

The OUTCAST of CEDAR CREEK

by Martin Clifford



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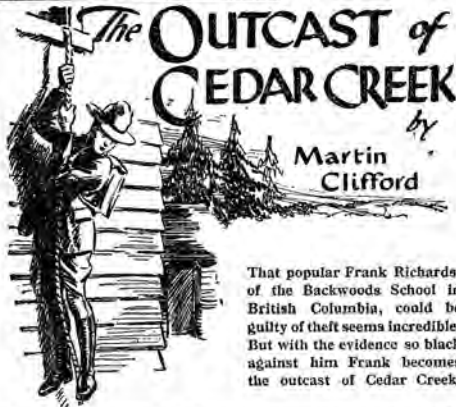
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That popular Frank Richards, of the Backwoods School in British Columbia, could be guilty of theft seems incredible. But with the evidence so black against him Frank becomes the outcast of Cedar Creek.

CHAPTER I.

Ten Dollars Wanted!

"NICEY ole Flanky!" Yen Chin, the Chinese of Cedar Creek, spoke in his softest and most wheedling tones.

Frank Richards was wary at once.

When the Cedar Creek heathen assumed that manner which was "child-like and bland" it was evident that the heathen wanted something—probably something that he shouldn't have.

"Well?" said Frank.

He stopped good-naturedly. Bob Lawless and Vere Beauchere were going

down to the frozen creek, skates in hand—and Frank Richards was following them when Yen Chin came along. The little heathen blinked at Frank with serious and solemn almond eyes.

"Niccy ole Flanky Richards——"

"Cut that out!" suggested Frank, with a grin. "What do you want, Yen Chin? Come to the point!"

"Poor hill' Yen Chin likey ole Flanky vely muchee," said the Chinese. "Ole Flanky vely good boy."

"I wish I could say the same of you," answered Frank. "But leave out the soft sawder!"

"Handsome ole Flanky——"

"Chuck it, I tell you!" exclaimed Frank. "Look here, I want to skate! If you've got anything to say, get it off your chest! Have you been getting into trouble again?"

"Poor lil' Chinee in great trouble," said Yen Chin sadly. "Nicey ole Planky helpee."

"I thought that was coming!" said Frank Richards grimly. "Well, what's the trouble? Have you been playing poker again and losing your money?"

"No playee poker, Plomise Planky nevey playee poker no more," said Yen Chin. "Keepee plomise, allee same white man."

"I hope so," said Frank, rather dubiously. "Well, if it isn't that, what is it?"

"Poor lil' Chinee lossee ten-dollor note!"

"Phew!"

"Ten dollor lot money," said Yen tearfully. "Chinee flaid goey home and sayee lossee money. Me goey dlownee in creek, me tinkee!"

"Don't talk rot, kid!" said Frank Richards gruffly. "How did it happen?"

Yen Chin explained in a faltering voice.

"Fathet givee Yen Chin ten-dollor payee at Gunten Store when comee to school. Wind blowee notee way. Chinee looker, no findes. Flaid to goey home and tell John Chin. Lickes with stiap, you bet. Me tinkes run away."

"You young ass!" said Frank. "You'd better tell your father exactly what's happened!"

Yen Chin shook his head.

"Flaid tellee. Whackee pool lil' Yen Chin. S'possee nicey ole Planky lendee Yen Chin ten dollor?" suggested the Chinee. "Chinee fludee notee some time and givee backee to Planky. What you tinkes?"

Frank Richards hesitated.

Ten dollars was a considerable sum to a schoolboy at Cedar Creek, though it happened that Frank had, at that moment, a ten-dollar note in his pocket, payment received for his weekly story in the "Thompson Press" from Mr. Isaacs.

He could not help wondering whether Yen Chin was aware of that fact, though Frank was not, as a rule, suspicious. But Yen Chin was not exactly a trustworthy youth.

The little Chinee watched his face.

"Planky no gottee money?" he asked. "If Planky no gottee money, no can give. Allee light!"

At which Frank Richards felt rather ashamed of his half-formed suspicion. Apparently the little heathen did not know anything about the ten-dollar note the schoolboy author had received from Mr. Isaacs.

"Are you coming, Frank?" bawled Bob Lawless from the bank of the creek.

"I'm coming!" called back Frank.

"Well, get a move on, then! We haven't much time before dark!"

"Don't wait for me, Bob!"

The rancher's son was putting on his skates, but he dropped them again and came back up the trail.

"What's on?" he demanded. "What's Yen Chin trying to get out of you, you soft-hearted jay? Is he pulling your silly leg again?"

