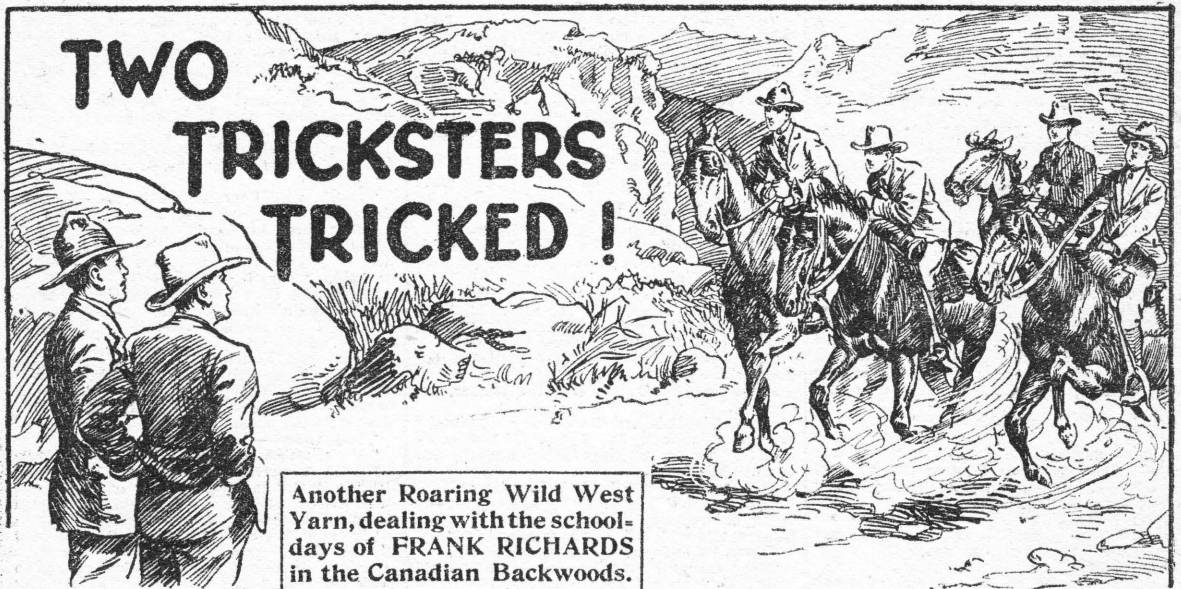


HOMEWARD BOUND!

Rascal though he is, Yen Chin has more than once been very useful to the schoolboy explorers. This week they have again good cause to bless the day the Chinese joined their party!

THE TRICK THAT FAILED!



Another Roaring Wild West Yarn, dealing with the school-days of **FRANK RICHARDS** in the Canadian Backwoods.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Two In Trouble!

GUESS those galoots have found trouble!"

Bob Lawless shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked away across the wide expanse of prairie, dotted with clumps of timber, as he spoke.

Frank Richards & Co. were on the homeward trail, after their holiday in the far North-West.

Far behind them now rose the pine-clad slopes and rocky summits of the Cascade Mountains.

They were heading southward for the Fraser River, with some more days of travel before them ere they reached their homes in the Thompson Valley.

Frank and Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc were riding a little ahead, followed by Chunky Todgers and Yen Chin and the pack-mule.

Away, ahead of the schoolboy party, two diminutive figures had come into view on the plain, Bob's keen eyes being the first to sight them.

The two strangers were a good distance ahead on the same scarcely marked trail, and, being on foot, they were half-hidden by the high grass.

They were tramping on slowly, their heads bent, and their looks indicative of heavy fatigue, their backs to the riders coming up the trail behind.

"I guess there's been trouble," Bob Lawless went on. "Those galoots never started on this prairie on foot, I reckon. They've lost their hosses, and they've had to tramp it."

"Poor beggars!" said Frank.

"There's twenty miles ahead of them to the nearest settlement, I calculate," said Bob. "They've got a hard row to hoe."

"We shall be camping soon," said Frank. "Let's put on speed, and overtake them, Bob, and see if we can help."

Bob Lawless nodded.

"I was just thinking of that," he replied.

"Good idea!" agreed Beauclerc. "Put it on!"

"Hustle, there!" Bob called back to Chunky Todgers and Yen Chin. And the chums of Cedar Creek urged on their horses.

They had been proceeding at a leisurely pace when they had sighted the two forlorn wanderers ahead; but now they were galloping they soon overhauled them.

