball had whizzed with deadly aim, and it landed fairly on the sharp, red nose of the schoolmaster.

There was a sudden howl from Mr. Peckover as he jumped.

"My hat!" exclaimed Frank Richards, in astonishment. "Who was that? There's somebody in the timber!"

Whiz, whiz!

Crash!

From the spruce whizzing snowballs came thick and fast.

It was evident that there was an ambush beside the trail, and Mr. Peckover had walked into it.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless stared on at the scene.

Their snowballs were not wanted.

Mr. Peckover was fairly dancing as the shower of missiles came pelting from the thicket, smiting him hip and thigh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob.

"Varooh!"

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

The snowballers were still invisible; the thick spruce hid them from sight.

But their aim was deadly.

Snowballs smashed all over Mr. Peckover as he yelled and jumped and dodged.

He had lost his footing suddenly in the snow and rolled over.

Then there was a sound of crashing in the thicket, as the unseen snowballers fled through the timber—still unseen.

"Who the dickens are they?" exclaimed Frank Richards. "Not Cedar Creek chaps, I think."

"I guess not!" chuckled Bob Lawless. "Look there!"

He pointed through an opening in the timber.

From where they stood the chums could see three figures darting among the leafless trees in full flight.

"Dicky Bird!" exclaimed Frank.

"And Blumpy and Fisher!" grinned Bob. "Hillcrest chaps—pelting their own merry headmaster, too! Peckover doesn't seem popular with his pupils."

In a moment or two Dicky Bird and his comrades vanished into the forest.

On the trail Mr. Peckover was still rolling in the snow, gasping and snorting.

"Let's give the old bird a hand up!" said Bob Lawless good-naturedly.

Mr. Peckover was really in need of assistance.

He had rolled into a drift beside the trail, and nearly disappeared from sight.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless ran towards him.

From the snowdrift a capped head and a red nose emerged.

"Yow-ow-ow-ow!" came from the half-buried schoolmaster.

Bob Lawless grasped Mr. Peckover by the shoulder, and Frank Richards seized his arm.

They dragged together, and the angular gentleman was pulled out of the drift.

He landed, gasping, in the trail.

"Ow! Oooooop!"

"All right now, sir!" said Bob Lawless, suppressing his merriment. "Set him on his tootsies, Franky!"

"Up with you, sir!" said Frank Richards cheerily.

The chums of Cedar Creek had quite forgotten their original intention of snowballing Mr. Peckover themselves.

Certainly he looked as if he was not in need of any more snowballing.

He was smothered with snow from head to foot, and looked a good deal like Father Christmas as the chums set him on his feet.

He gasped and spluttered breathlessly.

"You young scoundrels!"

"What?" ejaculated Frank.

"You young rascals!"

"Well, I like that!" said Bob Lawless.

"Is that what you call thanks for helping you out of the drift, Mr. Peckover?"

"I—I—I— You young villains!"

Mr. Peckover glared round wildly for his stick, which he had dropped when he rolled over.

Frank Richards picked it up and handed it to him.

The moment the angular gentleman grasped it he brought it across Frank's shoulders with a sounding whack.

Frank gave a yell.

"Why—what—you—"

"You young rascals!" shouted Mr. Peckover furiously. "I will thrash you within an inch of your lives! You—you dare to snowball me—"

The two schoolboys dodged.

"But we didn't!" yelled Bob. "We ran up to help you! It was somebody in the timber who snowballed you."

"Don't tell me falsehoods!"

Slash!

"You silly old duffer!" shouted Frank. "Keep off, you fathead! I tell you it was— Oh, my hat!"

Instead of keeping off, Mr. Peckover rushed on, with his stick flourishing in the air.

He was under the impression that it was the Cedar Creek chums who had snowballed him, and their denials were of no use. Mr. Ephraim Peckover was not of a trustful disposition.

Frank and Bob dodged the stick, with some difficulty. But Mr. Peckover was not to be denied.

He pressed on, the stick lashing out; and he would certainly have done some damage with it had not Bob rushed in and butted.

Bob's head smote the schoolmaster in the centre of the fur-coat, and fairly bowled him over.

He staggered back, and sat down in the snowdrift from which the chums had rescued him a few minutes before.

"Yoooop!"

Mr. Peckover's head and feet showed above the drift; the rest of him was out of sight.

"My hat! I've a jolly good mind to give him some of his own stick!" exclaimed Frank Richards wrathfully. "Leave him there, anyway."

"You bet!"

"Yow-ow-ow! Help!" yelled Mr. Peckover.

But the chums were not disposed to render further help.

They tramped on down the trail, leaving Mr. Peckover to sort himself out at his leisure.

## CHAPTER 25.

### Called Over the Coals.

MISS MEADOWS frowned. Cedar Creek was at afternoon lessons, when there came a loud knock at the door of the big school-room.

The door was flung open, and Mr. Peckover strode in.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless exchanged a quick look.

