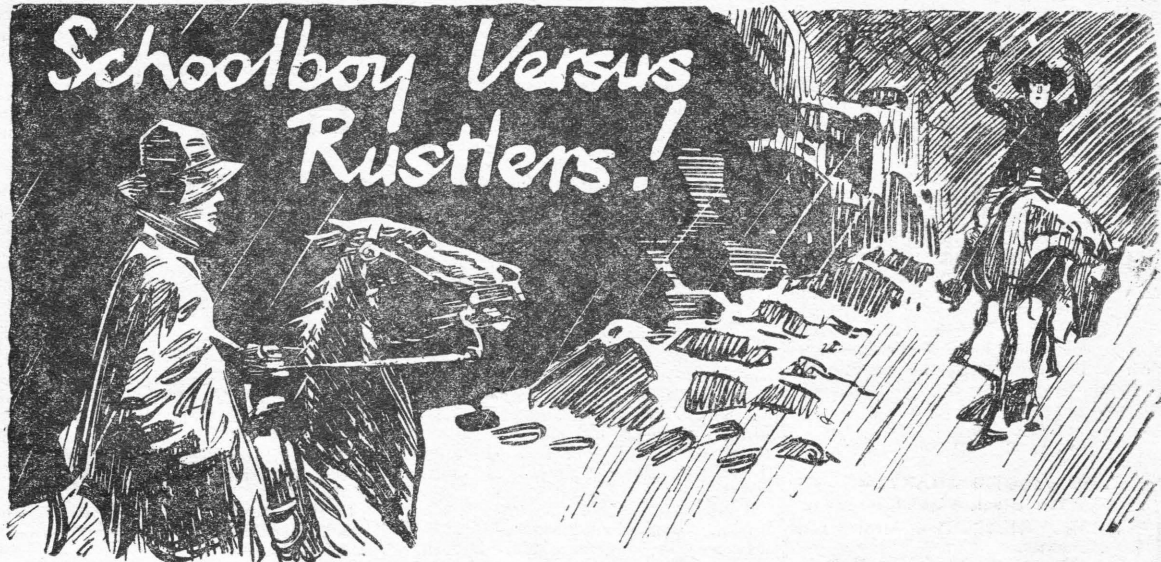


THE BLACK SACK GANG!

Knowing full well the terrible risk he is running, Frank Richards enters the

hidden retreat of the Black Sack Gang to the rescue of Lord St. Austells!



Another thrilling and dramatic long complete story of Frank Richards, the homeless schoolboy of the Backwoods!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Startling News!

THE moon at intervals gleamed out through dark ridges of cloud. Incessantly a fine, drizzling rain came down on the trail—soft, silent, but incessant.

Frank Richards was muffled to the ears in a long waterproof cloak, with a sou'-wester pulled down over his ears and forehead. Little more than his nose was visible as he peered ahead on the shadowy trail, guiding his horse with a sure hand.

Frank half regretted that he had not stopped for the night at Dusty Bar. Fine, clear moonlight had tempted him to push forward on the trail down the mountains. He was three or four miles out of Dusty Bar when the rain came on.

Now he was in for it, and he rode on as cheerfully as he could at a moderate pace, for the rain made the rocks slippery.

Several times during the last few minutes he had thought that he heard a sound of hoof-beats ahead. He was not very anxious to meet a fellow-traveller on that lonely trail. With four hundred dollars in his belt, he needed to be wary.

Clatter, clatter!

The hoof-beats were unmistakable now, and they were coming towards him.

It was evidently a reckless rider who was galloping at such a pace on the slippery trail.

Frank pulled in his horse to wait for the stranger to pass him. Under his black waterproof his hand rested on the butt of the revolver in his belt. His late adventures in the Cascade Mountains had taught him to be on his guard.

The moon emerged once more, and watery light fell on the trail and the weeping larches that bounded it on either side.

A horseman leaped suddenly, as it were, out of the shadow as the moon shone, within ten yards of Frank.

He was coming on at a gallop, but at the sight of the black-cloaked figure sitting the horse in the trail he stopped.

To Frank's astonishment, the stranger dragged in his panting horse in a great hurry, so suddenly that the animal almost slipped over. The next moment the man's hands went up over his head.

"Let up!" he shouted.

Frank stared at him blankly.

For the moment he did not comprehend the actions of the stranger, and then it suddenly dawned upon his mind that the man had mistaken him for a "rustler"—a robber of the trail.

Without waiting for the expected "Hands up!" the man had put up his hands in token of surrender.

Frank burst into a laugh.

"Don't shoot, pard!" went on the man, keeping his hands elevated above his head. "Let up, old man. I'm durned if I knew the trail was watched this end. I guess I wouldn't have lit out if I'd known. You've got me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Frank, greatly tickled by the peculiar situation. "What do you take me for?"