"Handsome ole Bob——"

"Stow that, Yen Chin!" said Bob Lawless gruffly. "That sort of chin-mistake cuts no ice with me! What does he want, Frank?"

Frank Richards explained, rather uncomfortably. Bob Lawless gave a grunt.

"Rats!" he said.

"But——" began Frank.

"You're not going to give Yen your ten dollars!" said Bob Lawless decidedly. "He's up to some of his heathen games again. He's been playing fan-tan at the Chinese joint in Thompson and losing his money; and that's about the truth of it. I don't believe for a minute that he's lost ten dollars."

"But——"

"You're too soft, Frank. You'd believe any yarn that was spun you!" growled Bob. "Look here, Yen Chin! When did you lose that ten-dollar note?"

"When me comee to school," said Yen Chin, "wind blowee away."

"Where?"

"Neal Gunten Store, in Main Street."

"Your father gave it to you to pay an account at the store—eh?"

"Yes."

"And you were carrying it in your hand on a windy morning?"

"Yes."

"More jay you!" growled Bob Lawless. "You want to be licked for it, and if your father licks you it will be a lesson for next time. Keep your ten dollars in your pocket, Frank!"

"But I say—" murmured Frank Richards.

"I guess it's only a yarn, and he hasn't lost any ten dollars!" growled Bob. "I know that pesky heathen. He's had us before. But I'll tell you what. We'll ride home through Thompson, and ask at John Chin's laundry. If he really gave the kid a ten-dollar bill to take to Gunten's store this morning we'll lend Yen Chin the money."

Yen Chin looked alarmed.

"No teller John Chin!" he exclaimed.

"And why not?"

"Whackee pool lill! Chinee."

"I guess I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be whacked. If you've lost ten dollars," said Bob Lawless. "I guess I'd sure larrup you if you'd lost ten dollars of mine. But we'll ask John Chin to let you off if we make up the loss."

"No teller John Chin. No wantee."

"Nope!" said Bob. "Because you haven't lost ten dollars at all, and you're trying to stick Frank for his little bill, to play fan-tan."

"He doesn't know I've got ten dollars," said Frank.

"I guess he does, because he was hanging round when Chunky Todgers was trying to touch you for it this morning," answered Bob.

"Oh!" ejaculated Frank.

"I guess you're too soft for Canada, Frank," said Bob Lawless. "You wouldn't have a red cent to bless yourself with if I didn't keep an eye on you. Chunky nearly had your ten-dollar bill

this morning, and now you want to give it to this pesky heathen."

"I don't want to. But——"

"Well, we'll ride home by Thompson, and ask John Chin," said the rancher's son. "If the ten is really lost we'll make it up. Can't say fairer than that."

Frank Richards nodded.

"That's all right," he said. "I'm sorry, Yen Chin, but you're such a blessed prevaricator, you know. It's a go!"

The pathetic, appealing look vanished from the heathen's face at once.

He grinned.

"No go to John Chin!" he said. "Ugly ole Bob pesky blute. You go and choppee chips!"

And Yen Chin backed away from the chums of Cedar Creek, Bob Lawless gave a snort.

"What did I tell you?" he growled.

"He's owning up now!"

"Ugly ole Bob——"

"I guess——"

"You young rascal!" exclaimed Frank Richards wrathfully. "So you were pulling my leg, after all!"

"What you tinket?" said Yen Chin coolly.

"Why, I'll—I'll——"

The heathen Chinee jumped away and ran.

Frank Richards drew a deep breath.

"Come on, you old ass!" said Bob Lawless, grinning. "I guess you were born to have your leg pulled, Franky. Come and get your skates on!"

"The young rascal! I should never have thought——"

"You never do, old scout! Come on!"

And the chums joined Vere Beauclerc and ran out on the ice, and soon forgot all about the heathen Chinee and his wiles.

CHAPTER 2.

The Heathen's Light

"HALLO! What is Hopkins up to?"

It was the following morning and Frank Richards & Co. were

riding up the trail to Cedar Creek when they came in sight of Harold Hopkins. The Cockney schoolboy seemed very busy on the trail. He was poking among the larches and frozen thickets with a long stick, as if in search of something.

He glanced up as the three chums came trotting by, and they pulled in their horses.

"Lost anything?" asked Beauclerc.

"Well, I 'aven't exactly," answered Hopkins, "but I'm looking for a ten-dollar note."

"I guess you'll never find it, anyhow," said Bob Lawless, with a grin. "You've been done, you ass!"

"Ow!" demanded Hopkins.

"Yen Chin never had a ten-note. Has he stuck you for ten dollars to play fan-tan?"

"Yes. Oh, my 'at!" ejaculated Hopkins.