"After us, you bet!" murmured Bob.

"You fellows been ragging Peckover?" asked Beauclerc, in a whisper.

"No; but he thinks we have."

"By gum! He looks wrathful!" murmured Chunky Todgers.

Mr. Peckover looked exceedingly wrathful as he strode down the school-room towards Miss Meadows.

"Miss Meadows—" spluttered the unexpected visitor.

"Really, Mr. Peckover—"

"I have come to lay a complaint before you, madam!" snorted Mr. Peckover.

"This is neither the time nor the place, sir. You are interrupting my work," said Miss Meadows coldly.

"Two boys in this class, madam, have assaulted me!" shouted Mr. Peckover.

He stared round the class, and pointed a bony forefinger at Frank Richards and Bob Lawless.

"Those two young scoundrels, Richards and Lawless!" he exclaimed.

Miss Meadows set her lips.

"Pray, calm yourself, sir! Richards and Lawless, step out before the class!"



Frank Richards and his Canadian cousin stepped out obediently.

The eyes of all Cedar Creek were upon them.

The two schoolboys were quite cool.

Mr. Peckover was very far from cool.

"Richards! Lawless! You have——" began the schoolmistress.

"Not at all, Miss Meadows!" said Frank quietly.

"You do not deny Mr. Peckover's statement?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The boy is lying!" thundered Mr. Peckover. "These two young rascals threw snowballs at me on the trail between this school and Hillcrest, and caused me to fall into a drift."

"This is very serious, Richards," said Miss Meadows, frowning. "If you have done this——"

"But we haven't, Miss Meadows," said Frank Richards earnestly.

"Did you meet Mr. Peckover on the trail?"

"Yes; but——"

"Kindly tell me what happened, then."

"I have told you what happened, Miss Meadows!" thundered Mr. Peckover. "And I demand the instant and severe punishment of these two young rascals."

"If they are guilty of assaulting you, sir, they will be punished; but, naturally, I shall hear their account first," said Miss Meadows tartly.

"They will utter falsehoods——"

"We shall do nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Frank Richards indignantly. "And only a cad would say so."

"Wha-a-at!" spluttered Mr. Peckover.

"You hear him, madam?"

"Silence, Richards!"

"He has no right to call us liars, ma'am," said Frank.

"Tell me what occurred," said Miss Meadows, with a worried look.

"I repeat that I have told you, madam, that——"

"Allow Richards to speak, please, Mr. Peckover."

Mr. Peckover snorted, but he gave Frank a chance to speak.

Frank explained what had taken place on the trail, Mr. Peckover punctuating the remarks with a series of scornful sniffs.

Miss Meadows' brow cleared as she listened.

"Did you see the persons who snowballed Mr. Peckover, Richards?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who were they?"

"I—I'd rather not mention their names, ma'am," stammered Frank. "Mr. Peckover has no right to come here for information."

"The boy is lying!" thundered Mr. Peckover. "It was he and his companions who threw the snowballs at me!"

"I do not believe Richards is capable of lying," said Miss Meadows quietly. "It appears that you did not see who threw the snowballs."

"I saw these boys throw them!" shouted Mr. Peckover.

"Oh! You are sure?"

"I am positive, madam."

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Frank.

He was quite taken aback.

If Mr. Peckover had seen who threw the snowballs, he would certainly have been aware that Dicky Bird & Co. were the culprits, and he would not have come to Cedar Creek to look for them.

Mr. Peckover was, in fact, not speaking the truth.

Miss Meadows looked very troubled.

Mr. Peckover's statement was positive on one side, and that of Frank Richards and Bob equally positive on the other.

The class looked on breathlessly, wondering what the schoolmistress' decision would be.

"You—you are sure that you actually saw these boys throw the snowballs, Mr. Peckover?" asked Miss Meadows slowly.

"I have said so, madam," answered the master of Hillcrest.

"And you, Richards and Lawless——"

"We deny it, ma'am," said Frank Richards steadily. "Mr. Peckover is not telling the truth."

"He is telling lies!" said Bob Lawless bluntly.

The Hillcrest master trembled with rage.

"You hear them, madam?" he stuttered. "This is the language your boys use to wards me!"

Miss Meadows made a gesture.

"Allow me to speak, Mr. Peckover Richards, I should be very sorry to doubt your word, but Mr. Peckover says positively——"

"He is not speaking the truth, ma'am."

"You say that you saw who threw the snowballs?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you must give me their names, Richards."

Frank and Bob exchanged a troubled look.

It did not occur to Miss Meadows that the Hillcrest master had been snowballed by his own pupils, upon whom terrific punishment was sure to fall if Mr. Peckover learned the facts.

The chums of Cedar Creek did not intend to betray Dicky Bird & Co. That was impossible.

But it was impossible, too, to explain their motive for withholding the names.

Miss Meadows grew sterner as they hesitated to speak.