The man blinked at him.

"Ain't you one of the Black Sacks?" he asked.

"The what?"

"The Black Sack Gang."

"Oh!" said Frank.

He remembered now that he had heard of the Black Sack Gang spoken of in Dusty Bar, though he had not paid much heed.

"Ain't you?" persisted the horseman.

"No," said Frank, laughing, "nothing of the kind. I'm a traveller, going down the mountain to Gold Brick."

"Jerusalem!"

The stranger dropped his hands, with a gasp of relief, and rode closer to the schoolboy of Cedar Creek, peering at him.

"I'm sorry I startled you," said Frank.

"I guess you did—just a few! You're from Dusty, I reckon?"

"Yes."

"You'd better turn round and hustle back to Dusty," said the horseman, "I'm going thar, if the hoss holds out. The Black Sacks are out on the trail between here and Gold Brick, and it ain't safe, I guess. They held us up and roped in

the boss, and I reckon I had a close call getting away—a bullet through my hat, by gum! Coming on?"

"Hold on!" said Frank. "Who the thump are the Black Sack Gang?"

"I guess they're rustlers, but nobody knows who they are, as they cover their heads with black sacks when they're on the trail. That's why I took you for one of them in that rig."

"And they held you up?" asked Frank.

"They sure did."

"And your boss?"

"They got him, I reckon. I saw him yanked off'n his horse."

"And you left him?"

"I guess I wasn't stopping to argue. I guess his lordship was paying Sam Slick to guide him, not to scrap with rustlers," answered the man coolly.

"His lordship?" asked Frank.

"A real old high-stepper," said Mr. Slick. "Lord St. Austells, from the Old Country, doing the sights of Canada! I guess he'd have done better to stick to the railroad. The Black Sack Gang will squeeze him hard."

Frank Richards gave a start.

"Lord St. Austells!" he repeated.

"Sure."

Sam Slick glanced back along the trail.

There was no sound to be heard, save the dropping of the rain from the firs and larches.

"I guess I'm clear," he remarked. "But I'm going on. You'd better do the same, stranger."

With that, Mr. Slick set his horse in motion again, and galloped on towards Dusty Bar.

But Frank Richards did not follow him.

He sat his horse in the trail in the rain, thinking hard. For Lord St. Austells was the uncle of his old chum, Vere Beauclerc, of Cedar Creek School, the brother of Vere's father, the remittance-man.

Frank had never seen him. So far as he knew, his lordship had never been in Canada. His younger son, Algerion, had paid a visit to Cedar.

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Creek, and Frank remembered him well. His lordship had fallen into the hands of the Black Sack Gang, and his guide, who evidently believed that discretion was the better part of valour, had left him there.

Frank Richards thought hard.

It did not seem likely that he could do much to help a man in the hands of a gang of desperate rustlers, but it went against the grain to ride away without an effort to help his chum's relation.

His mind was made up at last.

Mr. Slick, urging on his weary horse, had vanished up the trail, and his horse's hoof-beats had long died away.

Instead of following him, Frank Richards resumed his former route, following the shadowy trail down the mountain.

He knew that he was riding into deadly peril, but he did not hesitate. With a beating heart, he rode down the trail, his eyes keenly on the lookout for the rustlers.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Black Sacks!

FRANK RICHARDS drew rein suddenly.

The moon was hidden, and the trail was black, and through the blackness there came to his ears the sound of hoofs approaching him. He listened intently.

Five or six horsemen were coming up the trail, hidden from him as yet by the darkness.

Frank felt a thrill.

It was close upon midnight, and at that hour of a rainy night it was unlikely enough that travellers would be on the trail. He had come upon the rustlers sooner than he had anticipated.

Frank slipped from his horse, and led the animal into a thicket of firs by the trail.

The next gleam of the moon would have revealed him to the approaching horsemen, and already there was a vestige of silver among the clouds.

He pushed into cover with his horse, and, standing among the trees, with his hand over the horse's muzzle, he watched the trail breathlessly.

The horsemen were proceeding at a walk; he heard the slow hoof-beats, and a jingle of bridle and bit.

Through the darkness came a glimmer of silver light, strengthening as the moon sailed out from the banks of cloud.

For a few minutes the trail was revealed for a good distance in either direction.

Keeping well in cover, Frank watched.

Six horsemen came in sudden sight, riding in single file up the wet, rocky trail.

Five of them were disguised in a strange, bizarre way—black sacks being drawn down over their heads as low as their belts.

The sacks were drawn in a little to the neck, and slits were cut for eyes and mouth.

Frank needed no further evidence that he had fallen in with the Black Sack Gang.

