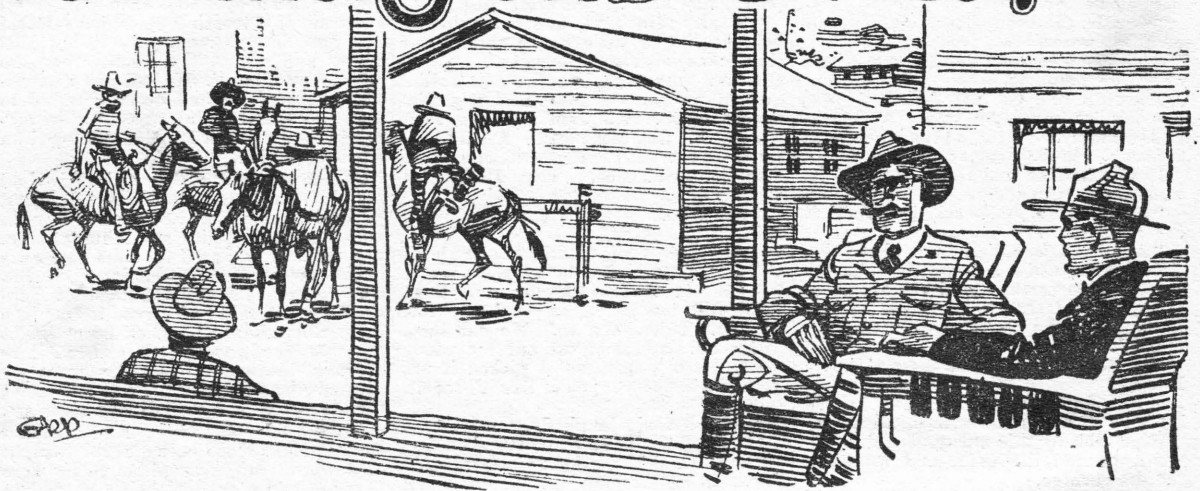


FRANK RICHARDS' TRUST!

Frank Richards has a dangerous job to guard the money entrusted to him

from the attention of the Black Sack Gang!

Holding His Own !



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

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Man Who Watched!

IN the warm summer morning the Gold Brick Hotel was very quiet. In the wooden veranda, Frank Richards sat in a long cane chair, at his ease, resting. Lord St. Austells sat opposite him, smoking a cigar. Frank was looking away towards the peaks of the Cascade Mountains, at the foot of which lay the camp of Gold Brick.

Frank was thinking of the hardships and perils he had passed through, in the foothills of the Cascade range; and wondering, too, whether he would see anything more of the desperate gang of rustlers he had so narrowly escaped from—the Black Sack Gang.

His companion seemed to be buried in thought.

At intervals some "pilgrim" tramped along the sunny street past the lumber hotel. From somewhere in the distance the clang of a miner's pick could be faintly heard. Frank Richards was quite content to sit and look at the play of sunshine and shadow on the hills, and rest; he felt that he had earned a rest.

He glanced lazily at a bunch of horsemen who rode into the rugged, unpaved street, and stopped at a short distance from the hotel. There were four horsemen, in red shirts and Stetson hats, and they looked a rough crowd. But that was not at all uncommon in Gold Brick—rather the reverse. The horsemen dismounted and tethered their beasts, and three of them lounged into a cabin. The fourth, a tall and powerful man with a hard, dark face and short, black beard, came on to the hotel, and passed under the veranda into the bar-room.

Frank Richards gave him no further attention.

But he would have been interested in the black-bearded man if he could have seen that individual's further movements.

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The man stopped at the bar, called for a cocktail, and then lounged carelessly into the smoke-room.

There, out of sight of the Chinaman at the bar, he looked round quickly and cautiously.

The room was empty; a wide-open door gave upon the veranda, and towards that door the black-bearded man moved silently on tiptoe. He did not emerge into the veranda, however. He caught one glimpse of Frank Richards' back, and of Lord St. Austells' profile, and backed quickly out of sight.

Lord St. Austells was speaking. Frank turned his glance from the sunny hills to his companion. Neither was aware of the black-bearded man just inside the doorway, within a few yards of them, listening and watching.