"They cannot give the names," said Mr. Peckover, with a sneer. "There are no names to be given, as they are guilty!"

"I am waiting, Richards!" said Miss Meadows ominously.

"I—I—" stammered Frank.

"I infer, Richards, from what you say, that Mr. Peckover was snowballed by some of the town boys," said Miss Meadows.

"There is no reason whatever why you should not give their names and clear yourself."

"There is a reason—"

"What is it?"

"I—I—"

"Well?" exclaimed Miss Meadows impatiently.

"I can't give the names," said Frank desperately. "There is a reason, but I can't explain it."

"That is so!" said Bob Lawless. "But you know that we are not liars, Miss Meadows."

"I certainly thought so, Lawless," said the schoolmistress sternly. "But if you refuse to take a perfectly easy method of clearing yourselves I must alter my opinion. For the last time, will you answer my question?"

Silence.

"Are you satisfied now?" asked Mr. Peckover, with a sneer.

"I am satisfied," said Miss Meadows, frowning. "Richards and Lawless, as you have nothing to say, I assume that Mr. Peckover's statement is correct, and I shall punish you severely."

Frank and Bob did not speak.

They did not blame Miss Meadows, who could scarcely take any other view; but

their feelings towards Mr. Peckover were almost homicidal.

"I will witness the punishment, Miss Meadows," said the Hillcrest master, his thin lips setting hard.

"There is no objection to that, sir." Miss Meadows took the pointer from her desk.

The next few minutes were very painful to the two chums. But they bore their infliction without a sound.

Miss Meadows felt that it was a time to be severe; and though such punishment was seldom administered at Cedar Creek, the schoolmistress could be severe when she thought it necessary.

Frank and Bob squeezed their hands hard as they went back to their places.

Mr. Peckover, with a glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes, left the school-room, and lessons proceeded at Cedar Creek.

## CHAPTER 26.

### Yen Chin Chips In.

"YOU galoots are a pair of jays, and no mistake!"

That was Eben Hacke's opinion, delivered in the playground, when Cedar Creek was dismissed after lessons.

"Awful duffers!" remarked Chunky Todgers. "You ought to have spun a better yarn than that!"

"What do you mean, you fat idiot!" growled Bob Lawless.

Bob's temper was not at its best just then.

"Well," said Chunky sagely, "I guess you could have told the truth; but if you were going to spin a yarn, you should have spun a likely one."

"I calculate so!" said Hacke.

"You silly chumps!" exclaimed Frank Richards angrily. "It wasn't a yarn; it was the frozen truth."

"Then why couldn't you give the names?" asked Chunky Todgers incredulously.

"Because they were Hillcrest chaps, you fat duffer!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Chunky.

"I guessed that," said Molly Lawrence. "I guessed at once, Frank. I was afraid old Peckover would guess it. But he's an old chump!"

"My hat!" said Beauclerc, with a whistle. "Who were they, then, Frank?"

"Dicky Bird and Fisher and Blumpy."  
"Phew!" said Eben Hacke. "Old Peckover would have skinned them alive if he'd known!"

"That's why we didn't tell him, ass!"  
"You took a licking instead," said Tom Lawrence.

"Well, what could we do?" grunted Bob.

"The worst of it is that Miss Meadows thinks we've been telling crams," said Frank Richards. "That's worse than the caning."

"Ugly ole Peckover tellee lies!" remarked Yen Chin, the Chinese.

"Yes."  
"Vellee badee man!" said Yen Chin. "Vellee wicked tellee lies!"

"Well, you ought to know all about it, Yen Chin," said Bob Lawless. "You never tell anything else."

"Yen Chin good Chinese," said the Celestial. "Me vellee solly Missee Meadee tinkee Flanky tellee whoppe. Me makee all light."

"Rats!" grunted Frank.

The chums of Cedar Creek sat in the porch to fasten on their snowshoes for the run home.

Yen Chin disappeared into the house.

Frank and Bob were in a glum humour, and Vere Beauclerc was sympathetic.

The caning had been severe, but the effects of that were wearing off.

But to be condemned by Miss Meadows for having spoken falsely was harder.

They valued the good opinion of the Canadian schoolmistress.

"It's rotten!" growled Frank. "We can't explain; and Miss Meadows will think badly of us. I'm going to scalp Peckover somehow!"

"I guess we'll make him sit up!" growled Bob vengefully. "I reckon he ought to be lynched! I suppose he believes it was us, but that's no excuse for telling thumping lies!"

Yen Chin came gliding out of the house with a grin on his yellow face.

"Oh, Flanky——" he began.

"Oh, don't worry!"

"Miss Meadee wantee speakee to Flanky and ugly ole Bob."

"Is that a message, you blessed heathen?" exclaimed Bob.

"Oh, yes! Missee Meadee tellee me tellee you."

"More trouble!" growled Bob. "Come on, Frank! We're up against it to-day, and no mistake!"

The chums kicked off their snowshoes, and went into the house.