After a glance at the rustlers, his eyes were fixed upon the horseman who wore no disguise—evidently the prisoner who had been deserted by Sam Slick.

He saw a rather handsome man, with a white moustache, in riding-clothes of a very elegant cut. The prisoner's

feet were tied loosely under his horse, and his hands were secured to his sides. His horse was led by a trail-rop, held by the rustler who rode in front of him.

The file of riders passed within six yards of the schoolboy watching from the thicket.

They had not quite passed him when deep shadow fell on the trail again as the moon disappeared.

Only the jingle a few yards from him told him that they were there.

Frank did not need telling that the rascals were heading for some den in the foothills, where their valuable prisoner was to be placed in security, and where, probably, their plunder was stored or divided after a raid.

Frank did not stop to think now. He mounted his horse, and pushed out of the thicket, falling into the trail behind the rustlers, making a last in the file.

He knew that he would be revealed as soon as the moon shone again; but in his black coat and sou'-wester he was very like, in appearance, to the rustlers themselves, as Sam Slick's mistake had shown.

That was the thought, or, rather, intuition, upon which he acted.

It was a desperate step but there was no alternative between that and abandoning his chum's uncle in the hands of the rustlers.

Whether it would be possible to make some desperate attempt to rescue the prisoner, he did not know; his present thought was to keep the rascals in sight.

With a thumping heart, but a cool head, Frank Richards rode in the wake of the Black Sack Gang, one hand on the revolver in his belt.

He breathed hard, as the moon glimmered among the clouds again. The rain had almost ceased.

In the faint light, on the trail barred by the shadows of the tall larches, there was little to distinguish him in looks from the rest of the file of horsemen, who rode several yards apart.

But as the moon glimmered out, the last rustler in the file turned his head, staring back along the trail through the eyeholes in the sack.

Frank Richards was six or seven yards behind him.

The man stared through the eyeholes, and called out something that Frank did not catch; but just then his horse slipped on the wet rocks, and he had to give all his attention to the animal.

The trail ahead was widening, and only two rustlers were in sight of Frank Richards as the moon shone.

Frank's heart was throbbing, but his hand was firm on his revolver.

He knew that the last rustler had heard his horse, and had been surprised by the sound, as he had supposed himself last in the line.

But Frank's look, in the dim light, was enough to reassure him—added to the fact that his horse needed care on the slippery trail.

That a stranger, in appearance like the Black Sacks themselves, had joined the file on the lonely trail was too improbable for the rustler to suspect it.

Evidently he had concluded that one of his comrades, whom he had supposed to be in front, was bringing up the rear.

It was this that Frank had hoped, and fortune had favoured him—as it is said to favour the brave.

The rustler who had looked back little dreamed of the narrow escape he had had, for had he ridden back to investigate, a revolver was ready under Frank's rain-cloak to greet him.

Fortunately, he was satisfied, and rode on, and Frank followed him. And in silence, save for the faint jingle of harness and the horses' tread, the strange file wound on into the foothills

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In the Rustler's Retreat!

"HALT!"

The order came from the leader of the file half an hour later. The riders had quitted the well-marked trail that ran between Gold Brick and Dusty Bar, turning into apparently untrodden wilds, through dim gulches and ravines. But the Black Sacks evidently knew the way well, for they rode on without a pause—and behind them rode Frank Richards. An occasional glimpse of the moon showed him wild rocks and boulders, firs and larches and gaunt pines, but no trace of a trail. But the dark clouds had been massing over the moon, and the glimpses of faint light were now few and far between.

The order to halt came at last from the leader, and the horsemen drew rein, Frank Richards following the example of the rest.

In the gloom he could see little. The Black Sack Gang were only faintly-moving shadows to his eyes.

The cavalcade had reached the end of a blind ravine. So far as Frank could make out, there was no egress. Ahead of them loomed up a dark wall of rock.

"Hank!" rapped out the leader.

"Hallo, cap'n!"

"Get in first with the prisoner!"

"Sure."

Frank Richards waited, with beating heart. It was difficult to distinguish the rustlers from the shadows and the nodding trees by the cliff; he could not pick out the prisoner now, or the leader, or the man addressed as "Hank." But he heard a sound of horses pushing on, and then, suddenly, startlingly, came the sound of a ringing bell.

The sound, in such a place, was startling enough. But it did not seem to surprise the rustlers; none of them spoke.

"Clang!"

It was a second stroke of the bell.

It dawned upon Frank's mind that this was some signal at the entrance to the rustlers' retreat, and his heart sank a little. He had hoped to push in unsuspected in the darkness, but the clang of the bell evidently gave warning as each horseman passed.

But it was too late now for retreat, even if Frank had thought of retreat.