"It's time we had a little explanation, Richards," said Lord St. Austells, removing his cigar.

"Yes," said Frank.

"We met under rather curious circumstances, Richards. You dropped in, like a bolt from the blue, and rescued me from the Black Sack Gang. I needn't say how astonished I was to find that you were Frank Richards, the friend of my nephew Vere Beauclerc, at Cedar Creek. I have heard a good deal about you and your cousin Bob Lawless. I understood that all three of you were at Cedar Creek, the backwoods school in the Thompson Valley."

"We were, until lately," said Frank, colouring.

He dropped his eyes.

The explanation had to come, but he felt a strong inward shrinking from telling Vere Beauclerc's uncle in what circumstances he had left Cedar Creek School. But it could not be helped.

"You are a hundred miles from Cedar Creek now, and apparently quite by yourself," said Lord St. Austells. "I expected to make your acquaintance, my boy, when I arrived in the Thompson Valley, on the visit I intend to make to

my brother. How is it that I find you here—far from your friends, and leading a life of hardship and danger?"

"I'm on my own now," said Frank. "I—I had to leave Cedar Creek—"

"But your uncle—Mr. Lawless—has not abandoned you?"

"Oh, no!"

"I can only conclude," said his lordship gently, "that you have run away from home, Frank. You have followed some foolish impulse, and left your friends."

"I'll tell you," said Frank, his colour deepening. "You'll hear the story soon enough when you get to Thompson. I had to leave Cedar Creek. I—I was suspected—"

"Of what?"

"Of—of—" Frank's voice faltered. "Miss Meadows, our schoolmistress, was robbed of a hundred and ten dollars."

"Richards!"

"It was supposed that—that I—" Frank was crimson now. "I needn't tell you that it was a mistake; that I was innocent."

"I hope not," said Lord St. Austells very gravely. "But surely you would not be condemned without the most complete evidence—"

"There was evidence," said Frank desperately. "The hundred-dollar bill was not found, but the ten-dollar bill was found—in my pocket."

"Oh!"

"How it got there I don't know. Of course, the thief must have put it there," said Frank. "But I was turned out of Cedar Creek, and my uncle decided to send me away to Vancouver—"

"He believed you guilty?"

"Yes," said Frank, wincing.

"Did no one believe in you?" asked Lord St. Austells, his grey, keen eyes fixed on Frank's crimson face.

"My friends did," said Frank. "Vere and Bob—they trusted me against all the evidence. Nobody else, I'm afraid." Lord St. Austells smoked his cigar for

a few minutes in silence. Frank sat quiet.

Inside the smoke-room the black-bearded man stood silent, listening, with a peculiar expression on his face.

Lord St. Austells spoke at last.

"If I had heard this story at Thompson, without having seen you, I think I should probably have taken your uncle's view," said Lord St. Austells.

"I—I suppose so."

"But I cannot forget that you risked your life to save me, a stranger," continued his lordship. "That was not the action of a dishonourable character. I believe in you, Richards. I think you have been the victim of a terrible mistake. And I must help you, somehow, to put matters right."

Frank shook his head sadly.

"I don't think it's possible," he said. "I left Cedar Creek with a stain on my name, and I can't return."

"I shall see, when I arrive at Thompson," said Lord St. Austells, with a smile. "At least, I may be able to convince your uncle, which will be a great step gained."

"But—" said Frank. He hesitated. "I—I don't want Mr. Lawless to know where I am. He would have me searched for, and he has authority to have me taken back. I am determined not to return unless my name is cleared!"

"I shall be discreet," said Lord St. Austells, with a nod. "You need fear nothing on that score. I leave this afternoon. And you will remain here?"

"No; I'm getting out of the mountains," answered Frank.

"You will write to me at Fraser, then, at the post-office, and keep in touch with me?"

"I'll be glad to!" said Frank.

"And I am going to ask a favour of you before we part," continued his lordship. "I have a great deal of money about me, and, after what has happened already, it is scarcely safe until I reach more settled regions. I wish you to take charge of a portion of it."

"Oh!" ejaculated Frank.

