

AT CLOSE QUARTERS WITH THE DESPERADO!

A thrilling story of the Backwoods School, telling how Frank Richards & Co. come to close quarters with Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, the Terror of Thompson Valley.



Another Roaring Tale of the Chums of the School in the Backwoods.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

An Astonishing Visitor.

THUD, thud!
The sound of hoof-beats came to the ears of Frank Richards & Co. in the school-room at Cedar Creek. Morning lessons were proceeding at the school in the backwoods, and Miss Meadows, Mr. Slimmey, and Mr. Shepherd were busy with their respective classes.

Thud, thud!
In the Cedar Creek school-room it was common enough to hear the sound of hoof-strokes from the trail that ran past the school gates. But on the present occasion the thudding of rapid hoofs rang in at the gates and came on towards the lumber school-house.

There was a stir in the class. Visitors at Cedar Creek were infrequent at lesson-time, and the arrival of one promised a break in lessons. So the Cedar Creek fellows were not at all sorry to hear a horseman dash up to the school-house.

With a clatter the unseen rider halted there, and the schoolboys heard him jump down.

Miss Meadows did not heed. The Canadian schoolmistress was taking Chunky Todgers on the subject of strong and weak verbs, and the differences between them—differences in which the hapless Chunky took rather a weak than a strong interest.

It was Black Sally's business to see to the arriving visitor, and tell him that Miss Meadows was engaged, and could see no one.

But Miss Meadows looked round towards the door when a heavy tramp of feet was heard without.

The visitor, apparently, had not waited for Sally to admit him; the outer door being on the latch, he had admitted himself, and was tramping heavily to the school-room.

Miss Meadows frowned. She did not approve of interruptions to lessons; differing on that point from her pupils, who approved heartily.

"Somebody's going to get the grim eye!" murmured Bob Lawless to his chums, Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc. "Miss Meadows is getting her mad up!"

"Lawless!"
"Oh! Ah! Yes, ma'am?"
"You should not whisper in class, Lawless!"

"Hem! Oh, certainly not, Miss Meadows!" said Bob, abashed.

Crash!
The school-room door flew open. The arriving visitor was certainly not standing on ceremony. He hurled the door open, without troubling to knock first.

Miss Meadows fixed a frowning glance on the doorway, ready for him, whoever he was, and her lips opened to speak very sharply. But the sharp words died on her lips as she saw the stranger.

He was a medium-sized man, clad in rough buckskin, which showed many signs of wear and tear. His face was covered and almost hidden by a thick, red beard and moustache, and there was a hideous scar on his right cheek. His keen eyes glittered under thick brows.

Bob Lawless gasped.
"Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones!"
"By gum!"
"Oh, Jerusalem!"

Miss Meadows' eyes were fixed on the stranger, and they almost seemed to be starting from her head. Mr. Slimmey, the second master, blinked at the man helplessly over his gold-rimmed glasses. Mr. Shepherd picked up a ruler. Not that a ruler was of much use against the armed and desperate ruffian, but it was the only weapon to hand.

There was no doubt about the ruffian's identity.

His name and description were blazoned on every wall in the Thompson Valley, with the offer of five hundred dollars for his apprehension.

Only a week before the red-bearded ruffian had ridden through Main Street, in Thompson, firing right and left at the windows. "Shooting up the town," as it was called—an act of reckless bravado not uncommon in the unsettled camps of the Western States, but very uncommon indeed within the Canadian border.

All Cedar Creek stared at the man as he strode heavily in, his thick boots ringing on the plank floor.

The sudden appearance of the Gentleman in Black himself could hardly have startled Cedar Creek School more than that of Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, the "rustler" from California.

There was a big revolver in the ruffian's hand, and he raised it as he strode in, his finger on the trigger.

Then there was a breathless hush. Chunky Todgers slid under his desk, and remained palpitating on the floor. The rest of the boys and girls sat where they were, spellbound by the startling apparition.

"Hands up!" murmured Frank Richards. It was difficult for the English schoolboy to realise that the scene was real; it seemed more like one of the Wild West plays that he had seen performed by a strolling company in the Public Room at Gunten's Store, in Thompson.