He was no longer the last of a line. The horsemen were in a bunch under the great cliff; one of them was only a yard from Frank.

Frank determined to make the nearest man his guide, for in the gloom he could see nothing but the towering cliff. But he understood now that there was some opening through which the rustlers passed.

"Clang!"

The bell sounded a third time, as a third horseman passed through the narrow opening in the cliff.

The man next to Frank pushed his horse on, and Frank followed, just contriving to keep the shadowy figure in sight.

"Clang!"

Frank understood now as he drew closer.

There was a rift in the great cliff, scarcely two feet wide, and into this the horsemen were pushing, one after another. Hank, and the prisoner had gone in first, two of the rustlers had followed, and now Frank Richards was to be the fifth to enter.

As his horse stepped into the narrow opening, his heart throbbed again. He could see nothing but a faint shadow of the rustler ahead of him, and two dim walls of rock that closed him in on either side.

There was a sudden sinking under his horse for a second.

Clang!

The bell rang a fifth time.

Frank Richards realised that in one spot the rocky floor of the gully had been excavated, the pit being covered by a wooden planking.

Under the planking the bell swung, and it was so adjusted as to ring when there was a tread on the plank above.

It was a cunning signal to warn the rustlers of any approach of an enemy to their hidden retreat.

Frank Richards rode on down the narrow gully, against the walls of which his stirrups brushed as he rode.

Clang!

The bell rang behind him as another rustler came in, riding after Frank Richards.

Retreat was more than ever impossible now, for a horse could not have turned in the passage, and the way was blocked by the incoming rustlers. Frank could only ride on, knowing that when the bell rang for a seventh time, the rascals would learn that a stranger had joined their ranks.

Clang!

From the darkness somewhere came a startled voice:

"What's that? The bell again!"

"That's seven—"

From behind came an oath.

"Who's that? Who—stand back, or I—"

"Hold your tongue, Bocus Bill, you fool!" came a savage voice. "It's me!"

"You, cap'n!"

"Yes; I guess I'm the last! And there's a stranger among us—the bell rang seven times. Five of us and a prisoner—that's six. But the bell went seven!"

"Oh Jerusalem! But how could—"

"What does it matter how?—the bell tells the truth, you fool! Keep your gun handy, while I close up the rock. There's a stranger in the gulch, and he's not to get out alive, I guess!"

"Sure, cap'n!"

Frank Richards heard every savage word behind him as he rode on through the winding, narrow rift.

There was a crash, and he realised that a heavy boulder had been rolled out of some opening in the rocky wall to close up the passage.

Then hoofs came on behind him again.

He rode on, with beating heart. The narrow passage ended at last, opening out into a gulch, hemmed in by steep cliffs. A red light gleamed through the darkness from a stove burning in a log cabin.

Three or four rough shacks stood by the side of a tiny rippling stream in the gulch.

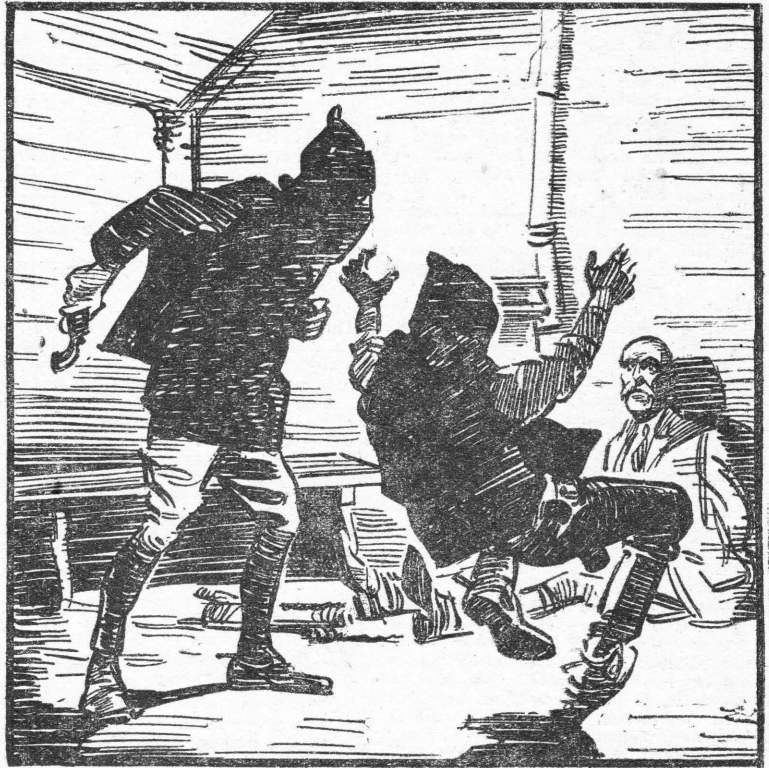
The outlaws were gathering at that spot; but Frank Richards did not follow them there.