"I shall hand you bank-bills for five thousand dollars, which you will return to me later, when we meet again," said Lord St. Austells. "You, a boy, will not be suspected of carrying such a sum, and it will be safe if you keep it concealed. Do you agree?"

"Certainly!" said Frank. "I can put it into my belt, with my own money. But—"

"That is settled, then."

"But, after what I've told you," stammered Frank, "you—you're willing to trust me with a thousand pounds?"

Lord St. Austells smiled.

"Quite!"

"Oh, sir!"

Frank's face was very bright now. "Come to my room, and I will place the money in your hands," said his lordship, rising. "We cannot be too careful in such matters!"

In the smoke-room, the black-bearded man trod away softly, silently, but rapidly. He was gone by the time Frank Richards and Lord St. Austells passed through the room into the house.

Save for one casual glance in the street, Frank had not seen him, and he little dreamed how near to him had been the captain of the Black Sack Gang.

"I guess it's O.K."

It was the black-bearded man who spoke, as he strode into the cabin where the three horsemen had stopped, in the rugged street of Gold Brick.

The three ruffians were sprawling about the room, smoking and playing

poker, while they waited for the man who was evidently their leader.

"All serene, cap'n?" asked one of the gang.

"You bet!"

"They're at the hotel, I reckon?"

"Both of them," said the captain of the Black Sacks. "But I reckon it wouldn't be easy to rope in his dandy lordship again. I've heard that he's starting from Gold Brick this afternoon, with a party on the southern trail, and I guess there'd be too many for us to tackle."

There was a muttering of curses among the ruffians.

"Then the game's up?" grunted one of them. "When the Jim-dandy is out of the foothills, there ain't any chance of playing the kidnapping stunt and squeezing a ransom out of him."

"There ain't!" agreed the captain. "But I reckon I've got on to a soft cinch, all the same. I heard them talking. The kid's staying in Gold Brick after the pesky nobleman goes, and he's leaving later—on his own."

"I guess I'd like to drive lead into him, cap'n, for the trick he played us, but I reckon he ain't worth our trouble."

"You haven't heard it all yet, Red Pete. His lordship is handing him his money to take care of, in case the Black Sacks drop down on him again. He reckons it won't be suspected that a schoolboy kid has got five thousand dollars hidden about his duds."

The trio of ruffians leaped to their feet as if electrified.

"Five thousand dollars!" exclaimed Red Pete.

"Sure!"

"By Jerusalem!"

"I heard them talking it over," said the captain coolly. "And I reckon we can afford to let his lordship slide, and keep our eye on the kid. He's going to pay for butting into our game and getting the Jim-dandy out of our hands, and it's worth five thousand dollars to us. He hasn't done with the Black Sacks yet."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Direct Peril!

"GOOD-BYE, Frank!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

The time had come for parting between the two who had met so strangely in the wilds of the Cascade Mountains of British Columbia.

Lord St. Austells would gladly have taken Frank Richards with him, but that the wandering schoolboy steadily refused.

His lordship was bound for Thompson, and Frank was determined that he never would set his foot in the valley again until his name was cleared.

Frank had resolved to stay for a couple of days longer at Gold Brick. He had lost his horse in the adventure with the Black Sacks, and he had to buy another, and he was in no hurry to take the trail again; his time was his own for the present.

But Lord St. Austells was anxious to rejoin the party of his friends who had gone on to Fraser. His lordship started from Gold Brick in a buggy, with a party of miners who were going on the same trail. His narrow escape from the Black Sack Gang had taught him caution.

Frank Richards waved him good-bye as the buggy and the horsemen vanished down the rugged trail.

Deep in thought, Frank Richards passed the lumber hotel, and walked on up the rugged street of Gold Brick.

At a quarter of a mile from the hotel the street ended in a hoof-printed trail, winding away into the foothills.

Miners' cabins were dotted here and there, and rough shacks and zinc sheds; but the farther the schoolboy went, the fewer grew the buildings, and, ahead of him at last were the bare hill-slopes. There Frank Richards turned to walk back. He came almost face to face, as he turned, with a thickest squat man, whose harsh face was adorned by a red beard and moustaches. Frank glanced at the man, realising by a sort of instinct that he was being watched.

His heart beat faster.