But the red-bearded ruffian was evidently in deadly earnest. His eyes gleamed savagely over the revolver.

Miss Meadows found her voice at last. "What do you want here?" she exclaimed, facing the ruffian courageously.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones stared at her. "You are the schoolmarm?" he asked.

"I am the schoolmistress."
"You're my game, then. I guess you know who I am—Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones from California. I calculate I'm here after the dollars, and if there's any trouble, I shoot on sight! That's a cinch!"

"I know you, from your description," said Miss Meadows coldly. "But if you have come here to rob the school—"

"I guess that's the lay-out, marm!" Five-Hundred-Dollar-Jones' eyes swept over the breathless school-room. "I said 'Hands up!' Do you want me to begin pluggin'?"

"Do as you are told, my boys," said Miss Meadows hastily.

Cedar Creek obeyed as one man. A forest of hands went up, to be clasped over heads. Miss Meadows looked at the two assistant-masters, and signed to them to obey also. Very reluctantly Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd elevated their hands. They were unarmed, naturally, and it was only too clear that the "bulldozer" from over the "Line" was ready to shoot, if provoked.

"I guess that fills the bill!" said Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, with a nod. "Now, marm, I'll trouble you to skip along and hand over the rocks. No time to lose—I'm in a bit of a hurry!"

And the ruffian grinned. Miss Meadows drew a deep breath. "I will do as you demand," she said coldly. "I warn you that you will be punished for this!"

"I guess, marm, that if they ever rope me in, this little business won't count among

the other things!" grinned Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones. "I reckon I made cold meat of the sheriff of Hoggsville before I skipped over the line, and there's a rope ready for me in the States, marm! Bless your little heart, this hyer business ain't a circumstance to me! Get a move on, marm!"

Miss Meadows stepped towards the door. There was no help for it; it was impossible to argue with a levelled revolver in the hand of a reckless ruffian.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones glanced round the school-room before he followed her.

"You keep still, the hull crowd!" he said. "If I hear so much as a chinwag, I guess I'll begin on you! That's a cinch!"

And he strode out of the school-room after Miss Meadows, leaving all Cedar Creek gassing.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Outlaw's Defeat!

"WELL, my hat!" stuttered Frank Richards.

"Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones here!" muttered Bob Lawless. "It takes the biscuit, and no mistake! The nerve of it!"

"The impudent scoundrel!" exclaimed Beauclerc, knitting his brows. "Are we going to take it quietly, and let him rob Miss Meadows?"

Bob Lawless grinned. "I guess this is where we come out at the little end of the horn," he replied. "That bulldozer would shoot as soon as look at you, and I sort of reckon I've left my gun at home!"

"It's rotten!" "Jolly rotten!" growled Frank Richards. "I don't see what we can do, though."

A quavering voice came from under the desks:

"Has he gone?" "It was the voice of Chunky Todgers. "Not quite!" grinned Bob. "He's in Miss Meadows' sitting-room at present, Chunky. Shall I call him?"

"Yow-ow-ow!" Mr. Shepherd and Mr. Slimmey had drawn together, and were speaking in low tones. Both the assistant masters of Cedar Creek were looking very angry and restive. They were under Miss Meadows' orders, and she had bidden them remain quiet; but it was not pleasant. But there was nothing they could do. The Californian ruffian could have shot them down like rabbits before they could have got at him with their hands.

All eyes were turned upon the school-room doorway.

Across the passage outside was the door of Miss Meadows' sitting-room, where the schoolmistress was at that moment carrying out the orders of the raider.

In the dead silence the schoolboys could hear the clicking of a key in a lock.

"Dash it all, we ought to do something!" muttered Frank Richards, clenching his hands. "He's making Miss Meadows hand over her money!"

"What can we do?" said Tom Lawrence. "If we could get near him—"

"Fatead! He would pot you like a prairie rabbit!"

"I—I suppose he would."

Vere Beauclerc half rose in his place. Mr. Shepherd's eye turned upon him at once.

"Sit down, Beauclerc!"

"But, sir—"

"Sit down at once!" Beauclerc obeyed.