Yen Chin had found the Cockney a much easier victim than Frank Richards—though, indeed, he would have victimised Frank but for Bob Lawless' intervention.

"If it's been a-pulling of my leg," said Hopkins, "I'll give 'im a jolly good 'iding! But 'ow do you know?"

Bob chuckled.

"Because he sprang the same yarn on Franky yesterday, only he lost the ten-dollar bill in Main Street at Thompson," he answered.

"The 'orrid little rogue!" exclaimed Hopkins.

Frank Richards & Co. rode on to the school, and Harold Hopkins followed them, giving up his vain search for the ten-dollar bill that did not exist.

Yen Chin was in the playground, and he greeted Frank Richards & Co. with a grin as they dismounted. Harold Hopkins bore down on him at once.

"You 'orrid little 'eathen——" he began.

"Whatee matter?" asked Yen Chin.

"You stuck me for ten dollars yesterday, with a yarn about losing a bill!" exclaimed Hopkins. "You was a-pulling of my leg!"

"You bet he was!" chimed in Chunky Todgers, with a chuckle. "I saw him going into the Chinese joint at Thompson after school. He was going to play fan-tan. I guess, with your ten dollars, Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll take it out of his 'ide!" said Hopkins.

Yen Chin backed away.

"No whackee pool ill! Chinese!" he exclaimed. "Me payee!"

Hopkins sniffed suspiciously.

"Pay up, then, before I wallop you!" he said.

Yen Chin shoved his hand into his loose garments, and, to the astonishment of the Cedar Creek fellows, drew out a little roll of bills. There were at least a dozen fives and tens in the roll.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Bob Lawless. "Have you been robbing the Thompson Bank, Yen Chin?"

Chunky Todgers blinked at the bills with fascinated eyes.

"Where did you get all that dust?" he gasped.

"Hele you' ten doller," said Yen Chin, carelessly detaching a bill and handing it to the astonished Hopkins. "Allee light?"

"My honny 'at!" said Hopkins, as he took the bill. "Is it a good one?"

"Looks all right—good Canadian," said Bob Lawless. "Where did you get it, Yen Chin?"

"Lill' Chinese velly rich now," said Yen Chin loftily. "Winnee muchee moneey playee fan-tan, you bet!"

"You young rascal!" said Frank Richards.

"Ole Franky velly silly ole dankey!" said the heathen. "No wantee ten doller from silly ole Franky now! Yah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So you've been gambling?" said Beauclerc.

"What you tinket! All Chinese play fan-tan," said Yen Chin. "Me winnee lot doller. Me rich. Go again and winnee mole! Oh, yes! Yen Chin velly clever ill! lascal! What you tinket?"

And the Chinese strolled away, evidently highly satisfied with himself.

Apparently he had had luck at the fan-tan game in the Chinese "joint," and he was far from understanding that he had been guilty of any wrongdoing. Yen Chin's ideas and beliefs were quite Oriental, and it was probable that he never would catch on to the morality of the white man. Though for that matter, white men as well as yellow went to the Chinese joint to gamble.

Frank Richards & Co. put up their horses and walked across to the lumber schoolhouse. Frank was looking very thoughtful. More than once he had taken the heathen Chinese in hand and tried to instill into his mind some useful precepts; but it had been uphill work. Yen Chin was always ready to make a "promise," but keeping it was quite another matter. As for telling the truth, Yen Chin was a true Oriental—he was absolutely indifferent on that point. Truth and falsehood came just the same to him—indeed, he seemed to have rather a preference for falsehood, which appealed to his wily nature.

"The young ass!" said Frank. "If Jalse Meadows should hear of this, he will get into an awful row. He ought to be jolly well licked. It's no good speaking to him, I suppose."

"Try it," grinned Bob.

Frank Richards did try it, but without much success.

CHAPTER 3.

Yen Chin Takes the Wind!

FRANK RICHARDS again bestowed some attention on Yen Chin the next day. He was rather concerned about the young rascal, though he realized that it was useless to talk to him. For Yen Chin's own sake he hoped that his luck at fan-tan would not last. As soon as the heathen had lost his ill-gotten dollars he would have to stop. Frank noticed, at morning lessons, that the little heathen was looking extremely doleful, and he guessed that the run of luck had not lasted. When the Cedar Creek fellows came out

the Celestial sidled up to Frank with an ingratiating grin.

"Pool lill' Chinee in trouble," he said pathetically.

"You've lost your money?" asked Frank.

"Losee all!"

"All the better for you," said Frank Richards.

"Ma Jasee ten doller note, too," said Yen Chin. "Win' blowee away on thail this morning."