He remembered the Black Sack Gang. When the rustlers had removed the disguising black sacks they wore on the trail, there was nothing to prevent them from walking the streets of Gold Brick unsuspected. Something cautious and watchful in the red-faced man's look warned Frank that the fellow had been following him.

Although now outside the mining camp, Frank was in full sight of the street, and he felt that he was too near the camp for the ruffian to attempt open hostility, if his intentions were really hostile.

He walked back into Gold Brick, keeping a very wary eye open in the direction of Red Pete, without appearing to do so.

He was not surprised when the ruffian swung round and followed him back into the town.

Frank passed into the Gold Brick Hotel, and Red Pete lounged into the bar, and called for a drink.

From the veranda, a few minutes later, Frank saw him loaf away to a cabin a stone-throw distant—the cabin where he had seen the four horsemen stop that morning.

He joined the black-bearded man in the doorway, and they went in together.

Frank Richards stood very still in the pinewood veranda, thinking hard.

His suspicions were more than aroused now.

The red-faced man had been following and watching him; he was assured of that. If he had gone far beyond the limits of the town he would have been attacked, if his suspicions were well-founded. The only conclusion was that the four horsemen he had seen were members of the Black Sack Gang—undisguised now. What did they want?

Lord St. Austells was gone, and as they had not followed him, it seemed pretty clear that they had given up their design of kidnapping the English nobleman and holding him to ransom.

Frank had baffled them in that design once, and they were not renewing it, though pretty certainly they would have done so if his lordship had ridden alone out of Gold Brick.

Now they were hanging on in the camp, and watching Frank Richards. Was their object simply revenge for the defeat he had inflicted on them?

Whatever their object might be, Frank realised that he had to be very wary.

Fastened up in his belt were his own four hundred dollars and the five thousand dollars in bank-bills that Lord St. Austells had entrusted to his keeping.

At the bare thought of losing that sum of money Frank felt a sinking of the heart.

Frank set his teeth. If the Black Sack Gang succeeded in getting their pifering hands on Lord St. Austells' money, it would not be while Frank Richards was alive to defend it.

He had intended to buy a horse in

the camp, and ride out of Gold Brick in a day or two openly on the trail. That plan was abandoned now. He knew that as soon as he quitted the camp the Black Sacks would ride after him, and once out on the lonely trails he would be at their mercy.

He thought of visiting the sheriff, but gave up that idea. He had no proof to offer that the men in Red Pete's cabin were the rustlers who on the mountain trails disguised themselves with black sacks and held up hapless passengers.

The landlord of the Gold Brick Hotel came into the veranda to smoke a pipe as the sun went down, and Frank talked to him for a time, and learned what he could of the cabin down the street and its occupants.

It belonged to Red Pete, who was generally absent "prospecting" in the mountains. The other men there were his comrades, and also prospectors.

Sometimes they brought in "dust" to sell at the store, and sometimes a horse to sell, and the landlord winked as he made that statement, implying that Red Pete & Co. were not particular where they obtained a horse when they sold it.

They were a rough crowd, the landlord informed him, and better kept clear of, but evidently he had no suspicion that they were connected with the Black Sack Gang.

Generally when they were in camp they were good customers at the bar-room of the Gold Brick, and sometimes the sheriff had had to deal with them for kicking up shindies. That was all the landlord knew or cared to tell.

But it was enough for Frank.

As the sun sank lower, the landlord went to his business, and Frank was left alone to think out his problem.

His enemies were close at hand, and what their next move might be he could not guess. But he knew that the night before him would be one of terrible peril.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Night of Terror!

FRANK RICHARDS retired to his room that night at an early hour.

He had glanced into the bar-room, and seen the black-bearded man there, with Red Pete and two other companions. They were playing poker at a table in the corner, and apparently had settled down till closing-time.

But when Frank glanced in again later, he noted that one place at the poker-table was vacant. Red Pete had gone out.

In his room at the back of the lumber building Frank fastened the bolt of the door, and set down his candle.

There was one window to the room—innocent of glass, which was an unknown luxury in the windows at Gold Brick.

It was closed by a wooden shutter that fastened with a bolt, and it was about five feet from the ground.