As soon as he was in the open gulch he turned off into the open to keep as clear of the rustlers as he could.

But the gulch was narrow; scarcely twenty yards separated the steeply-sloping sides of rock, patched here and there by pines and firs.

There was little room for hiding.

The rest of the rustlers came out of the narrow passage into the gulch, and



FRANK TO THE RESCUE! The leader of the Black Sacks leaped to his feet. "I guess that will bring you to order!" he jeered. "And I reckon—oh!" He broke off with a gasping cry as the butt of Frank's revolver crashed on the back of his head, and he dropped like a log to the floor. (See Chapter 4.)

Frank heard a buzzing of excited voices.

He halted, and looked round.

In the glow of light from a cabin he saw the prisoner taken from his horse and led in.

Then the Black Sacks gathered in an excited group.

One of the rustlers emerged from a shack with a blazing pinewood torch. A moment more, and the ruffians were spread about the narrow gulch, searching for the intruder.

Frank Richards slipped from his horse, tethering the animal in a patch of thicket.

The flare of the blazing torch lit up the darkness, only a short distance from him.

The schoolboy of Cedar Creek was almost cornered; there was no escape by the way he had come. And, instead of aiding the prisoner, it was clear now that he had to fight for his life.

With his revolver gripped in his hand, he stepped out of the thicket, his eyes turned upon the rustlers.

There was a sudden shout.

The red flare of the torch showed him up against the dark rocks, and for a moment he was full in view. And, in the sudden light, the rustlers could see that he was not in the black sack disguise worn by the rest of the gang. His garb had passed without notice in the dim glimpses of the moon; but, in the torchlight, it was a different matter.

"Thar he is!"

"Shoot!" yelled the captain.

Frank Richards turned and scrambled away among the rocks, with bullets spattering behind him as he ran.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Frank Richards to the Rescue!

WITH loud shouts to one another, the Black Sack Gang hunted among the rocks for the intruder. In the darkness, among the broken boulders and patches of thicket, Frank Richards dodged and wound, and for a time he eluded the search. But he knew that it could not last. The rustlers knew now that he was there—that he was clad differently from themselves, and it was only a question of time—probably of minutes—before they sighted him again.

Frank's brain worked quickly.

In his cloak and sou'-wester he was easily recognisable if the torchlight fell on him again, and a desperate plan had already formed in his mind.

He stopped his flight at last, and crouched silently in a crevice of the cliff, waiting, with throbbing heart. The rustlers were trampling among the rocks, shouting and calling to one another, sometimes in twos, sometimes widely separated, as they searched for the stranger. The torch was flaring a score of yards away, when a ruffian came trampling, revolver in hand, within a yard of Frank's hiding-place.

Whether he would have passed the schoolboy unseen in the darkness Frank did not know; but he did not, give the ruffian time to pass.

As he came opposite the crevice Frank sprang out on him, his revolver clubbed by the barrel.

Before the ruffian knew he was at hand, the clubbed revolver came down with a crash.

With all the strength of Frank Richards' strong arm, it crashed on the rustler's head.

The man gave a low gasp, and there was a thud as he dropped senseless on the ground.

He lay like a log without a movement. Frank bent over the senseless rustler again, loosened the black sack that disguised him, and jerked it off.

In a minute or less he had drawn it over his head and shoulders, and fastened it on.

That was the plan he had formed, and it had been successful, so far. He rolled the senseless rustler into the crevice, as deep into the shadow as possible.

There was a footstep a few yards away. Frank turned, to see a dark form close at hand.

"Seen him?"

It was one of the rustlers. He flashed a lantern on Frank, but the familiar black sack reassured him.

Not a suspicion crossed his mind that the black sack concealed the stranger who had penetrated into the outlaws' retreat.

"Not here!" muttered Frank gruffly. "Durn him! Where has he got to?" growled the man.

Frank passed him, moving towards the group of shacks by the stream.

There were slits in the side of the sack to give free play to the arms; under the sack he gripped his revolver.

The ruffian with the torch came tramping by him, without a glance of suspicion. With savage oaths, the rascals continued the search, while Frank approached the deserted shacks.

He glanced in at the open doorway of the cabin in which the stove burned and glowed.

Near the stove, on the earthen floor, sat the prisoner, his hands bound to his sides.

He glanced up as Frank entered.

Frank looked at Lord St. Austells with some curiosity. He saw a pale, handsome face, very like Vere Beauclerc's in feature. There was an expression of cold scorn on Lord St. Austell's face.