"What?" gasped Frank.

"Fathel givee me ten doller to payee at Gunten Store, and wind blowee away. Plaid to goey home."

"My hat!"

"Nicey ole Planky lendee Yen Chin ten doller!" said the heathen hopefully.

"You cheeky young rascal!" roared Frank, in great wrath. "Do you think you can take me in again with the same yarn?"

"Lill' Chinee teller truth!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Nicey ole Planky! Yawahoop!" howled Yen Chin, as Frank Richards took him by the collar and shook him. "Lettee goey! Ow! Wow! No slinke pool lill' Chinee!"

"Shake! Shake!"

"Oh! Ow! Woop!" roared Yen Chin. "Nastee ole bluttee, you lettee goey! Silly ole donkey! Ow!"

"Taud!"

Frank Richards planted his boot behind the heathen Chinese. He was wrathful, and, like the prophet of old, he felt that he did well to be angry. His kindness to the young rascal had simply led Yen Chin to believe that he was "soft," and could be imposed upon with any flimsy yarn. Naturally, that was exasperating to a youth who was conscious that his tender heart sometimes betrayed him into weakness. He gave the heathen the full benefit of his boot, and Yen Chin's howls rang across the playground.

Unfortunately Mr. Slimmey came out of the schoolhouse just then.

"Richards!" exclaimed the master,

Frank let go the Celestial as if he had suddenly become red-hot.

"Yes, sir!" he stammered.

"Ooooooooooooo!" roared Yen Chin, doubling up as if in great anguish. "Kickee pool lill' Chineee velly hard! Ooooooooooh!"

"Richards, how dare you kick that little fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Slimmey angrily.

Frank Richards crimsoned.

Certainly he could not explain Yen Chin's tortuous rascality to the master. The results to Yen Chin would have been too serious. He crimsoned and stammered.

Mr. Slimmey looked at him very severely.

"I am surprised at this, Richards. I had not expected it of you."

"I—I—" stuttered Frank.

"Ooooooh!" howled Yen Chin.

"I cannot pass this over," said Mr. Slimmey. "Go into Miss Meadows' sitting-room, Richards, and wait for her. When she comes in, tell her that I have sent you to be caned."

"Oh, sir! I—"

"Go at once!" said Mr. Slimmey, with an impatient wave of the hand.

With a crimson face Frank Richards went into the lumber schoolhouse.

Mr. Slimmey turned kindly to the heathen.

"Are you much hurt, Yen Chin?" he asked.

"Ooooooooooh!" wailed Yen Chin. "Pool lill' Chineee velly muchee bad hurt. Ooooooooooh!"

"Richards will be caned severely," said Mr. Slimmey, and he walked on, feeling quite angry with the unfortunate Frank.

As soon as his back was turned, Yen Chin's anguish ceased all of a sudden. His agonised face relaxed into a grin, and he put his thumb to his nose and extended his fingers towards the unconscious master's back. That was Yen Chin's gratitude for Mr. Slimmey's kindly intervention.

Meanwhile, Frank Richards went into the Canadian schoolmistress' study.

Miss Meadows was not there; she was busy in the household department with Black Dinah, the cook.

Frank had to wait.

It was not agreeable for him. Mr. Slimmey's error was exasperating enough, and it was still more annoying that Miss Meadows should be made to suppose that he had bullied the little heathen. But there seemed to be no help for it.

His wait in the sitting-room was a long one. Miss Meadows did not know that he was there, and she did not come.

As Mr. Slimmey had commanded him to wait for her, Frank could not go; and he waited restlessly.

There was a Montreal magazine lying on Miss Meadows' desk, which was open. Frank picked it up to pass the time by reading it.

A little yellow face grinned in at him at the doorway.

"Silly ole Planky gettee Hekee!" said Yen Chin.

Frank glanced at him with a frown. "Get out, you young rascal!" he snapped.

"You gettee muchee likkee, me glad!" said Yen Chin.

"By Jove, I'll—"

Frank Richards started towards the little heathen angrily.

Yen Chin chuckled, and scuttled away into the school-room across the passage. Frank returned to the schoolmistress' desk and took up the Montreal magazine again.

It was close on dinner-time now, and Frank could hear the Cedar Creek crowd gathering in the dining-room.

He debated in his mind whether he should wait any longer. He had waited nearly half an hour already, and he doubted whether Miss Meadows would come in now before dinner. She was much more likely to go direct from the kitchen into the dining-room—and certainly Frank could not wait on and miss his dinner.

He decided to chance it at last, and

he quitted the room and went down the passage.

From the school-room doorway two almond eyes watched him go, though Frank did not observe them.