Forcing the window would have been child's play to anyone operating from outside.

Was that the intention of the rustlers?

He knew that they were on the watch, and that he could not leave the hotel without being observed. He looked from the window into the dim moonlight on the waste ground behind the building.

If he had stepped from the window he knew that a bullet might have sped

from the shadows. It was not only his money-belt but his life that was sought by the revengeful rustlers, he was assured of that.

He fastened the window-shutter, and sat down on the plank-bed to think. The bed was of a primitive kind—a plank with a couple of blankets on it, and a sack of straw for a pillow.

To sleep was out of the question, and Frank shivered at the thought that he would have turned in to sleep without misgiving, but for the discovery he had made that afternoon.

He extinguished his candle at last, as the thought came to him that he might be watched through some chink in the rough pine shutters.

That there were plenty of chinks was evident, for as soon as the candle was out glimmers of moonlight showed at the window.

Frank rolled up his own blanket and placed it, with his wallet, in the bed under the two blankets there, arranging the whole to look like the form of a sleeper.

Then he retired into the furthest corner of the room, and sat on the pine-wood stool that was almost the only other article of furniture.

He sat and waited.

The hour grew later, but the suppressed excitement in his breast banished all desire for sleep.

The din from the bar-room grew fainter, and at last ceased altogether, and there was a sound of shutting and barring doors.

The lumber hotel had closed for the night.

Still Frank Richards waited, wrapped in darkness, with his revolver in his hand resting on his knee.

Faint sounds came through the night—the deep snore of some fellow guest in an adjoining room, the howl of a hungry dog looking for garbage in the waste ground by the building.

Frank started suddenly, with a thrill at his heart.

Outside his shuttered window came a faint but unmistakable sound—that of a cautious footfall.

He had not been mistaken.

The Black Sacks knew which room he occupied. They had ascertained that during the day, and now that the place was sleeping they had come.

His heart throbbed at the thought that four desperate ruffians were lurking without in the shadows, and that only the frail pine shutter separated him from their vengeance.

But his hand was firm upon the butt of his revolver. He was not sleeping, as they believed; he was wakeful and ready.

He made no sound, but listened intently.

There was a movement of the shutter at last.

His eyes had long grown accustomed to the dimness. He caught the glimmer of a broad blade thrust in to force the clumsy wooden bolt that secured the shutters.

Creak!

The sound would not have awakened him if he had been sleeping; but now, to his straining ears, it seemed almost like thunder in the dead stillness of the room.

Creak!

Cra-ck!

The shutter swung softly open.

Faint moonlight streamed in at the opening and fell across the plank bed.

But it did not reach Frank, in the further corner, where he sat in deep shadow.

A Stetson hat showed up, shadowy, in the opening, and two glittering eyes looked into the room. Dim as the light was, Frank made out the black beard of the man he suspected to be the captain of the Black Sack Gang.

"All O.K., cap'n?" came a faint, husky whisper from behind.

"I guess so, Pete."

"He's thar?"

"I can see him in the bed."

"Good!"

Frank Richards smiled grimly. The black-bearded man made out the outlines of the dummy sleeper in the bed, and he was satisfied.

His arms came over the pinewood window-frame, and he climbed quietly in—very quietly for a man of his bulk. The pinewood creaked, and that was all.

Beyond him, Frank caught glimpses of three fierce faces, with eyes that caught the moonlight and glittered.

Frank drew a deep breath. Still unseen, he raised his revolver, and the muzzle bore full upon the black-bearded man as he climbed in.

The ruffian stepped into the room.

There was a knife in his hand that gave a cold, ghastly glistening as the moonlight caught it. The rascal made one step towards the bed. At the same moment Frank Richards pulled trigger, aiming low.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

He pumped out four bullets in as many seconds.

There was a fearful yell in the silence of the night, and the crash of a heavy fall, as the black-bearded man went down, his legs riddled with bullets.

The firing and the yelling of the wounded man rang through the lumber hotel from end to end.

Outside the open window there was a buzz of startled and confused voices.

"He's awake——"

"Captain——"

"By thunder——"

As the black-bearded man lay groaning on the floor, Frank turned his revolver upon the open window, and fired twice again rapidly.