He was a helpless prisoner in the hands of the Black Sack Gang, but it was evident from his look that his spirit was not subdued.

"Lord St. Austells!" said Frank hurriedly.

The prisoner eyed him.

"You can safely untie my hands, I think," he said. "You have me fairly safely here. Or you may put a bullet through my head, as you please. I assure you, on my word of honour, that you will obtain no ransom for my release. I will remain here the rest of my life before I pay a single shilling to such a gang of scoundrels!"

There was a quiet determination in the earl's look and voice, which showed that he meant every word he uttered.

"You are mistaken," said Frank in a low voice. "No time for talk now; but I'm here to save you."

The earl shrugged his shoulders.

"Listen to me," said Frank hurriedly. "You may have heard of my name—I am the friend of your nephew, Vere Beauclerc, of Cedar Creek School in the Thompson Valley—if you are Lord St. Austells."

"I am Lord St. Austells, but my nephew Vere has no friends among a gang of lawless outcasts."

"I am Frank Richards."

The earl started.

"I have heard that name," he said. "My brother has mentioned it in his letters. But—"

"I am here to save you. I have stunned one of those scoundrels, and taken his outfit," whispered Frank.

"You understand now?"

"Good heavens!"

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"Hush!"

There was a footstep outside and the leader of the Black Sack Gang strode into the cabin.

Frank knew his voice as soon as he spoke.

"What the thunder are you doing here?" he exclaimed, evidently taking Frank for one of the gang. "Why ain't you searching with the rest? Get a move on, you pesky fool!"

Frank quitted the cabin without a word.

But he did not go far. He strode away noisily a few yards, and then crept back on tiptoe.

The rustler captain had seated himself on a bench, with his boots stretched to the stove, cursing volubly as he did so. He turned a savage glare upon Lord St. Austells, evidently irritated by the coldly scornful expression on his prisoner's face.

"I guess it's some friend of yours that's got into the gulch," he said, with a curse. "But he won't get out alive. I've got a man on watch in the passage through the cliff, durn you! You won't see the outside of this gulch again till you've handed out a cool ten thousand dollars."

Lord St. Austells curled his lip.

"I shall pay you nothing!" he said contemptuously.

"I reckon you'll sing a different tune when there's a rope twisted round your neck," said the rustler coolly. "You're the biggest prize that's ever come our way, and I reckon we've been watching for you for a week or more, ever since you came up into the mountains, like the durn tenderfoot you are! You're good for ten thousand dollars, and I guess it's pay or pass in your checks."

"I have said my last word."

The ruffian uttered an oath.

"Take that for a start."

The ruffian leaped to his feet, and kicked the bound man brutally in the ribs with his heavy cowhide boot.

"I guess that will bring you to order!" he jeered. "And I reckon—Oh!"

He broke off with a gasping cry, as the butt of a revolver crashed on the back of his head, and he dropped like a log to the floor.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

By Luck and Pluck!

FRANK RICHARDS had struck the blow, and the leader of the Black Sack Gang lay stunned at his feet. Frank had not dealt lightly with him; he cared little, at that moment, whether the lawless rascal recovered or not. Lord St. Austells scrambled with difficulty to his feet.

"Is it—is it?" he panted. To his eyes, Frank's aspect was that of the Black Sacks, though his action told a different tale.

"It is I!" panted Frank. He drew the hunting-knife from his belt, and slashed through the rope that bound the prisoner's arms. "There's not a moment to lose; those scoundrels will be back here when they give up the search." He dragged the black sack from the rustler at his feet. "Get into this; it's a chance, at least—"

"But—"

Frank Richards gave an anxious look from the doorway.

In the distance there was a loud shouting. Three of the rustlers were keeping up the search, and the shouting told that they had discovered their comrade, whose disguise Frank had borrowed.

Frank turned back quickly.

"Come—quick! They've found out what I've done, and they may be back here any minute. Quick!"

Lord St. Austells, like a man in a dream, allowed the schoolboy to throw the black sack over his head.

He fastened it on mechanically.

Frank grasped the rustler captain, and rolled him to the side of the cabin, and threw over him the bearskin that lay on the floor.

Then, catching Lord St. Austells' arm, he led him from the cabin.

"Look out, cap'n!" The man with the torch came racing up. "Look out! We've found Hank—"

The rustler broke off, sudden suspicion dawning upon his mind that it might be the very "galoot" he was speaking of, that he was speaking to.

He grasped his revolver.

"I guess—" he began.

Crack!

Frank Richards fired from under his sack before the ruffian could get farther, and there was a yell as the man went down with his knee shattered by the bullet.

"Help, boys! He's here!" yelled the rustler, as he rolled over. The torch fell, and blazed on the ground.

Frank Richards caught it up.