The door of Miss Meadows' sitting-room was open, and they presented themselves there with glum faces.

Miss Meadows, somewhat to their surprise, gave them a kindly glance as she beckoned them to enter.

"I have just been told something," the schoolmistress began.

"Yes, ma'am!" said Bob Lawless resignedly. "We're ready."

Miss Meadows smiled.

"I have not sent for you to punish you, Lawless."

"Oh!" ejaculated Bob.

"It appears," said Miss Meadows gravely, "that, contrary to my belief, you were speaking the truth this afternoon when Mr. Peckover called here."

"We were, Miss Meadows," said Frank.

"It did not occur to me that you might have some boyish chivalrous motive for concealing the names of the persons concerned in attacking Mr. Peckover. Is it the case, Lawless, that the persons referred to belonged to Mr. Peckover's school?"

Silence.

"You need not hesitate to speak frankly," said Miss Meadows. "Mr. Peckover is not here now, and I have no intention of acquainting him with what you tell me."

"Oh!" said Bob. "In that case, Miss Meadows, we'll give you the facts fast enough. It was some Hillcrest chaps who snowballed him. We couldn't give 'em away to their headmaster, ma'am."

"Their names?" said Miss Meadows. "In confidence, of course," she added quickly.

"Bird, Fisher and Blumpy," said Bob, without hesitation.

Miss Meadows pursed her lips.

"I understand now," she said.

"I hope you believe us now, Miss Meadows," said Frank Richards. "I know it looked suspicious our not giving their names; but now you know the reason——"

"I fully believe you, Richards, and I am sorry you have been punished; but at the time you left me no alternative."

"Oh, that doesn't matter, ma'am!" said Bob. "We're not a bit of putty—I—I mean, we don't mind a bit. But we didn't want you to think we were liars."

"I do not think so, Lawless, and I am very glad that you have been set right in my eyes. Mr. Peckover was—ahem!—mistaken. No doubt, in the excitement of the moment, he fancied that he had seen you throw the snowballs."

The schoolboys had their own opinion about it, but they did not utter it.

They had a suspicion, too, that Miss Meadows shared their opinion.

"You may go," said Miss Meadows. "Good-bye, my boys!"

The chums walked out in great spirits.

"But how the dickens did Miss Meadows know?" exclaimed Bob, as he sat down in the porch to put on his snowshoes once more.

Frank shook his head.

"Blessed if I know, Bob! She said she had been told something."

"Allee light, oh, yes?" Yen Chin grinned in the porch.

"Yes, it's all right, heathen," grinned Bob Lawless, laughing.

"What me tellee you?" grinned Yen Chin. "Me makee all light, what you tinkee? Yen Chin good old lascat—oh, yes!"

Frank Richards uttered an exclamation. "You told Miss Meadows, Yen Chin?"

The Chinese nodded.

"Me tellee," he answered. "Settee ole flanky light, you bet! Chineee velly good boy!"

"You young ass!" exclaimed Bob. "As it happens, Miss Meadows isn't going to tell Peckover; but she might have got Dicky Bird lagged by old Peckover! I've a jolly good mind—"

"All's well that ends well," interposed Vere Beauclerc, with a laugh. "It's turned out all right, Bob."

"Well, that's so," admitted Bob. "All the same—"

"Bob Lawless ugly ole lascat!" exclaimed Yen Chin indignantly. "Velly unglateful. Go and choppee chippee!"

"Well, I guess I'm obliged to you, as it turns out," said Bob. "But if it had led to Dicky Bird being lagged I'd have roped you, heathen, that's a cert!"

"Bob Lawless velly ugly!" was Yen Chin's reply, as he walked away.

Bob laughed.

"I guess I'm glad we're all O.K. with Miss Meadows again," he said. "But all the same, we're going to make Peckover sorry for telling lies and getting us into hot water."

"We are!" said Frank Richards emphatically.

And Vere Beauclerc nodded assent.

The three chums were of one opinion in that matter, and as they glided homeward through the dusk and the snow they were thinking of ways and means for making Mr. Peckover and Hillcrest duly sorry.

## CHAPTER 27.

### Looking for Trouble.

FRANK RICHARDS & Co. did some thinking on the following day, and their thinking was by no means on the subject of their lessons.

They were thinking of Mr. Peckover.

Their rivalry with Dicky Bird and the other fellows at Hillcrest was quite of a good-natured kind, but they did not feel good-natured towards the Hillcrest headmaster.

But how to "go for" Ephraim Peckover was rather a perplexing problem.

They decided that it had to be done, but the "how" remained a problem, and it was not quite settled when lessons were over for the day.

The snow was still thick on the trails, and the chums had come to school on their snowshoes.

After lessons the trio glided out at the gates together, cheerily enough in the keen, frosty air.

"This way!" called out Bob, as they started.

He slid off into the Thompson trail, which led in the direction of Hillcrest School, for some distance.