"No use, cherub!" muttered Bob Lawless. "No earthly good, old chap! We can't do anything, and if he began firing here, there's the girls—"

Beauclerc nodded, and sat still.

From Miss Meadows' sitting-room the bull voice of the ruffian became audible:

"A hundred dollars! Where's the rest?" Miss Meadows' reply could not be heard.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones' voice rang out again, louder than before:

"I guess you're fooling me, marm! There's more'n a hundred dollars in this hyer she-ban, I reckon. I'll trouble you to hand it over!"

"There is nothing more to hand over." Miss Meadows' reply was heard this time.

"I have given you all the money I have in the school."

"And where's the rest?"

"In the bank at Thompson, my man, where it is quite safe from you!"

There was a loud and angry oath.

"I guess I ain't vamoosing the ranch

with a hundred dollars, marm! You'll find more than that!"

"I cannot!"

"You're fooling me. If you don't want your pretty looks spoiled, marm, you'll hustle pretty lively and shell out!"

"I can give you no more!"

Another angry oath.

"I guess I'll give you a couple of minutes," said Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, "and if you don't ante in that time, marm, this hyer school will want a new school-marm!"

Frank Richards drew a quick breath.

Three or four of the Cedar Creek fellows were on their feet now, at the threat of injury to the schoolmistress.

Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd, as if moved by the same spring, started towards the door.

"Bob," muttered Frank, "if—if he—"

Bob came out. "We're not going to sit here and let him hurt Miss Meadows!"

"No fear!" said Bob Lawless, between his teeth.

There were no weapons to be had—nothing but inkpots and rulers. Such as they were, the chums of Cedar Creek grasped them, and hurried after the two masters.

Nearer the door of the school-room, they could see across the passage into Miss Meadows' sitting-room.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones had his revolver levelled at Miss Meadows' pale face, with a threatening glare upon the schoolmistress.

"I guess you'd better produce the rocks, marm!" he said.

"I have no more—"

"You can't fool me!" said the ruffian savagely. "I ain't come hyer to levant with a hundred dollars! Not much! You've got one minute left, marm. afore I draw trigger!"

Miss Meadows sank into a chair, her face white and set.

The threatening revolver still looked her in the face, and the trigger moved a little under the ruffian's finger.

But Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones swung round at the sound of footsteps in the doorway.

Mr. Slimmey and Mr. Shepherd were rushing in.

Crack!

Crack!

The ruffian fired twice, and there was a cry from Mr. Slimmey as he fell. The second bullet missed, for, at the same instant, an inkpot flew from Bob Lawless' hand, and it struck the ruffian full in the face, and he staggered.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones uttered a roar of rage as the missile struck him, the ink flooding over his face.

Crash!

Frank Richards' ruler followed the inkpot, crashing upon the ruffian's chin.

Crack!

Crack!

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones was firing blindly now.

But Miss Meadows, springing from the chair, struck up his arm as he pulled trigger, and the bullets crashed into the ceiling.

Then Mr. Shepherd reached the ruffian.

The young master's fist landed on Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones' jaw, sending the ruffian spinning backwards.

"Pile in!" yelled Frank Richards.

Crash!

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones was on the floor, and Mr. Shepherd kicked the revolver from his hand as he sprawled there.

"Collar him!"

"Down with him!"

Frank Richards & Co., and half a dozen other fellows, were rushing on the ruffian now.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones dragged himself away from the young master, panting.

He was only thinking of escape now.

The hundred dollars lay unheeded on Miss Meadows' desk; the ruffian did not even think of his plunder. The Cedar Creek fellows were closing on him, and, now he was unarmed, he was very near the end of his tether if once six or seven sturdy Canadian lads had fastened on him.

He made a fierce bound away from his assailants, in the direction of the window.

"Collar him!" panted Frank.

Crash!

The reckless ruffian crashed bodily through the window, and rolled in the playground outside, amid a shower of broken glass.

"After him!"

"Head him off!"

Miss Meadows was kneeling by the side of poor Mr. Slimmey, who lay senseless on the floor. But the crowd rushed for the door, in hot pursuit of Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

The ruffian had reached his horse, and he dragged himself into the saddle as the crowd rushed out.