Bob's expression changed as they came nearer and nearer to the pair.

"I guess I've seen those galoots before!" he said suddenly.

"Can't see their faces," remarked Frank.

"There seems something familiar about them, though."

"Gunten and Keller," said Vere Beauclerc quietly.

"My hat!"

Instinctively, the chums of Cedar Creek slackened down a little.

They were not anxious to fall in with Gunten and Keller, their old enemies of Cedar Creek School.

The two Swiss schoolboys had spent the school holiday in the North-West, and more than once had fallen in with Frank Richards & Co., and there had been trouble.

Bob frowned grimly.

"Better keep clear of that lot," he said. "We've had trouble enough with them."

"But—" began Frank.

"They're bad eggs, Franky."

"I know; but they're in hard luck, by their looks," said Frank. "They've lost their horses, and they're stranded. After all, they belong to our school, rotters as they are."

Bob Lawless made a grimace.

"You mean you want to lend 'em a hand!" he grunted. "They're the kind of rotters to bite the hand that helps 'em! Still, I don't mind."

"They've seen us," said Chunky Todgers.

Gunten and Keller had heard the hoof-beats behind, and looked round.

They stared in surprise at the sight of Frank Richards & Co., and stood motionless, evidently waiting for the party to come up.

The looks of the two Swiss showed that they were very much down on their luck.

It was clear that they had been in the wars.

"Hallo, you galoots!" exclaimed Bob Lawless, as he drew rein. "I never expected to see you again before we got back to school."

"Where are your horses?" asked Frank.

Gunten gritted his teeth.

"Stolen!" he answered. "We fell in with a gang of rustlers this morning. They took our horses, and cleared us out of our money, and everything else they took a fancy to."

"And left us to hoof it," said Keller, with a quaver in his voice. "We're tired out, and jolly near famished!"

He cast a hungry glance at the load on the pack-mule.

"Hard luck!" said Beauclerc.

"Yes; very amusing to you, I dare say!" said Gunten, between his teeth. "You can cackle!"

"But we're not cackling, Gunten," said Frank Richards mildly.

"Not so much chin-wag, Gunten!" grunted Keller. "We're in a bad box. Look here, old chaps, we'll be glad of some help. We've eaten next to nothing to-day."

"You're welcome to camp with us, and

share round," said Bob Lawless at once.

"But none of your tricks! We did as much for you before, when you landed yourself in a scrape, and you played a dirty trick on us. None of that, or I tell you there will be trouble!"

"That was only a—a joke."

"We don't like jokes of that kind. Look here, we're camping at the next timber," said Bob. "Hoof it along with us as far as that."

A mile on, a clump of timber rose from the plain, a spring sparkling in the sunset among the trees.

There the Cedar Creek party halted, to camp for the night.

The horses and the mule were staked out, and the latter unloaded.

Bob Lawless was about to begin gathering brushwood for a camp-fire, when he paused.

"Hold on!" he said. "How far back did you meet those rustlers, Gunten?"

"A good many miles," answered the Swiss. "We've been tramping ever since."

"We don't want them to call on us, if they're within sight of smoke," Bob explained to his chums. "Of course, they wouldn't handle us as they seem to have done with these chaps; but we don't want any shooting, if we can help it. I reckon we'll do without a fire. It's not cold, since we left the hills."

"Good idea!" agreed Frank Richards.

"We've got plenty of cold meat, and we don't need to cook."

"I say, I was going to make a jolly good supper!" said Chunky Todgers. "There's game in this timber—"

"Bother your supper, Chunky! Leave it till to-morrow, and you can feed till you burst your crop!"

"Look here, Bob—"

"Br-r-r!" was Bob's answer.

And Chunky Todgers had to relinquish the vision of a glorious supper, which he had been looking forward to all day, and the party sat down to cold meat and corn-cakes, which, however, they ate with very good appetites.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Good Samaritans!

BOB LAWLESS had taken a large buck-skin bag from his saddle at the halt, and fastened it to his belt when the schoolboys camped.

It was a heavy bag, and both Gunten and Keller looked at it very curiously, probably guessing what it contained.

"How did you get on with that strike?"

"A Rank Injustice!"—That is Next Week's Roaring Backwoods Story!

you made up in the hills?" asked Kern Gunten suddenly. "You were working a placer—"

"First chop!" answered Bob cheerily. "We put in a week's hard work, and cleared out the placer."