His chums followed him.

"Not going to Thompson?" asked Frank.

"Nope; Hillcrest!" answered Bob briefly.

"All the better; the coast will be clear," said Bob. "I guess it's Peckover we're going to see."

"But—" began Frank.

"We're going to make the rotter sit up for telling lies about me!" said Bob. "It's got to be did."

"But how?"

"We shan't find out how by going home. Let's got to Hillcrest, and then we'll see."

"Oh, all right!"

The three chums moved rapidly along the thickly-snowed trail, and turned off into the path to Hillcrest.

They were not long in coming in sight of the new school.

The snow was falling in light flakes, and the high fence of the school enclosure was tipped with white, as well as the roofs of the buildings.

Dusk was deepening over the woods.

From the roofs of Hillcrest a column of smoke rose from a chimney, and was lost in the dusk of the evening.

The gates were closed and locked.

Frank and Beauclerc looked rather humorously at their determined chum. So far as they could see, there was "nothing doing."

"We're going in," said Bob.

"But—"

"Peckover lives there in the schoolhouse, and there's only the man-of-all-work, and his wife as well," said Bob. "Nothing to be afraid of."

"Yes; but—"

"Chuck off your snowshoes and follow your leader, old sport, and not so much chin-wag!" said Bob, who had evidently made up his mind.

"Oh, all right!"

The boys took off their snowshoes outside the fence, and, with Bob leading the way, they climbed the high fence and dropped down inside.

It was easy enough to approach the house unseen in the gathering dusk, and with the thick snow deadening the sound of their boots.

As they moved on towards the house they were unaware of the fact that four faces rose over the fence from the outside and looked after them.

Dicky Bird, Fisher, Blumpy and Watson, the chums of Hillcrest, were the four, and they were grinning.

"Dear little innocent kids!" murmured Dicky Bird. "They don't know they've been spotted. They've a lot to learn at Cedar Creek."

His comrades chuckled.

"But what the thunder are they doing here?" asked Watson.

Dicky shook his head.

"I give that one up!" he said. "I guess

they're after us, but they ought to know that school's closed before this time. We shouldn't have known they were here, even, if we hadn't happened to spot them coming up the trail. I wonder if it's a stunt on Peckover. They don't like our headmaster."

"Any more than we do!" grunted Blumpy.

"We don't, Blumpy, old chap; but we don't allow Cedar Creek kids to rag our headmaster, all the same."

"No fear!" said Fisher.

"Cedar Creek's got to be kept in its place. We're the top-notch school of this section, and the rest are nowhere. I guess we're going to give those galoots a tip about inviting themselves here. Come after me, and keep quiet."

Dicky Bird dropped down inside the fence.

His companions followed him, falling silently into the thick snow.

Meanwhile, Frank Richards & Co. had reached the log schoolhouse, utterly oblivious of Dicky Bird's proximity.

The three chums had raced along the trails on their snowshoes, and they had not

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observed the Hillcrest fellows in the dusk of the woods, but they had been observed themselves.

For the present they were blissfully unaware of that fact.

"Well, now we're here, Bob," said Frank Richards, "what's the game?"

Bob Lawless pointed to a lighted window. "That's Peckover's sitting-room," he said. "Use your peepers, and you'll see his rascally old cabeza."

Frank looked towards the window. The blinds were not yet drawn, and in the lamp-light within Mr. Peckover was to be seen.

He was warming his hands at a log-fire, and occasionally taking up and sipping from a glass that stood on a table near him.

"That's the rotter!" agreed Frank. "Get some snow together," said Bob in a whisper. "I'll sling a pebble at the window, and you can bet Peckover will open it and look out. Then you fellows can——"

A chuckle interrupted him. "Good egg!" said Frank. "Keep in cover, though; we don't want to be spotted, and another visit made to Miss Meadows."

"You bet!" "Keeping in the shadow of the wall, Bob Lawless crept towards the lighted windows with several pebbles in his hand.

Clink, clink, clink! The pebbles rattled on the window. Mr. Peckover within gave a sudden jump, strode to the window, and threw it wide open.

He put out his head and peered round in the dusk.

"Who is there?" he shouted. "How dare you! Who—what—— Yarooooop!"

Whiz! Two big snowballs flew together from Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc.

In the deep dusk they were invisible to Mr. Peckover; but the latter was a good target against the lighted room.

Crash! Smash! One of the snowballs burst on Mr. Peckover's nose and the other on his chin.

He spun back into the room as if he had been smitten by cannon-balls instead of snowballs.

Bump! "Ha, ha, ha!" came in a yell from the

shadows as the schoolmaster was heard to fall on the floor within.

There was a wild yell from Mr. Peckover. He staggered dazedly to his feet.

As his head showed above the level of the window-sill three snowballs whizzed in and smashed upon his head and shoulders.

"Oh! Ah! Oooooop!" "Ha, ha, ha!"