Clatter, clatter!

In frantic haste, Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones rode for the gates.

He spurred on his horse savagely, as a volley of yells and missiles followed him from the lumber school.

In a few seconds he whirled out of the school gates, and the galloping of his horse died away down the trail.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones was gone; but it had been one of the narrowest escapes of his lawless career.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

On the Trail!

"HOW'S Slimmey?"

That was the question on every lip, as the Cedar Creek fellows crowded back into the school-

house.

Miss Meadows, with a white face, was attending to his wound. Fortunately, it was not serious, though it had knocked poor Mr. Slimmey out. The ruffian's intentions had been murderous; but he had fired too hurriedly. The bullet had gone through Mr. Slimmey's shoulder, and dropped inside his coat at the back.

Mr. Shepherd waved the schoolboys away as they were crowding in.

"Keep back, please!" he said.

"But how's Mr. Slimmey, sir?" asked Frank Richards.

"He is still unconscious; but there is no danger. We are about to remove him to his cabin. All of you go into the school-room."

"Yes, sir!"

The schoolboys obeyed at once.

"Poor old Slimmey!" said Bob Lawless, as they crowded in. "He isn't much use in a scrap; but he's got heaps of pluck! It's rotten for that bulldozer to have got away—"

"Lucky it's no worse!" said Frank Richards, with a shiver. "My hat! What a happening for Cedar Creek!"

"I say, has he gone?" came a quavering voice. Chunky Todgers was still under the desks.

"Yes, he's gone, you fat rabbit!" grunted Bob.

"Oh dear!"

Todgers crawled out at that welcome information. He blinked uneasily towards the doorway.

"Sure he's gone?" he asked.

"Yes, you ass!" said Frank. "All safe now."

"Oh, good!" said Chunky. "I—I guess I wasn't frightened, you know, but—"

"Rats!"

And the hapless Chunky said no more. There really was not much room for Chunky to "spread" himself on this occasion. Even Chunky could not maintain that it was leonine courage that had driven him under the desks for shelter.

There was a buzz of excited voices in the school-room.

Lessons were hardly to be thought of just then. The fellows looked round eagerly as Mr. Shepherd came in.

"School is dismissed for to-day!" he announced. "You will all return to your homes as quickly as possible. Lawless!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Someone must be sent to Thompson at once to take a message to the sheriff. I do not care to leave Miss Meadows now, as it is barely possible that that ruffian might return. If you will go—"

"Certainly, sir!" said Bob at once.

"Thank you, Lawless! You will call on the doctor first, and ask him to come here, and then take the letter to the sheriff."

"Yes, sir."

"S-s-suppose we meet Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones on the trail, sir!" stammered Chunky Todgers.

"That is very unlikely, Todgers, as he is fleeing for his life. But anyone who wishes may remain within gates until his parents can send for him."

"Come along with us, Chunky," said Bob Lawless. "We'll see you through."

"I—I guess I will!" said Chunky.

Frank Richards & Co. led out their horses,

and their schoolfellows whose homes lay in the direction of Thompson joined them. Quite a numerous party started up the trail, and there were a good many uneasy glances cast into the timber as they went. But nothing was to be seen of Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones.

Outside Thompson, Frank Richards & Co. parted from their companions, and rode into the town.

They called on the doctor, and then conveyed Mr. Shepherd's letter to the sheriff, with a report of what had happened at the lumber school. Mr. Henderson read the letter, and then called for his horse and started for Cedar Creek.

"Home now?" asked Frank Richards, as the three chums left the sheriff's house.

Bob Lawless shook his head. "If you fellows are game—" he began. "Game as pie!" answered Frank. "What have you got in your head now?"

Bob stood with his hand resting on the saddle, his brows knitted.

"I was thinking of Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones," he said abruptly. "It wasn't any business of ours, so long as the rascal kept clear of us. Now he's been to Cedar Creek, and threatened Miss Meadows, and shot poor Slimmy down. He might have killed Slimmy; he didn't care a Continental red cent!"