"You found dust?"

"I guess so—in fact, you know we did!" said Bob, looking at him. "You saw Yen Chin with some of our dust, I guess."

"Guntee velly bad boy!" murmured Yen Chin.

"And you've got it there?" asked Gunten. "A thousand dollars' worth!" answered Bob. "That was clear, after we'd spent money on tools and things in the camp at Tucker's Bar. Not so bad to bag on a holiday, I reckon."

Gunten compressed his lips. "There was bitter envy and malice in his eyes."

"You fellows have all the luck," he said sullenly. "We've had the worst."

"I dare say we each got what we deserved," said Bob dryly.

"We've had rotten luck all along," said Keller. "We lost our canoe and outfit, in the first place, on the rapids, and had to spend money on horses. Now we've lost them."

Bob Lawless looked very thoughtful. In the buckskin bag there was gold-dust to the value of a thousand dollars, which was to be divided into two hundred dollars each for the five members of the party—forty pounds each in English money.

Frank Richards smiled as he read the expression in his Canadian cousin's face, and Vere Beauclerc smiled and nodded.

"They could guess Bob's thoughts."

"I suppose you galoots are cleared right out," said Bob, after a short silence.

"Down to bedrock!" grunted Gunten; and Keller nodded dolorously.

Bob glanced at his comrades. "What do you fellows say?" he asked. "We're going to divvy up the dust when we get home. What about letting these galoots stand in, to see them through?"

Chunky Todgers' eyes opened wide. Yen Chin shook his head emphatically.

But there was assent from both Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc.

"Oh I say—" began Keller. "You don't mean that?" said Gunten.

"I do mean it," said Bob quietly. "Yen Chin and Chunky don't agree, I see that; but we three do, and you two fellows shall stand in equal with us three, in six hundred dollars, if you like."

"And welcome!" said Frank Richards. Beauclerc nodded.

"I guess we close on that," said Keller, with a grin. "I don't know what you're doing it for, but I agree, right down! I owe money for my outfit at Thompson, and it will see me through."

Kern Gunten did not speak. There was a strange expression on his heavy face.

"Well, what do you say, Gunten?" asked Bob genially. "It was a windfall for us. We never expected to bag anything of the kind, of course. You've had hard luck, and it will help you through."

Gunten shook his head. "I don't want to touch your dust!" he said deliberately. "Keller can do as he likes, but I sha'n't touch it!"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "Suit yourself!" he answered.

"Well, I guess you're a jay, Gunten?" exclaimed Keller. "I think it's jolly decent of these chaps, and I accept—with thanks, too! Don't be a silly ass! Your poppa will make a row when you crawl in and tell him you're cleaned out. I know that. Take your chance while you can!"

"I guess I know my own business best," said Gunten.

And with that the subject dropped. Gunten sat silent for some time, with his eyes on the dark trees round the camp, as he finished his supper.

Suddenly he gave a start, and jumped to his feet. He pointed excitedly to the shadowy wood. "Look out!" he exclaimed.

Bob Lawless grasped his rifle at once, remembering the rustlers.

"What is it?" he asked. "One of that gang that robbed us this morning!" said Gunten. "He was starting out from that thicket! He's gone!"

The schoolboys were all on their feet now, rifle in hand.

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But there came no sound from the timber, not even the rustling of a twig.

The sun was gone now, and the dim twilight of the stars reigned on the prairie. In the timber all was darkness.

"By gum!" muttered Bob Lawless. "We shall have to keep our eyes peeled to-night! You're sure you weren't mistaken, Gunten?"

"Quite sure!"

"I hear nothing," said Bob. "I reckon I'll take a look round before I turn in. You fellows keep a watch out."

Bob went into the timber, his eyes well about him and rifle ready.

Gunten rose to his feet. "Come on, Keller!" he said. "Let's have a look round, too!"

"I'd rather stay here!"

"Oh, don't be a fool! Come with me!" Keller unwillingly rose and followed his comrade. They disappeared into the shadows of the timber.

Yen Chin rose to his feet. "Me looker loud, too!" he said.

"Sit down!" answered Frank. "You'll lose yourself, kid! Stay where you are!"

"Me wantee looker loud!" persisted the little Chinese.

Yen Chin glided away into the timber, unheeding.

Frank Richards and Beauclerc and Chunky Todgers remained in charge of the camp and the horses, waiting rather uneasily for the others to return.