Nearly blinded by snow and crimson with rage, Mr. Peckover rushed to the open window.

Whiz, whiz! Crash! Snowballs fairly rained on him, and he staggered back from the window.

He did not show himself there again, but caught up a heavy stick, and rushed for the door.

"I guess this is where we vamoose!" chuckled Bob Lawless.

"Ha, ha, ha!" It was evidently time to be gone.

The three avengers rushed for the distant fence to get back to the outer world and their snowshoes.

And there were three gasps of surprise and dismay as they ran into a group of shadowy forms, and were seized on all sides.

"Look out!" "Down 'em!" chortled Dicky Bird. "Sit on their necks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" And in a second Frank Richards & Co. were on their backs in the snow, with Dicky Bird and his comrades pinning them down.

## CHAPTER 28.

### Awful Luck!

"O W!" "Oh!" "Gruuurg!"

"I guess we've got you!" chuckled Dicky Bird, as he planted his knee on Frank Richards' chest, driving him deeper into the snow.

"I guess so!" grinned Fisher. "Let up!" panted Bob Lawless. "How the thump did you come here, you galoots! I reckoned you were gone home."

"We were going, when we spotted you on the trail," grinned Dicky Bird, "and we came back to see what your game was."

"Let up!" "No fear! We're going to give you a lesson about showing your noses in our

quarters," said Dicky Bird. "You've been snowballing poor old Peckover in his own shebang."

"Leggo!"

"Nobody is allowed to snowball Peckover but our noble selves," said Dicky Bird. "We can give him all he wants—and a little over!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo! That's somebody coming out!" exclaimed Fisher, as a door was heard to open violently.

"Peckover, I guess!" said Blumpy.

"You jays!" panted Bob Lawless. "Let up! The old jay will be after us in two ticks!"

Dicky Bird's first thought had been to collar the invaders and rag them for their temerity in venturing into Hillcrest on the war-path, but at the sound of Mr. Peckover's furious footsteps he changed his mind.

"By gum! We'd better bunk!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

It was too late to "bunk."

Mr. Peckover, in a towering rage, was rushing on the scene. He had heard the sound of voices, and it guided him in the dusk.

Even as the Hillcrest fellows jumped up from their prisoners the master was upon them.

Mr. Peckover rushed at top speed into the group, laying about him with his stick.

Frank Richards & Co. were still gasping breathlessly in the snow, but Dicky Bird and his friends had jumped up, and they came in for the furious lashes of the stick.

In the deep gloom Mr. Peckover could not see who the boys were; but he could see them well enough to lay on with the stick.

There were wild yells on all sides.

Dicky Bird & Co., yelling wildly, scattered and ran for the fence.

"You young rascals!" panted Mr. Peckover. "You—you—"

He broke off with a howl as his ankle was seized and he was jerked over.

The Hillcrest master plumped into the snow.

"Hook it!" panted Bob.

Frank Richards & Co. scrambled away, and fled for the fence.

But Mr. Peckover was up in a second, and stick in hand, rushing in hot pursuit.

Dicky Bird & Co. had reached the fence,

and scrambled over hurriedly, falling on hands and knees in the snow.

They did not stop there, but leaped up and vanished into the gloom.

The chums of Cedar Creek were not so lucky.

They reached the fence, with the Hillcrest master raging only a few yards behind them.

They jumped desperately, and caught the top of the fence, and dragged themselves up.

Before they could reach the top, however, Mr. Peckover was below them, and his stick came into active service.

Whack, whack, whack!

The unfortunate chums were remarkably well-placed for punishment as they hung on the fence; and Mr. Peckover did not spare the rod.

In fact, he showed unexpected powers as an athlete as he lashed at the three yelling schoolboys.

They were close together on the fence, and Mr. Peckover, standing below, lashed at one and then another, distributing his favours with great impartiality.

Far in the distance the fleeing Hillcrest fellows paused under the frosty trees, and listened.

From the direction of Hillcrest they heard a sort of horrid chorus of woe:

"Yaroo!"

"Stoppit? Yarroop!"

"Oh, my hat! They're catching it!" murmured Dicky Bird, rubbing his shoulders. "We've caught some; but they—"

—My word, listen to them!"

"Yaroo! Oh, dear! Yah! Oooooop!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Frank Richards & Co. struggled desperately to pull themselves over the fence.

They succeeded at last, and the final lashes of the schoolmaster's stick landed on the palings.

Frank and Bob and the Cherub rolled over, and landed in the snow outside, gasping and groaning.

They had been through it with a vengeance.

They rolled in the snow, and groaned, too breathless and smarting to do anything else for a minute or two.

But the sound of bars being removed from the gate aroused them. Mr. Peckover, apparently, was not satisfied yet.

He was coming out to get to close quarters again, stick in hand.

Frank Richards staggered to his feet.

"Bolt!" he gasped. "The beast is coming out! Oh, dear!"

The three schoolboys snatched up their snowshoes, and, without staying to put them on, fled for the trail.