"He's a brutal ruffian," said Frank; "but—"

"It's weeks since he skipped out of the States to save his neck, and he hasn't been run down here. He snaps his fingers at the sheriff, even to the extent of shooting up the town under his blessed nose. He may happen along again at Cedar Creek, for all we know. Lots of the kids will be kept away from school after this. Their folks will be nervous of letting them out on the trails, with that tough cavorting around. It's up to Cedar Creek to take a hand in the game, and that means us."

"I agree!" said Vere Beauclerc quietly.

"I'm not thinking about the reward," went on Bob. "It's blood-money, and though I wouldn't blame any galoot for taking it, if he wanted, I'd rather not touch it myself. But that bulldozer isn't going to hold up Cedar Creek, and nothing said."

"But what's the stunt?" asked Frank.

"You know I'm pretty good at woodcraft," said Bob. "If we could pick up his trail—"

"I suppose there's a chance."

"We know the way he went, for a start. I don't suggest tackling him—we're unarmed—but if we could trail him it would be easy enough to get the sheriff's men after him. Are you game to try?"

"You bet!"

"Come on, then!"

The chums of Cedar Creek mounted their horses, and rode out of Thompson the way they had come.

They caught a glimpse of Mr. Henderson on the trail ahead of them, riding at a gallop for Cedar Creek School.

The sheriff soon disappeared from sight.

The three chums were serious enough as they rode along the timber. Picking up the trail of a man like Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones was a dangerous business, and they were well aware of it.

But they were very keen to undertake it, all the same, and they did not wish to lose time by going home for Bob's rifle. Moreover, if Bob had gone in at the ranch for his rifle, it was highly probable that Mr. Lawless would have inquired into the matter, and that a very heavy foot would have come down on the whole project.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones' trail was easy enough to pick up near the school. There had been a recent fall of rain, and there was plenty of mud on the trail, and Bob's sharp eyes soon picked out the hoof-prints of the outlaw's horse.

The ruffian in his flight had ridden down the timber trail away from the creek—the direction Frank Richards & Co. usually took in going home to the ranch after school.

Leading their horses by the bridles, the three schoolboys followed on the trail.

In the timber, they cut themselves thick cudgels with their clasp-knives, as a precaution against a possible meeting with the ruffian whose tracks they were following.

For half a mile Bob Lawless picked the track out with ease, and then his progress became much slower.

He stopped at last, and "tried" backwards and forwards, looking for "sign," but he looked in vain.

Frank and Beauclerc watched him silently. At this work, the Canadian schoolboy was any distance ahead of his chums, and they could not help him.

Bob looked up from the trail at last. "I guess he took to the timber here!" he said.

"Very likely!" assented Frank. "He rode away at top speed at first. But he wouldn't keep on the open trail long, in case of meeting somebody—and he would be known at a glance, with his red whiskers."

"We'll try the timber, anyhow."

It was past the usual dinner-time for the chums now; but they were not thinking of dinner. They were too eager to get on the track for that.

After some search, Bob Lawless found traces of a horse having forced a way from the open trail into the thickets of larch and sassafras. But there was little "sign" on the tangled ground, and he could not feel certain that it was the track of the man he was seeking.

"I guess it was Jones, but I wouldn't stack many dollars on it," said Bob. "It might have been anybody, or even a loose horse. The track's not good enough. But I don't feel inclined to give in."

"After all, there's no school to-day," said Frank Richards. "We can stick it out till sundown."

"I reckon so."

"Only we shall have to get some grub," added Frank, with a smile.

"We're not far now from our shack," said Beauclerc. "My father's home. Suppose we drop in there for something to eat, and start again."

"That's not a bad idea."

Bob Lawless nodded assent.

"We'll get a snack with Beau, and then start afresh," he said. "We've got all the afternoon, and I guess Mister Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones isn't far away all the time."

"Come on, then!"

Frank Richards & Co. led their horses into the trail that ran to the Beauclercs' shack on the creek, and mounted. They rode

on at a gallop for the home of the remittance-man.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Hand to Hand!

CRACK! Sharp and clear, the rifle-shot rang through the timber, above the thudding of the hoofs on the well-worn trail.

A hundred echoes from the trees and thickets followed it, multiplying the sound.