Bob Lawless came back before long. "All serene!" he said. "I can't find any trace of anybody in the timber. I guess Gunten was mistaken. Where are they?"

"Gone to look, too!" answered Frank.

"Silly duffers!" commented Bob. "We'd better stay up till they come in."

And Bob sat down on a log, his rifle on his knees, and his eyes very sharply on the shadowy timber.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Precious Pair!

"WHAT'S the game, Gunten?" Keller asked the question sullenly when the two Swiss were a dozen yards from the camp.

"I'm not going into the wood in the dark. That rustler—"

Gunten broke in impatiently. "Don't be a fool! There was no rustler."

"But—but you said—"

"I was fooling them, of course," muttered Gunten. "Those rustlers are thirty miles away, I guess. They were going west when they left us."

Keller stared at his comrades in the gloom under the trees, in utter bewilderment.

"What did you want to give a false alarm for?"

"Oh, you're a jay!" said Gunten impatiently. "Look here, Keller, we both owe money for our outfit in Thompson, and we're cleaned out. We spent every cent on our new outfit after we lost the canoe, and now we've been robbed of the whole caboodle."

"I know that. But a whack in the gold-dust will help us out, and they've offered—"

"Hang them and their offers! I don't want shucks in their dust! I want the lot!"

"What?"

"There's a thousand dollars in that bag," said Gunten, sinking his voice, though the wood was silent round them. "Think of that! It would see us through, and give us plenty over. It's a ten-strike, if we can finger it."

"You fool!" muttered his companion. "They'd give us the trail-ropes again, as they did before, if we tried anything of the sort. There's five of them, armed—against us two!"

Gunten smiled sourly. "I'm not thinking of tackling them," he said. "That wouldn't do, anyway. We can't knock them on the head, and nothing short of that would be safe. But there's no reason why we shouldn't bag the dust. Bob Lawless keeps that bag tied to his belt. When he's asleep—"

"Well?"

"One cut of a knife would get the bag loose, without waking him; and then—"

"Oh, you're mad!" muttered Keller. "I dare say you could do that much; but how could you get away with it? They'll be watching the horses; they haven't forgotten the trick we served them before."

"I know that."

"Well, are you thinking of starting out on foot?" sneered Keller. "Suppose they didn't miss the bag till morning? Then they'd simply run us down."

"That's no good, of course. We've got to stick them for a supply of food before we leave them. We can't take that without being seen, and we can't take the horses. We're not going to light out with the dust."

Keller looked bewildered. "Not light out! Then as soon as Bob Lawless misses the bag do you think he won't know who's taken it?"

"Yes; he'll think of the rustler he thinks I saw in the thicket," said Gunten coolly.

"Oh!"

"That's why I pretended to see the man there. Now do you savvy?"

Keller shook his head. "They may think of the rustler, but they're jolly certain to think of us, too!" he said. "They'll search us to the skin."

"Of course they will; I've considered that. But we sha'n't have the dust about us. As soon as I get my hands on the bag I shall hide it. Easy enough to do that."

"Oh!" said Keller again.

"They can search us if they like; they'll find nothing. They'll have to take the trail to-morrow without the bag of dust. We shall go with them."

"And then—"

"After we've parted with them—we can work up a quarrel—we get back here, and lift the dust," said Gunten coolly. "We can buy horses at the settlements, and ride home, with money in our pockets."

"By gum, it's a cinch—if you can get hold of the dust!" said Keller.

"I can do that. I guess I know how to work the rifle," said Gunten. "The one I'm afraid of is that infernal Chinese. He's as sharp as a needle. But I guess we can do it."

"Where will you hide the dust?" muttered Keller.

"I'm going to find a hollow tree before we get back to camp."

"Good!"

Keller's objections were overcome now. In the darkness under the timber the two young rascals proceeded to search for a hiding place for the bag of gold-dust, and in a few minutes they found a hollow tree.

Gunten thrust his arm into the hollow, and felt around it.

"I guess this will do," he said. "We can stuff some brushwood in after the bag, and they'll never find it, even if they thought of looking."

"Don't forget the tree."

"I guess I'll remember it," said Gunten. "Look at it—two forked branches, covered with creepers. I sha'n't forget that. Let's get back."

The two Swiss returned to the camp on the edge of the timber.

"Oh, here they are!" said Bob Lawless, as Gunten and Keller came out into the starlight. "Seen anything?"