They put on a good burst of speed, and Hillcrest and its master were soon a good distance behind. They they slacked down breathlessly.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Frank. "You ass, Bob——"

"Yow-ow-ow!" groaned Bob. "It would have been all O.K. but for those Hillcrest rotters turning up! Ow, ow!"

"Hallo, here they are!"

Four grinning faces loomed up for a moment in the gloom.

"Enjoyed your visit?" chuckled Dicky Bird.

Then the Hillcrest fellows vanished, chuckling. Frank Richards & Co. were not feeling inclined for pursuit.

They put on their snowshoes, and travelled. They had had enough for one evening.

"Bob, you ass——" groaned Frank.

"Bob, you duffer——" mumbled the Cherub.

To which Bob Lawless' only reply was:

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

## CHAPTER 29.

### Hard Luck!

"OH!"

"Ow!"

"Oh, dear!"

"I guess somebody's been hurt!"

grinned Chunky Todgers.

It certainly sounded like it!

A group of Cedar Creek fellows were waiting in the trail in the thickening winter gloom.

From the darkness along the trail which led to Cedar Creek from Hillcrest School came those sounds of woe.

"Hyer they are!" chuckled Eben Hacke, as three figures came to sight in the dusk. "They've been lookin' for trouble, and, by thunder, I reckon they've found it—some!"

"Just a few!" choriled Todgers.

The three were Frank Richards, Bob Lawless and Vere-Beaulere.

They were on their snowshoes, but were going slowly over the frozen snow of the trail.

They did not look happy.

But their pained ejaculations suddenly ceased as they spotted the Cedar Creek crowd waiting for them.

"Hallo!" said Bob Lawless gruffly. "What are you galoots hanging around for?"

"For you!" said Tom Lawrence, laughing. "We knew you'd gone over to Hillcrest School——"

"To rag Mr. Peckover!" chuckled Chunky Todgers. "We waited to see what luck you'd have."

"And now we know! Ha, ha!"

"Nothing to cackle at!" said Frank Richards. "We've had rather bad luck. We were fairly caught——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Eben Hacke. "I guess I could have told you that! You'd better let Peckover alone!"

"We won't let him alone," said Beaulere. "We've had bad luck this time."

"You look it! Did he lambaste you?"

"Ye-es."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Jolly funny, ain't it?" growled Frank Richards.

"I guess so. Ha, ha!"

"But what happened, Frank?" asked Molly Lawrence, in her sweet, soft voice, which had a soothing effect.

"Well, it was hard luck, Molly," said Frank. "You know, Mr. Peckover came over from Hillcrest to complain about us, and actually told Miss Meadows what wasn't true. So we went over to—to——"

"To get a cow-hiding," suggested Chunky Todgers.

"To make him sit up somehow," said Frank, unheeding the humorous Chunky. "We snowballed him in his own room, and cleared off, and then by sheer ill-luck we ran into Dicky Bird and Fisher and some others of that lot, and they collared us."

"You didn't expect to see them?" said Chunky.

"We thought they'd gone home, of course."

"They didn't think you had!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The silly asses collared us, and then Peckover came on the lot of us!" said Frank ruefully. "Dicky Bird and the rest cleared off; but we were down in the



snow, and before we could get away—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cut the cackle!" said Bob Lawless gruffly. "I don't see why you galoots haven't gone home. Nothing to wait for that I can see!"

"We wanted to know how you got on at Hillcrest," said Molly, restraining her smiles. "It was reckless to go there and snowball a headmaster. He might come complaining to Miss Meadows again."

"He didn't know us in the dark, Molly," said Beauclere. "Still, it was a very duffer's idea, yours, Bob."

"Br-r-r-r!" growled Bob.  
"We'll make Peckover sit up, somehow, all the same," said Frank Richards.

"Tell us when you mosey over to Hillcrest to do it!" implored Chunky Todgers. "We want to be on the scene next time; it will be worth seeing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!"

Frank Richards & Co. slid on their way, and the Cedar Creek fellows took their homeward route, still laughing.

The unfortunate ending of the expedition to Hillcrest seemed to strike them as comic.

It did not seem very comic to the three fellows who had taken part in it; they were still aching from the lashes of Mr. Peckover's big stick.

In fact, the expedition, which had been reckless enough, had turned out a hopeless failure; and the chums of Cedar Creek School were sore both in mind and body.

"Ow!" mumbled Bob Lawless, as they slid on over the snow. "I say, I've got a lot of bumps and things! That old galoot seemed to think that he was beating carpets when we were hanging on the fence!"

"Oh, dear! I'm aching all over!"

"But we're not done with him yet," said Bob.

"Fathead!"

"I say, Frank—"

"Don't say anything!" groaned Frank Richards. "I feel as if I'd been put through a quartz crusher! You're an ass, Bob! If you propose going over to Hillcrest again I'll biff you!"