Crack! Crack!

A shrill howl answered the shots, and there was a trample of retreating feet. Three startled ruffians had fled, one of them wounded. The lumber hotel was alarmed now—voices were shouting on all sides. It was time for the Black Sacks to flee. But there was one who could not flee—the black-bearded man, who lay crippled on the floor, unable to move.

There was a crash at Frank's door, and the voice of the landlord roared to him:

"Say, what's this game? Let me in?"

Frank threw open the door hastily.

The landlord strode in with a lamp in his hand, and five or six half-dressed guests of the hotel, mostly with weapons in their hands, crowded behind him. Frank hastily flung the window-shutter close. With a light in the room he was exposed to fire from without; and the next minute proved that his precaution was well taken. From the night came the ringing of a revolver, and a bullet crashed on the shutter.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the landlord as he stared at the wounded man on the floor. "What's this jamboree, young man?"

"You can see," answered Frank quietly. "He came in at the window with a knife in his hand——"

"By Jerusalem!"

"I believe he is the captain of the Black Sack Gang," went on Frank,

"but, anyhow, you can see what he intended."

"By gum, that's clear enough! It's Black Jack Saunders!" said the landlord, staring down at the wretch at his feet. "I guess he was a bad egg—a real bad egg! But he's got the medicine he wanted now."

There was a deep groan from the black-bearded man. He turned a savage glare upon Frank Richards, and made a feeble motion towards the revolver in his belt. The landlord kicked his feeble hand back without ceremony.

"I guess not," he said. "Hyer, you, Bill, you go and wake up the sheriff. I calculate this is his business."

There was a crash of another bullet on the shutter. It was the last word of the Black Sack Gang. While Black Jack Sanders lay crippled and a prisoner in the camp calaboose, his three comrades dragged out their horses and rode away at top speed into the mountains to save their necks.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Old Chums!

IT was some days later that Frank Richards quitted Gold Brick.

He was safe now from his foes; the captain of the Black Sacks was in safe keeping, and his comrades were many a long mile from the place. They were known now, and they were not likely to venture again within a day's ride of the camp.

Frank Richards, with a new horse and a light heart, rode out of Gold Brick on the southern trail, with Lord St. Austells' five thousand dollars safe in his belt.

Every mile that he placed between himself and the wild foothills increased his satisfaction.

He was glad enough when he reached the settlements again, where law and order reigned, and it was no longer necessary to go "heeled."

He had had good luck, upon the whole, at the diggings in the foothills, but he was glad to see the last of them.

He was anxious, too, to be rid of the large sum of money that he carried in his belt; it was a weight upon his mind so long as it was in his keeping. As soon as he "struck" a railroad town Frank stopped at the post-office, and thence he despatched a letter to Fraser to the address Lord St. Austells had given him. In that letter was a draft for the five thousand dollars, and Frank was glad to see it go.

He gave his own address as "Post-Office, Albert Station," and put up at a cheap lodging to wait for Lord St. Austells' reply.

It was not long in coming.

Frank called every day at the post-office for letters, and at last there was one for him.

It was from his lordship, and Frank Richards read it with considerable interest. It ran:

"Fraser, Continental Hotel.

"My Dear Richards,—I received your letter to-day, enclosing the draft for five thousand dollars.

"I am very glad to hear that you are safe and sound, and that the money I placed in your keeping did not lead you into any danger."

Frank Richards grinned over this line. He had not related in his letter to Lord St. Austells any of the happenings at Gold Brick after his lordship had left. The letter continued:

"I am glad, too, that you have left the mountains, and are now in safer and more civilised quarters. I hope

you will remain where you are until you hear further from me."

"Now I am going to make a confession. Although I believed every word of the story you told me in the hotel in Gold Brick, I felt that it was necessary to have some indisputable proof. That proof I have now obtained. The five thousand dollars I left with you was not placed in your hands merely for safe keeping—though doubtless it was safer with you than with me while I was in the mountains. I had another object.

