

THE NEW SCHOOL IN THE BACKWOODS!

Everyone expected trouble when the new school of the Backwoods was opened. How could it possibly be otherwise? The Cedar Creek chums are up against the Hillcrest fellows from the very first. Airs and graces are barred at Thompson—that is why Frank Richards & Co. decided to make a raid on the rival school!

RAGGING THE RAGGERS.



RIVALS OF THE BACKWOODS!

The Thrilling Adventures of Frank Richards & Co., of Cedar Creek, and Kern Gunten & Co., of Hillcrest School. The Finest Wild West Yarn on the Market

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Raid!

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 Camp 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 been turned out of 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 a rather 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.

Their 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 school-house, 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 tarpot when you're atop, Cherub."

"Right you are!"

Bob Lawless braced his stalwart form against the gate and Frank Richards

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Frank Richards & Co. Are Real Live Boys! They're Here Every Week!

climbed nimbly on his shoulders, first removing his boots.

Standing on Bob's shoulders, he held against the gate to steady himself.

"Ready, Beau?"
 Vere Beauclerc had a more difficult task in mounting to Frank's shoulders. But he succeeded, and held on to the sign itself.

Then the tarpot, which Bob held ready in his hand, was carefully passed up, and Beauclerc took it.

Holding on with his left hand, the tarpot 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 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!"

"Yoooop!"

BUMP!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

After the Raiders!

FRANK RICHARDS sat up dazedly.

He was on the ground, hardly knowing how he had got there, but knowing only too well that he had got 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?"

"Yoooop!" 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 bugged 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, 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 tarpot?" asked Bob.

"Here you are!"

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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 handwork, 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.

"Hullo!" called out Dicky Bird, as he sighted them. "What are you fellows doing here?"

"Peckover!" replied Bob Lawless, with a grin.

"Wha-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 tarcan?" 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!"

"Cheek!"

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 that 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 tarcan 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 happening 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 tarcan.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

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-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—Grooogh!"

"Better keep your mouth shut," suggested Dicky Bird. "This is jolly good tar, but it's not really fit to eat!"

"Grrrrruuugh!"
"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."

"Mmmmmmmmmmm!"
"You next, old scout!"
"Look here—" gasped Frank Richards.

"Oh! Ah! Ooooooch!"
He shut his mouth tight.

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."

"Mmmmmmmmmmm!"

"He's trying to talk Chinese or Kootenay," said Watson. "What does it mean, Lawless?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmm!"
"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 paddling away at a great speed for safety.

In the trail Frank and Bob and Vere Beauclerc 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 brides as the oncoming party of schoolboys 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-wow! Yes, Molly! Oh dear!"
"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



THE RETURN OF THE RAGGERS! Frank Richards & Co. hurried in at the gates of Cedar Creek followed by roars of laughter. "Ha, ha, ha!" cried Chunky Todgers. "Look at those fellows. Holy smoke! They look a lovely gang of sambos!" (See Chapter 3.)

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 school-house. She had seen the extraordinary trio from a window. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"
 "Oh, Miss Meadows!"
 "Richards!" ejaculated the school-mistress.

"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-unno!"

"You utterly foolish boys, why have you played this extraordinary prank?" exclaimed Miss Meadows.

"We—we—we didn't!" gasped 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 school-room 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.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
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."

Those 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 Beauclerc. "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.

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"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 this misadventure 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 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.

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 would have passed them on the trail. Canoeing, 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 & 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 & 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. "Get 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.

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! Get 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 Richards.

The chums of Cedar Creek had quite forgotten now their hostile intentions towards Dicky Bird & 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 out 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 they 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 lucid!" 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 tar business, under the—the circumstances!"

(Continued on page 28.)

"Catching It Hot!"—a Story of the Cedar Creek Chums Next Week!

"Rivals of the Backwoods!"

(Continued from page 22.)

"Done!" said Dicky Bird cheerfully. "We should have done this business this morning if you hadn't come around. So it's only 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 at the sign. Crack! 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 grating of a key.

The raiders rushed into the shadows of the wood, Frank Richards & 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 chorled 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.

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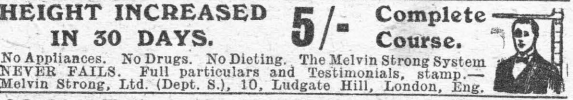
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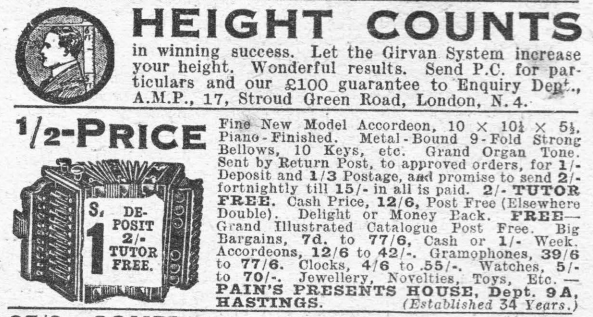
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