Bob Lawless drew rein suddenly.

"By gum! That came from the shack, Cherub!"

"It was my father's rifle," exclaimed Beauclerc. "I know the ring of it. What can be happening there?"

He drove on his horse to a gallop.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless followed him fast.

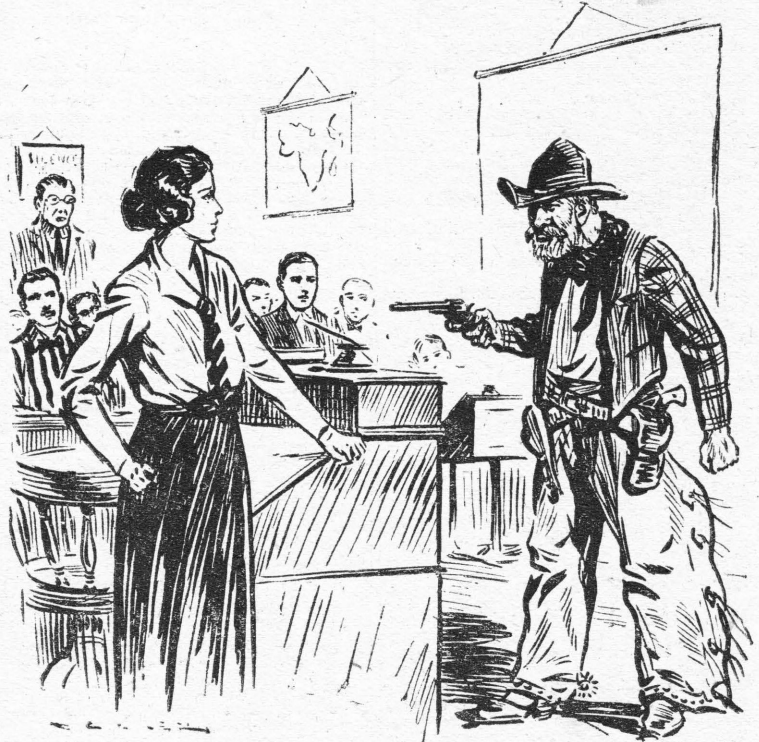
That sudden shot from the remittance-man's shack had startled them. At any other time they might have supposed that Lascelles Beauclerc was shooting a coyote, or, perhaps, a lurking prairie-wolf. But Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones was fresh in their minds, and they could not help thinking of the red-bearded ruffian.

True, the Californian outlaw was not likely to visit the rough shack on the creek with the intention of robbery. Excepting on the days when he received his remittances from England, Mr. Beauclerc had little money, and the shack did not look as if it contained five dollars' worth of plunder. But the rifle-shot had alarmed the chums of Cedar Creek.

They came up the trail at a gallop, and in a few minutes were in sight of the shack. It stood lonely in the little clearing on the bank of the creek, a good mile from Cedar Camp, where were the nearest habitations. The clearing was in a good state of cultivation.

Lascelles Beauclerc was much more industrious than of old, and he was now seldom seen in the poker-room of the Occidental or the Red Dog Saloon.

The door of the shack was closed as the schoolboys sighted it, but the remittance-



A VISIT FROM FIVE-HUNDRED-DOLLAR JONES! The door of the schoolroom flew open, and the visitor walked in. There was a big revolver in his hand, and he raised it as he came up to Miss Meadows. "Hands up!" "Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones!" gasped Frank Richards. (See Chapter 1.)

man could be seen at the window. There was a rifle in his hands, and he was looking out watchfully.

Beaulerc gasped with relief at the sight of his father. The remittance-man was safe, at least. But at whom, or what, had the rifle been discharged?

"Pull in, Cherub!" rapped out Bob Lawless. "Your poppa's there, safe enough. Pull in!"

"But—" Bob Lawless caught Beaulerc's rein and forcibly stopped him. The three schoolboys halted on the edge of the timber. Vere Beaulerc uttered an impatient exclamation. "What are you stopping for?" he exclaimed.

"I guess I'm stopping because we're still in cover here," answered Bob coolly. "Before we leave cover I reckon we want to know what your poppa was pulling trigger at. If Mr. Jones of California is in the clearing we don't want him to draw a bead on us."