Without the light it was difficult to find his way to the rift in the cliff that gave egress from the hidden gulch. He ran on, calling breathlessly to his companion to follow.

From the darkness two rustlers came running.

"This way!" shouted Frank. "They're escaping!"

Loud oaths answered him, and the two rustlers followed on, as Frank, with the torch uplifted, ran towards the rift.

The torchlight showed up the narrow split in the great cliff, and Frank and Lord St. Austells plunged into it, with the two rustlers almost at their heels, but evidently thinking that they were following the lead of their own comrades.

A lantern gleamed in the rift; a dark face and a levelled rifle greeted Frank Richards, and he halted. He remembered the captain's words, that a watch was set in the passage—doubtless the member of the gang who had been on guard in the retreat during the absence of the Black Sacks on their raid.

The sentry lowered his rifle, however, as his lantern gleamed on the black sacks that hid the faces of Frank Richards and Lord St. Austells.

"Oh, you!" he ejaculated. "I reckoned—"

He had no time for more. Lord St. Austells was close on him, and he struck out with clenched fist, and the man sprawled at his feet.

Lord St. Austells caught up the rifle as it clattered from the fallen ruffian's hand. He turned on the two Black Sacks who were following up the rift, and pulled a trigger without a word. There was a yell of surprise and rage from the rustlers as they turned and fled back into the gulch.

"Come on!" gasped Frank. "Now's our chance."

They ran up the winding rift, leaving the half-stunned sentry sprawling on the ground, dazed and helpless.

Frank held up the torch as he ran. From behind came a confused shouting, but there was no pursuit for the moment. In five minutes more Frank stopped at a great boulder blocked the rift ahead.

"Lend a hand!" panted Frank.

They grasped the boulder and rolled it back, and the way to freedom lay open before them.

There were footsteps in the distance behind them now, echoing in the winding rift, and Frank Richards turned and

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hoped it would be Yellow Hand. If Yellow Hand were riding at the head, then he was a certain gift to death.

At the ring of the shot there came a chorus of exclamations from the braves, some of whom half reined in their horses, and caused not a little confusion amongst the others by doing so.

Buffalo Bill lay still.

Not yet was it time for him to do move. Later he might find his chance. Now he watched, and knew that the Redskins were peering into the darkness, seeking to locate where that fatal shot had come from.

Then Red Hawk ripped out a command, and the whole band was sweeping down on nearby Three Crossings. Even if that shot had aroused the people they would stand but little chance, for they would be surprised—and surprise in these affairs was always the element that promised success and often gave it.

Buffalo Bill still lay quiet. He was quite content. He had seen a rider, though he did not know it was California Joe, go into the night—had seen him come back at a terrific pace—and he knew that his warning had been acted upon and also confirmed, and that California Joe was going in with the news that the warning was a real one.

"Them Redskins don't catch Three Crossings asleep!" he gritted, as he saw the swaying, bobbing band of braves charging down upon the devoted settlement. "I'd give a lot t' know of Kansas King's amongst them Injuns; but I reckon he'll be lookin'

after his own skin jest now. It sure wouldn't be healthy fr a white man t' see him with them!"

Came the moment when Red Hawk's war-band entered Three Crossings.

And Three Crossings was ready. Watchful eyes had seen the stealthy scouts, and when they had disappeared into the darkness again Wild Bill and his fellows emerged from their concealment. Wild Bill had heard Cody's shot, and could not understand what it meant. At first he had intended to go out to meet the Indians, then had decided that the better thing was to maintain quietness and lull them into believing that the shot had not been heard, and that Three Crossings was not ready—not aroused to the danger that was coming upon them.

But when the head of the war-party entered Three Crossings, Bill Hickok touched the arm of the man next to him, that man touched the arm of the man beside him, and the silent, but pregnant, signal went through the company. And a volley of rifle-fire ripped the air—flashes of light from barrels spouted viciously—Redskins and horses went down like ninepins, and the Indians behind that foremost file crashed into them and made confusion worse confounded.

No need for any command from Bill Hickok. His men pumped bullets into the struggling mass for all they were worth. They did not attempt to charge. Here was much more effective method of doing destruction, and brave after brave stopped the death missiles.

But other braves there were who had recovered from the shock of surprise and disappointment, and now they were firing at the palefaces; while yet others, extricating themselves from the confusion, were sweeping out and about, intent upon taking the defenders in the rear.

"Back about, byes, some o' yew!" shouted Wild Bill, who knew the manoeuvre. "Give 'em Hades! All of it!"

There were brave men indeed, however, amongst those braves, and the lust of blood was upon them. They surged to the attack—were driven back—surged again, and yet again were held off. Not without having done some execution amongst the thin ranks of the defenders. Tom Clark heard a choking gasp from the man beside him, and, glancing round, saw him topple over as though he were a weary man drooping to sleep. It was sleep—the last sleep of a gallant fighter.