"I heard something," said Gunten calmly. "I'm pretty certain that there's somebody lurking in the wood."

"I heard a footstep," said Keller, backing up his companion's story.

"Mime, perhaps," said Bob, laughing. "I reckon you were mistaken, Gunten."

"Better keep a watch to-night, all the same," said Gunten anxiously.

"You bet!" answered Bob. "Might lose our horses if we don't."

Gunten affected not to see that allusion to the trick the two Swiss had played on a previous occasion.

"Time to turn in," he said, with a yawn. "I'm tired out. I reckon I shall sleep like a top to-night."

"Whack out the blankets, Franky," said Bob. "Lucky we've got a few spares. Where has that blessed heathen got to, I wonder?"

Gunten looked round quickly; he had not noticed the absence of Yen Chin.

"Has the heathen gone out?" he asked. "The young ass went to look for your blessed rustler," said Frank Richards. "I'm afraid he'll get lost."

"If he does, he can camp out in the timber till morning," said Bob. "No finding him in the dark. He shouldn't have gone." Gunten's eyes glimmered.

Yen Chin was the only member of the party of whose keeness he was in fear, and nothing would have suited his plans better than for the little Chinese to remain out of camp for the night.

He made no remark, however.

The campers waited up some time for Yen Chin, but the Chinese did not appear.

"The young ass!" said Frank at last. "He would go. After all, it won't hurt him to sleep in the bush; it's not cold. Just as good as being here, except that he won't have his blanket."

"Bless him!" said Bob. "You fellows turn in; my first watch."

Chunky Todgers was already fast asleep, and snoring.

Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc rolled themselves in their blankets to sleep, and the two Swiss followed their example.

Bob Lawless remained near the staked-out horses, on the watch.

At midnight he called Vere Beauclerc, who rose to take his turn of duty.

"Yen Chin come in?" asked Beauclerc.

"No."

"The young ass!"

Beauclerc took his rifle, and paced to and fro in the grass, near the horses, while he kept watch.

Bob Lawless was very quickly in the land of dreams.

Beauclerc was watching the horses, the plain, and the shadowy wood with unrelenting vigilance; but, naturally, he did not give much attention to the sleeping forms in the camp.

Darkness and silence reigned.

In the darkness Beauclerc was unconscious of the fact that Gunten was moving silently, cautiously.

He did not know that the Swiss, like a snake in the grass in nature as well as in action, was creeping into the timber hidden by the long herbage.

Black shadows hid the cunning Swiss as he moved and as he crawled back through the deep grass.

There was a smile on Kern Gunten's face when at last he composed himself to sleep.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Missing!

MORNING dawned on the prairie. It was Frank Richards who was keeping the last watch, and he called to his comrades as the sunlight strengthened on the plain, turning it into a sea of green and gold.

Bob Lawless sat up, yawned, and kicked Chunky Todgers in the ribs, and Chunky jumped up with a yell.

"That blessed Chinese come back?" asked Bob, looking round.

"No," answered Frank.

"Bother him! That means that we shall have to hunt for him before we take the trail!" growled Bob. "Here, wake up, Gunten! Wake up, Keller!"

The two Swiss sat up and rubbed their eyes.

Bob cast an impatient look towards the timber. He had intended to take the trail early, after a hasty, cold breakfast.

But Yen Chin could not be left behind. "He's bound to find his way back now it's daylight," said Beauclerc.

"Unless something's happened to him," said Frank uneasily.

"He had his gun with him. He would have used it if he was in danger, and we should have heard it."

"Yes, that's so."

The party sat down to a cold breakfast, and they were just beginning when Bob Lawless suddenly started to his feet, with a loud and excited exclamation.

"Great gophers! The bag!"

"The bag!" repeated Frank.

Bob's hand was at his belt. The place was empty where he had slung the buckskin bag the previous night.

"It's gone!" he shouted.

"Gone!" yelled Chunky Todgers. "The gold-dust!"

"Yes!"

"Oh, gum! But it can't be gone."

"Must have come unfastened," said Beauclerc. "How could it be gone, Bob? You'll find it in the grass."

Bob Lawless' eyes gleamed.

"It hasn't come unfastened," he said. "Look here! The strap's been cut through with a knife!"

"Great Scott!"

Gunten and Keller went on with their breakfast, apparently unconscious of the looks the chums cast upon them.

"Gunten," said Bob, very quietly.