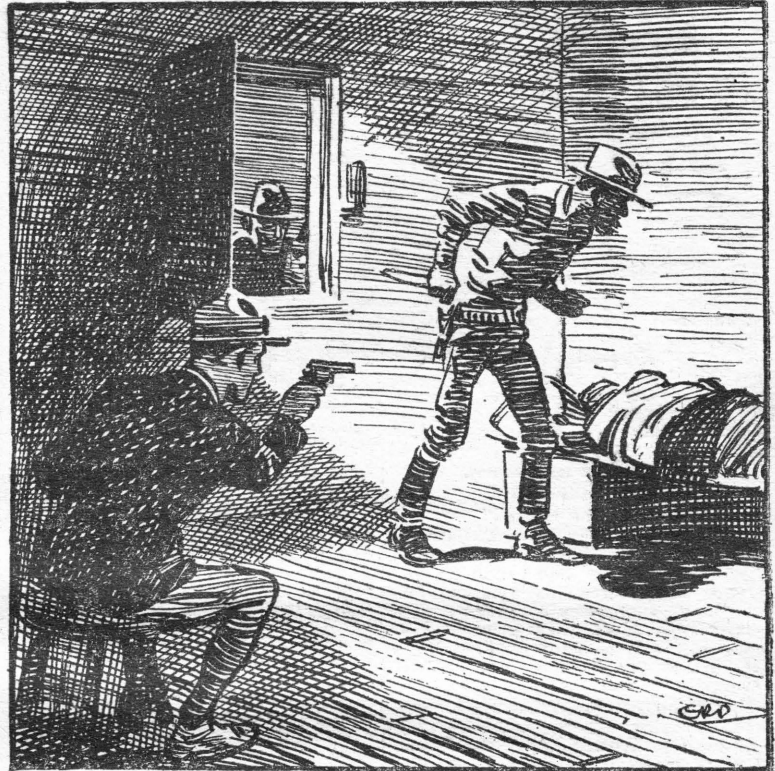
"You were suspected at Cedar Creek

wrinkled with thought as he read, but there was a new light in his eyes. It had not even occurred to him that Lord St. Austells, in placing the large sum of money in his hands, had been putting him to the test.

But he had been put to the test, and he had not failed.

Frank Richards was not out of the wood yet, but he felt that the clouds were lifting.

After thinking the matter out he determined to remain at Albert Station until he heard again from Lord St.



THE TERROR OF THE NIGHT! Still unseen by the intruders, Frank Richards raised his revolver and the muzzle bore full upon the black-bearded man as he climbed in. There was a knife in the ruffian's hand that glistened as the moonlight caught it. The rascal made one step towards the bed, and then Frank pulled the trigger. (See Chapter 3.)

of purloining the hundred dollars that were missing. I have now proof that you are incapable of taking a much larger sum. You were quite at liberty, if you had chosen, to keep the five thousand dollars I left with you. You have returned it to me of your own accord.

"I am going on from here to Thompson, and I shall call at once upon your uncle at the Lawless Ranch, show him your letter, and tell him what I know of you.

"I think this should have the effect of convincing him that you are incapable of the action attributed to you, and that a terrible mistake has been made. This will be the first step towards proving your innocence. When Mr. Lawless is convinced that you have been sinned against instead of sinning, he will certainly take measures to clear your name. At all events, we must hope for the best.

"I shall write again from Thompson as soon as I can.

"With kindest regards,

"ST. AUSTELLS."

Frank Richards read that letter over twice, sitting in the sunshine at Albert Station, with trains shunting on the track before him. His brow was

Austells. His money was diminishing, and he looked for a job on the railway to keep him going. And every day he called at the post-office for the expected letter.

The letter did not come. But one day, as Frank quitted the post-office, he heard the clatter of hoofs, and looked along the sunny street. And his heart leaped. Two youths were riding up the street whose faces he well knew. They caught sight of him at the same moment.

"Frank!"

"Franky! Hurrah!" roared Bob Lawless.

The next moment the two riders had leaped from their saddles and rushed at him, and Frank Richards was fairly hugged on the sunny side-walk, under the eyes of a dozen astonished citizens of Albert Station. His old chums had found him at last.

THE END.

(Look out for another thrilling long complete story of Frank Richards, the Backwoods schoolboy, next week, entitled, "Right at Last!" in which Frank makes a dramatic return to Cedar Creek to clear his name.)

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