Crack! The remittance-man's rifle rang again from the window of the shack.

Keeping in cover of the trees, on the edge of the timber, the three schoolboys watched the direction of the rifle to discover the target.

There was a crash in a little clump of willows, by the bank of the creek, as the rifle-bullet tore through the branches.

The willows were about half-way from the timber to the shack, and round the clump was open ground.

"I reckoned so!" said Bob. "Your poppa isn't burning powder for nothing Cherub. He's firing at somebody in those willows. And there goes a shot in answer."

It was a pistol-shot that flashed out from the willows, though the marksman could not be seen.

The range to the shack was long for a revolver. The bullet struck that lumber wall a yard from the window where the remittance-man stood with his rifle.

The "ping" of the shot on the wall came faintly to the ears of the schoolboys in the timber.

"He means business, whoever he is!" said Bob Lawless coolly. "With a shorter range I guess he would have got home."

The same thought evidently occurred to Mr. Beaulerc, for he stepped back from the window and closed the shutter. Through a slit in the shutter the muzzle of his rifle came into view again.

Beaulerc clenched his hands hard. Neither party in that strange conflict had seen the schoolboys, halted under the overhanging branches on the edge of the clearing. But if they approached the shack they had to pass within full view of the willow clump and easy range of the marksman hidden there.

"It must be the outlaw!" muttered Beaulerc.

Bob Lawless nodded, though he looked puzzled.

"I reckon Mr. Jones came this way after vamoosing out of Cedar Creek," he remarked. "But if it's the Jones-man, what the thunder is he tackling your poppa for, Cherub? You needn't be uneasy. Your poppa is as safe as houses behind that shutter. Keep back, you duffer! Do you want to get plugged?"

Bob pulled Beaulerc's horse farther back into the trees. "It beats me," he went on. "There's nothing at the shack to tempt a man like Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, and he can't know your father, and have a grudge against him, I guess."

"There is money at home to-day," said Beaulerc. "My father drew his remittance yesterday at the bank in Thompson."

Bob whistled.

"But he wouldn't carry it home on the top of his hat," he said. "How could the Jones-man know anything about it?"

"I don't know. He does, or he wouldn't be here. It's Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones—look!"

The chums followed with their eyes the direction of Beaulerc's pointing finger. From the willows a head rose into view cautiously, and they caught a glimpse of a red-bearded, scarred face under a Stetson hat.

Crack! The rifle rang out from the window again, and the red head promptly ducked and disappeared. But the chums had recognised Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones.

"Get off your horses, you chaps, and don't

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make a row!" said Bob. "That bulldozer hasn't spotted us, and he's not going to."

The schoolboys dismounted and tethered the horses under the trees. Then Bob Lawless explained his plan concisely.

"That brute doesn't know we're on hand. We can skirt round through the timber to the creek, and wade downstream right behind that clump of willows. I guess we shall catch him from behind, and nail him before he knows what's happening. Are you game?"

"Come on!" was Beaulerc's reply. And the chums plunged into the timber. Bob Lawless led the way.

The schoolboys heard another exchange of shots from the clearing as they wound through the wood. In a few minutes more they had reached the creek.

With great caution they waded in, the high bank hiding them from view as they waded along towards the willows, if the red-bearded ruffian had looked behind him.

The tops of the willows over the bank warned them when they were close to Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones' lurking place.

In silence, with beating hearts, the three schoolboys trod up the rugged, muddy bank of the creek, till their heads came over the level, and they could look into the clump of willows from the creek side.

Near them—so near to them that they started and caught their breath—was a kneeling figure, with his back towards them.

It was Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, kneeling in the willows, and watching the shack through the openings, revolver in hand. The ruffian never thought of looking over his shoulder; he had no suspicion of foes behind him. All his attention was riveted on the shack across the clearing. He was watching for a chance to "plug" the remittance-man, whose rifle-muzzle still showed from the distant window.

Bob Lawless' eyes glittered. Half a dozen paces only separated the trio from the kneeling ruffian, unconscious of their presence.