The Swiss looked up.

"Do you know anything about this?"

"What should I know?" said Gunten, with



THE PRISONERS ESCAPE! There was a yell from Chunky Todgers. "Yen Chin, you silly heathen! You've let them go!" The Chinese looked round. Gunten and Keller had taken to their heels now and were running hard. "Gone!" said Yen Chin calmly. (See Chapter 5.)

a sneer. "Do you think I've taken your bag of gold-dust?"

"Yes, to be candid, I do," answered Bob. "It's been cut loose from my belt while I was asleep, and somebody's taken it."

Gunten shrugged his shoulders.

"You should have kept better watch," he said. "I should, with a thousand dollars about me. That rustler has bagged it."

Bob fixed his eyes on Gunten.

"It's possible that there was a rustler in the timber last night," he said slowly.

"Only you saw him, though. It's possible that he may have sneaked in through the grass and corralled my bag. But it's jolly unlikely. I may as well speak out plain, Gunten. I think you've got it, and I'm going to see."

"You can do as you like, of course," said Gunten sullenly. "You're armed, and I'm not, so you can insult me as much as you choose, I suppose."

"If I'm doing you a wrong, I'm sorry. But I'm going to see whether you've got my dust, and that's flat—you and Keller."

"You're welcome!"

Gunten and Keller held up their hands submissively, while Bob Lawless made a grim and thorough search of them.

The buckskin bag did not come to light, however.

It certainly was not concealed about either of the two Swiss.

"Well?" said Gunten sneeringly, when Bob had finished.

"You've not got it about you," said Bob. "If you took it, you've hidden it somewhere. Easy enough to crawl out of camp in the dark and hide it, I guess."

"If it was easy for me to crawl out unseen, it was easy for anybody else to crawl in unseen," said Gunten. "I don't know anything about it. It looks to me as if that rustler I saw last night crept in and robbed you."

Bob wrinkled his brows.

There was certainly reason in what the Swiss said.

"Better search," said Frank Richards abruptly.

Bob Lawless nodded, and the chums of Cedar Creek began a search for the missing buckskin bag.

They extended the search to a good distance around the camp, among the trees and tangled thickets.

But if the bag was hidden there it was too well hidden for them to find it.

They returned to the camp at last, tired and angry.

The two Swiss were still there, and they found Yen Chin sitting on a log, eating his breakfast.

"Oh, you've come back, then!" growled Bob.

"Me comee baddee," said Yen Chin, grinning. "Turnee up like baddee pennee. Ole Bob bad tempee this morning."

"The dust's been stolen."

"Velly baddee," said Yen Chin. "P'Paps Guntee stealtee."

"Blest if I know!"

"Where have you been all night, Yen Chin?" asked Frank Richards.

"Walkee bout, and sleepee undel tee," said the Chinese. "Allee light! Solly makee Flanky anxious. Oh, yes!"

"You didn't see anything of a rustler in the wood?"

"No see."

The chums ate their belated breakfast in glum spirits.

The gold-dust had vanished, and there seemed no prospect of finding it.

But naturally their suspicions lingered upon the Swiss.

"We'll stick here for the morning, and hunt for it, anyway," said Bob. "If a rustler's bagged it and vamooseed, we shall never see it again, of course, but— He paused.

"But if it's hidden in the timber, to be taken after we've gone, that's different," said Beauclerc.

"It won't be," said Bob grimly. "Gunten and Keller are going to keep in our company till we get back to Thompson Valley, now. They're not going to have any chance of coming back and taking it."

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Kern Gunten, the Swiss, Again in Trouble Next Week!

Keller started, but Gunten burst into a laugh.

"We'll be glad to travel with you," he said. "It's up to you to pay our expenses if you do."

"You'll stay in camp for the present," said Bob. "Yen Chin, stay with them, and see that they don't light out. If they try to vamoose, give them a charge from the shotgun in their legs."

"What you tinkee?" grinned the Chinese, and his look showed that he would not fail to carry out Bob's instructions.

"We'll help you hunt for the thing, if you like," said Keller.

Bob's answer was curt.

"I guess I don't trust you. Stay here." And, leaving the two Swiss in charge of the Chinese, with the loaded shotgun on his knees, Frank Richards & Co. resumed their search for the missing dust.

It was a discouraging search, for they knew all the time that the stolen bag might be twenty miles away, if some unknown thief had taken it.

The search was only founded upon their distrust of the Swiss.