"Well, perhaps it was a bit reckless," admitted Bob. "But it would have gone all right if we hadn't fallen in with Dicky Bird."

"But we did!" grunted Frank.

Tempers were a little sore in the Co., as well as backs.

They slid on in silence for some time, till they reached the fork in the trail.

"Good-night!" called out Beauclere, as he took his turning.

"Good-night, Cherub!"

Veré Beauclere disappeared along the dark trail that led to the shack by the creek, and Frank and Bob kept on by the main trail for the Lawless Ranch.

They were tired when they arrived home, and late for supper, and when they sat down to supper they betrayed an incessant desire to shift in their seats.

Mr. Peckover had laid on his big stick not wisely, but too well, and it was likely to be some days before the chums recovered from the infliction.

They were still feeling sore and sorry when they went up to the room they shared in the ranch-house.

"Frank, old chap," said Bob, from his bed, after they had turned in and the candle was out.

"Ow!" was Frank's reply.

"Still feeling bad?"

"Ow! Yes."

"Never mind! I've decided to leave Peckover alone. What about you?"

"Same here!"

And, despite their discomfort, the two chums of the backwoods were soon asleep.



# THE FIRE-FIGHTERS.

## Thirty-mile-an-hour Blazes.

Picture to yourself the most awe-inspiring fire you've ever seen, then imagine it, if you can, on a hundred, a thousand times bigger scale and you'll begin to get some idea of that leaping, racing, terrifying monster—a forest fire.

Year after year, during the baking drought that settles over the great timber regions of Canada and the United States, this menace of the lives and property of lonely settlers, scattered homesteads and townships takes a grim toll, in spite of the fact that a great army of picked men, trained to the pitch of perfection, and equipped with the most up-to-date fire-fighting apparatus in the world, keeps a ceaseless watch over the danger zones.

It is not easy to realize the perilous job these men have to tackle, once the flames get a good grip on the parched trees and bone-dry undergrowth. The merest spark, a smouldering match-end, is quite enough to start a blaze that may, in literally a few hours, sweep through great tracts of forest-land hundreds of square miles in extent, leaving nothing but black ruin and desolation in its path.

Sometimes a driving wind will carry the flames before it at over thirty miles an hour, faster than the swiftest racehorse, and then sweep on a fiery blast that kills and shrivels man and beast while the raging inferno is still miles away.

## Constant Vigil.

Small wonder that during dry weather the forest dwellers keep a constant look-out for warning smoke on the horizon, or that the vigil of the fire-fighting patrols never relaxes for an instant.

Every appliance that skill and ingenuity can devise is pressed into service against the terror of the forest. The first sign of an outbreak eight or nine thousand feet below sends the cruising scout down in a screaming dive to warn everybody in the threatened area. Simultaneously he signals to the nearest outpost, and at once wireless messages are flashed to the fire-fighting base, where supplies of equipment and material are kept in readiness for any emergency.

Hoses and motor-pumps, shovels, dynamite for blowing up trees, and a complete first-aid

outfit are rushed to the scene of the fire by rail, motor-boat, car, or special service aeroplanes, the latter fitted with floats to enable them to land on the nearest stretch of water.

Swift though help comes, however, the flames are often swifter, and then the settlers' chances of life depend on whether there is a river or lake near at hand where they and their animals can submerge themselves up to the neck until the danger is over. There was no such refuge for the victims of a disastrous forest fire that startled the world recently. It was started by a settler who thought he would clear his land by burning the bushes and grass away, and before the blaze was got under control 12,000 square miles of forest had been destroyed and 250 people had lost their lives.

## Two Hundred Fire-fighters Trapped.

That is the tragic side of the picture. On the other hand, we read of two hundred fire-fighters being trapped in a small town in Oregon and then winning their way to safety through the burned bush as the wind shifted at the last minute. Two motorists had an equally miraculous escape from death when they were overtaken by a forest fire. They did the only thing possible in the circumstances—they crouched beneath the car—and the flames passed overhead!

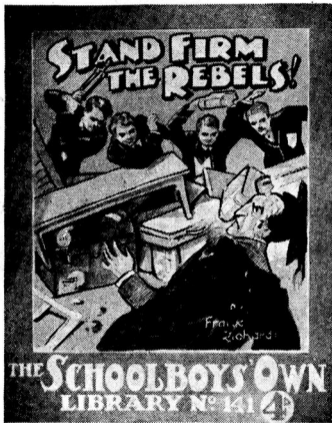
A forest fire is bad enough, as you've probably gathered, but an oil-well ablaze is ten times worse. Water is useless against this type of fire, and the choking clouds of thick black smoke make it practically impossible for anyone to reach the flames.

The one slender chance of getting the holocaust under control before it lays waste to miles of surrounding countryside lies in smothering it with a dynamite explosion or by means of great trolley-loads of sand, rushed to the well-mouth by weird-looking figures in gas-masks and thick asbestos clothing.

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