Crack, crack! A rifle-shot rang from the shack, answered by a pistol-shot from the willows.

It was followed by a curse from Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones. And that curse had scarcely dropped from his lips when Bob Lawless sprang upon him with uplifted cudgel.

Crash! The ruffian heard him as he closed in, and whirled half-round. His arm was thrown up defensively, and the cudgel descended upon it. The revolver whirled from his hand, and he uttered a yell of pain.

"Down with him!" panted Bob. Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones came plunging out of the willows, his face convulsed with fury. The three schoolboys struck at him together, and he yelled, backing away towards the creek. All four of them were out of cover now, and in full view of the shack and the remittance-man. But Lascelles Beaulerc did not fire, as he saw the schoolboys. A bullet was as likely to hit one of them as the Californian outlaw.

The door of the shack flew open, and the remittance-man ran out, rifle in hand, and dashed towards the spot.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones was retreating towards the timber, jumping and dodging to elude the slashes of the cudgels showered on him without mercy. He made a backward bound and rushed into the trees, with the three chums hot on his track.

"Stand clear!" shouted Mr. Beaulerc. The rifle rang out now, and there was a yell from the timber where the outlaw had rushed into cover. A Stetson hat whirled among the trees and fluttered to the ground. Then there was a crash in the thickets as a horse was driven furiously through the underwood.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones had reached his horse, hidden in the timber. For the second time that day the Californian outlaw had failed, and was thinking only of saving his skin.

The remittance-man dashed into the timber, reloading his rifle as he ran. Frank Richards & Co. followed him fast.

Crack! The rifle-shot tore through the leaves, but the crashing of the driven horse did not stop. The outlaw burst out into the open trail, and with whip and spur drove on his horse. There was no time for another shot.

The remittance-man lowered his smoking rifle.

"He has got clear, I'm afraid," he said. The schoolboys ran into the trail in time

to catch a fleeting glimpse of the outlaw as he vanished into the distance at a furious gallop. Lascelles Beaulerc joined them.

"He is gone!" he said. "But how came you here?"

Beaulerc explained. "You came in good time," said the remittance-man, with a smile. "It was Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones, the man who is being hunted for from Kamloops to the Fraser River. He came on me suddenly, but, luckily, I got hold of my rifle in time, and he took cover." The remittance-man knitted his brows. "How he knew there was plunder here, I cannot guess. There is usually little there in the shack."

"He must have known," said Beaulerc. "Yes; he could have had no other reason for coming here. The rascal must have confederated in Thompson; yet that is curious, for he is a stranger in this section. I wonder if—"

"Look here," said Frank Richards quietly. He had picked up the Stetson hat, knocked from the outlaw's head by the rifle-shot. With the hat was a red wig, which had evidently fallen with it from the rascal's head.

"By gum! Then he is in disguise!" exclaimed Bob Lawless. "All that red hair is only cover!"

The remittance-man nodded thoughtfully. "That accounts," he said. "That is why the ruffian is given to showing himself in public, as when he shot-up Thompson. The authorities are hunting for a man with red hair and beard, and all the time—"

"All the time he looks quite different when he's at home!" grinned Bob Lawless. "Why, he may be walking Main Street in Thompson every day, and not a galoot the wiser!"

"That is it."

Frank Richards & Co. rode up to the sheriff's office in Thompson later that afternoon with their trophy. There was no doubt that the Canadian sheriff was glad of the news they brought. And when the news was out, and all Thompson knew that Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones' red hair was only a mask, there was keen excitement in the town. For, as Bob Lawless had said, it was quite possible that the Californian ruffian, in his own proper person, was walking Main Street every day unknown to all—perhaps, indeed, known to all by another name, and his real identity never suspected. The ease with which the ruffian had thrown pursuers off the track was explained now.

Frank Richards & Co. wondered whether, now that his secret was known, the ruffian would "vamoose" from the Thompson Valley, and seek safer quarters. But they were destined to discover that they were not yet done with Five-Hundred-Dollar Jones.

THE END.

(Next week's thrilling story of the chums of Cedar Creek is entitled "The Hold-Up!" Be sure you get the POPULAR next Tuesday.)

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