Gunten and Keller were not without uneasiness as they waited at the camp.

Well as the stolen buckskin bag had been hidden, it was barely possible that it might be found.

But when the sun was at the meridian, and the chums returned wearily to camp, their looks showed that they had been unsuccessful.

"Any luck?" asked Gunten, smiling.

"No," snapped Bob. They ate their midday meal almost in silence, Chunky Todgers giving a deep groan every now and then.

After the meal there was a consultation. "We can't do any good by hanging it out here," said Bob glumly. "It's a case of easy come and easy go. The dashed stuff's gone, and we may as well make up our minds to it. It's rotten, but it can't be helped."

Chunky groaned. "We've only allowed ourselves time to get home before school begins, too," said Bob. "We can't afford to lose another day. What do you fellows say?"

"Better get on the trail," said Frank. "And keep Gunten and Keller with us," added Beauclerc quietly.

"You bet!" Upon that point the chums were determined, though their suspicion was less keen now.

If the Swiss had taken the gold, they were not to be allowed a chance of returning to the timber and taking it from its hiding-place.

The horses were saddled, and the mule's pack being distributed among the other animals, Gunten and Keller rode double upon the animal.

There were glum faces in the party as they set out on the trail—with one exception.

Yen Chin was smiling away cheerily as if he regarded the loss of the gold-dust as more or less of a joke, as perhaps he did.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Plotters' Punishment!

FRANK RICHARDS & CO. took little heed of the two Swiss as they travelled on that day.

Gunten and Keller looked gloomy as the afternoon waned into evening.

They were looking for a chance to get away, but it had not come. They were, in fact, more or less prisoners, and they realised it.

Gunten had tried the resource of a quarrel, but that failed him.

The chums of Cedar Creek, half-suspecting his motive, refused to answer him; and when he became insulting, a "lick" from Bob's trail-rope gave him a hint to be silent; and he was silent.

But the Swiss was growing desperate as mile after mile intervened between him and the timber left far behind.

To recover the buckskin bag hidden in the tree, he had to retrace the journey on foot, and that was no easy task.

Indeed, after another day's journey he was not sure that he would be able to find the timber-chump again in the wide prairie.

That night, at the latest, he had to escape. Then, with the gold-dust in his possession,

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he would be able to reach the settlements and pay his way home.

At sundown the party halted by a stream that murmured through low bushes and long grass.

The two Swiss sat sulkily on a knoll, while the chums camped and built a fire, and Bob and Frank and Beauclerc went to look for game.

Chunky Todgers gathered brushwood for the fire, and Yen Chin was set to watch the Swiss, with the shotgun ready.

Gunten and Keller gave him savage looks. To their amazement, after his comrades were out of sight, Yen Chin rose from the ground and walked away towards the stream.

Gunten and Keller exchanged a rapid glance.

"The fool's forgotten us!" muttered Keller. "More likely fed up with the job of watching us!" grinned Gunten. "Now's our chance!"

Yen Chin was standing by the stream twenty yards distant, looking with apparent interest into the glistening waters as they rippled by.

He had his back to the two Swiss, who rose with great caution, and tiptoed away in the opposite direction.

The Chinese did not turn his head.

Gladly enough would the Swiss have stolen a horse apiece, but Yen Chin was standing close by the animals, where they were tethered within reach of the water, and that was impossible without risking the shotgun.

They were only too glad of the chance of escaping at all, and their hearts were beating as they stole away.

There was a yell from Chunky Todgers as he came back with his plump arms full of brushwood.

"Yen Chin! You silly heathen, you've let them go!"

Yen Chin looked round.

Gunten and Keller had taken to their heels now, and were running hard, and he caught a last glimpse of them vanishing among the swells of the prairie.

"Gone!" said Yen Chin calmly.

"You jay!" roared Chunky. "They've gone back for the dust. I'll bet you they have!"

"No indee, me tinkee."

Chunky Todgers threw down the brushwood, and stood for a good ten minutes telling Yen Chin what he thought of him.

The little Chinese listened with a sleepy grin.

Chunky's tirade was still going strong when Frank Richards and his chums returned to the camp, well supplied with game for supper.

"Hallo! What's the row?" exclaimed Bob. "Where are the Swiss?"

"Gone!" howled Chunky. "The heathen let them vamoose!"

"Yen Chin! You born idiot—"

"No mattee!" said Yen Chin. "Allee light!"