Tom Clark drew a line on a Redskin charging down.

"That pays my pardner's death, Redskin!" he shouted, as the man dropped from his horse, which, careering forward, would doubtless have trampled on some of the defenders had not California Joe, on the other side of Tom, pumped a bullet into it and brought it down.

"Pity t' kill hosses, son," he said, "stead of Injuns! They're yuth somethin', an' sure Injuns ain't! I—" He broke off, to bring down another Redskin, as the charging Indians broke and swung their horses round for away.

But the fight was by no means over. There was worse to come—or what would have been worse had it not been that the shacks were emptied of their human beings.

Out on the plain presently, during a lull, Tom Clark saw a sudden upglare of light. He knew what that meant even as he saw it.

"Th' old game!" he said.

"Ay, th' old game, son!" agreed California Joe. "They'll come in with torches, and try an' fling 'em into th' shacks. Th' old game, sure!"

With hideous yells, the Redskins came charging up again, not massed, but spread well out. And behind each man on a horse was one running on foot, ready to snatch the burning brand if perchance the rider was killed.

Into Three Crossings—reckless of the swift fire thrown at them. Here and there an Indian succeeded in hurling his blazing torch into a shack, and before ever the attack was beaten off flames were emerging from them, where bedding and clothes had caught fire.

"Can't hope t' put them out!" growled Wild Bill. "That's what them Redskin 'ud like. Then they'd be in agen. Hey, what's thet?"

Shouts, yells, gunfire were coming from 'way back at the lock-up. And, swinging round, Tom Clark realised that a party of the Redskins had managed to creep up unseen and were attacking the guard there. Others, riding like the wind, and bearing torches, were coming up to their support.

"More men back there!" yelled Wild Bill; and Tom Clark was amongst the fellows who charged down towards the lock-up.

(The fight is by means over, as Tom Clark is soon to find out. Do not miss next week's long thrilling instalment of this powerful romance of the Wild West.)

AT THE CROSS-ROADS!

(Continued from page 5.)

"This is enough. C-c-come along the passage, will you, Jimmy?"

"Any old thing!"

Wondering a little, Jimmy Silver walked down the Fourth Form passage with his chum. George Raby turned the handle of the door of the first study and flung it wide open.

Peele & Co. started up and stared round. Raby strode in. Some coins were dropped on the study table.

"There you are, you rotters!" said Raby, between his teeth. "There's your dirty money! Now call me again what you called me ten minutes ago, and I'll wade in and smash you up—all three of you!"

Raby waited a few moments for an answer. As none was forthcoming, he turned and tramped out of the study.

Jimmy slipped a hand through his arm.

"Come and get into your footer rig," said Jimmy.

They came on the footer ground, and in a few minutes more Raby was in the practice game, with a lighter heart than he had known for many days, and a brighter face. The cool, keen air, the clean, wholesome game, the cheery, healthy faces—never had Raby enjoyed a game of football as he enjoyed that unimportant practice game.

THE END.

(Next week there will be another splendid long complete story of Jimmy Silver & Co., the chums of Rook-wood, entitled: "TUBBY MUFFIN'S PRIZE!" By Owen Conquest. This story is full of humorous incidents in which Tubby Muffin, the fat boy of the Fourth, takes the most prominent part.)

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SCHOOLBOY VERSUS RUSTLERS!

(Continued from page 22.)

blazed away with his revolver. The bullets chipped and rang on the rocky walls, without even reaching the rustlers; but the footsteps stopped.

Once on the open hillside they tossed aside the disguising black sacks. Lord St. Austells drew nearer to his young companion.

"And you are Frank Richards?" he asked. "But what can you possibly be doing here alone in these wild mountains a hundred miles from your home?"

Frank bit his lip.

Lord St. Austells gave him a quick, searching look; but he nodded, and asked no further questions.

And without further words they started down the rocky hillside, plunging through thickets and tangled rocks and boulders, and the dawn was glittering on the Cascade Mountains by the time they found the trail to Gold Brick Camp.

Weary and footsore, Frank Richards and his companion limped into Gold Brick under the blaze of a noonday sun. Before they sought rest their story was told to the sheriff of Gold Brick, and in a short time a dozen armed men were riding for the retreat of the Black Sack Gang. They found the retreat, but the rustlers had fled in time. The rascals were still free; and Frank Richards, ere he looked his last on the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, was destined to see the Black Sacks again.

THE END.

("HOLDING HIS OWN!" is the title of next Tuesday's stirring long complete story of Frank Richards, the homeless schoolboy of the Backwoods.)