"We can run them down on horseback," said Frank Richards.

"In the dark?" grunted Bob.

"We know where they are heading for." "What's the good? They won't go straight back there. They'll keep close till they know we're off the scene," said Bob. "Oh, that idiotic heathen! We oughtn't to have trusted him."

"Velly good to tustee Chinese," said Yen Chin. "Me tellee you allee light! You losee gold-dust; you velly silly. Me findee!"

"What!" yelled the whole party.

Yen Chin grinned and fumbled among his garments, and to the amazement of his comrades produced the buckskin bag.

Bob, almost gasping, pounced upon it and opened it.

The gold-dust was there!

"Great gophers!" gasped Bob dazedly. "Here's the dust, right enough! Was it you who lifted it, you monkey? Is this another of your heathen tricks? By gum, I've a jolly good mind—"

"No playee flick!" said Yen Chin indignantly. "Me velly good boy!"

"How did you get the dust, then?" asked Chunky Todgers, feasting his eyes upon it.

"Explain, you young ass!" said Frank Richards.

Yen Chin chuckled.

"Chinese velly clevee boy," he said. "Velly deep ole lascal, you bet! Oh, yes! Last night Guntee and Kellee goey out. Pletend looker for bad man in timber. Oh,

yes? Me tinkee keepee eye on ole lascals. Oh, yes! Me goey, too!"

"You were watching them!" exclaimed Beauclerc.

Yen Chin nodded, evidently in great enjoyment.

"Me watchee. Keepee velly close, and watchee and listen. Oh, yes! Heal Guntee talkee to Kellee. Sayee steal gold-dust fom silly ole Bob, and hidee in hollow tree. Me stickee in wood, waitee and watchee."

"So that's why you didn't come back to camp?" said Frank in wonder.

"Allee light! Me waitee, watchee!"

"Late! on Guntee stealee bag. Comee creepee, creepee into wood, and hidee in hollow tree. Me say nuffin, no lettee Guntee see. Oh, yes! Guntee clepee, clepee, and hidee bag, and goey back clepee, clepee, likee snake. Me smiley. Goey to hollow tree, takee out bag, and puttee back blushwood in hollow, allee samee Guntee."

"My only hat!" murmured Frank.

"Lettee Guntee tinkee bag hidee allee light. What you tinkee? Me comee backee in morning, bag safee under jackee. What you tinkee? Me laugh velly mucchee when pool ole Bob searchee for bag."

And Yen Chin roared.

Frank Richards & Co. gave the young Chinese very peculiar looks.

"You young rascal!" said Bob in measured tones. "You let me hunt all the morning for the bag! Why didn't you tell us?"

"Spoillee jokee on Guntee," explained Yen Chin, perhaps not thinking it wise to confess that the vain search had amused him, too. "You savvy? Guntee goey twenty milee back to takee bag fom hollow tree. No findee! Ha, ha!"

And he roared again.

The chums of Cedar Creek stared at one another, and then burst into a roar.

They understood now.

Yen Chin had allowed the two Swiss to escape on purpose, and they had twenty miles to tramp back on the rough prairie to find the hidden gold-dust in the hollow tree.

When they arrived and found that it was not there their feelings could be better imagined than described.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Yen Chin joined joyously in the laughter.

"Goodee jokee on Guntee. What you tinkee?" he grinned. "Goey clamp, clamp, clamp twenty milee, and lookee in hollow tree, and findee noting! He tinkee Guntee and Kellee solly stealee. Oh, yes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums of Cedar Creek camped in great spirits, and they burst into renewed laughter whenever they thought of the two rascals tramping mile after mile over the dark plains to find the plunder that was not there!

They felt that they could quite forgive Yen Chin for the trouble they had gone through in view of the peculiar punishment of Gunten and Keller.

The next day two disappointed and furious young rascals were tramping wearily on the prairie—disappointed, furious, penniless, and fatigued. Gunten and Keller were getting their punishment.

Frank Richards & Co. at the same time were riding cheerily homeward, to arrive in great spirits, with a thousand dollars' worth of gold-dust to show for their excursion into the wild North-West; but long after the chums of Cedar Creek had arrived at the Lawless Ranch, Gunten and Keller were still on the tramp, homeward bound.

THE END.

Next week's extra-special story of the Chums of Cedar Creek is entitled: "A Rank Injustice!"

By Martin Clifford.

Don't miss it!