The passage was clear, and Yen Chin stole out of the school-room and crossed to the study doorway.

With a tread as stealthy as a cat's, the little heathen came into the room.

He stood for a moment listening.

The Cedar Creek fellows were crowding into the dining-room by the door on the playground, and Frank Richards had joined them.

From the kitchen the little heathen could hear Miss Meadows' voice, addressing Black Dinah.

His eyes glinted.

He turned swiftly to the schoolmistress' desk, against which Frank had been leaning while he read the magazine.

His nimble fingers ran quickly through it.

Yen Chin was not even thinking of the rascality of what he was doing. He was thinking of the "fan-tan" game at the Chinese joint—the gambling fever was in his Oriental blood. At the back of his mind was the knowledge that the blame of his action would not fall upon himself, but he did not actually think it out.

The heathen was not more than two minutes at the desk.

Then he trod stealthily to the door and peered out cautiously into the passage.

It was clear; and he scuttled across swiftly into the school-room. A minute later he emerged into the playground by the door at the other end of the long school-room.

A few minutes more, and Yen Chin joined the crowd going in to dinner, with a perfectly calm and composed face. Hidden in the wood-pile, to be taken away later, was a hundred-dollar bill he had abstracted from Miss Meadows' desk. And there was a calm and placid smile on Yen Chin's face as he dropped into a seat at the dining-table beside Frank Richards. In the

palm of his yellow hand was a ten-dollar note, also taken from Miss Meadows' desk. Before dinner was over that ten-dollar note was reposing in Frank's jacket-pocket.

And Yen Chin smiled serenely.

CHAPTER 4.

A Startling Accusation!

MISS MEADOWS came into the school-room to take her class that afternoon with a slight frown on her brow. Frank Richards noted it, and as he had seen Mr. Slimmey speaking to the Canadian schoolmistress, he guessed the cause. He was not surprised when Miss Meadows called him out.

"Richards!"

"Yes, Miss Meadows?"

"Mr. Slimmey sent you to my study to be caned before dinner."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You were told to wait for me," said Miss Meadows severely.

"I waited till nearly dinner-time, Miss Meadows," answered Frank meekly.

"You should have told me that you were sent to me to be caned," said Miss Meadows. "Had not Mr. Slimmey mentioned the matter, I should not have been aware of it."

Frank made no reply to that. He had felt that, as he had waited in vain for Miss Meadows in her study, the matter might as well drop. He was not anxious to be caned, especially as the caning was undeserved. But evidently the matter was not to be dropped so easily.

"Come out before the class, Richards."

"Yes, ma'am," said Frank resignedly.

Bob and Beaulieu gave him sympathetic looks as he went. The twish of the schoolmistress' cane was heard.

Yen Chin grinned at Frank Richards as the latter came back to his place with his lips compressed.

Frank did not look at the heathen. His feelings towards Yen Chin at that moment were anything but amiable.

Lessons were rather a worry to Frank that afternoon. His palm was aching; and he was in the black books of both Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey. He was far from being in his usual sunny spirits.

However, lessons ended at last, and the Cedar Creek boys and girls crowded out into the playground. Yen Chin was the first to depart on his pony; he lost no time in getting clear of the backwoods school. Frank Richards & Co. led out their horses into the trail, and mounted for the ride home.

They trotted easily along the trail through the timber, and Frank's face, which had been rather glum, cleared as he trotted through the clear, invigorating air. At the fork in the trail Vere Beauclerc left his chums, as usual, and Frank and Bob rode on towards the ranch.

They were close on the edge of the timber, with the open plain before them, when there was a beat of horses' hoofs on the trail behind.

"Hallo, the Cherub's coming after us for something," remarked Bob Lawless, as he looked back.

But the rider behind was not Vere Beauclerc. To their astonishment, the chums recognised Mr. Slimmey.

Mr. Slimmey was riding fast, on the track of the two schoolboys.

"After us!" said Frank. "It's Slimmey!"

"What the thump does he want?" said Bob Lawless. "Look here, ride on; he doesn't know we've seen him. If he thinks you want caning again, he's off the mark, and we'll give him a chase."

Frank Richards laughed.

"Good egg!" he said.

The chums of Cedar Creek touched their horses with the whip, and broke into a gallop.

They came out of the timber trail at good speed, and the horses stretched in a gallop across the dusky plain.

A voice came faintly on the wind behind, but the schoolboys did not choose to hear it.

Mr. Slimmey was probably calling

upon them to stop; but they did not make out the words, and they did not intend to let him get near enough for them to make out what he was calling.

Bob Lawless glanced back without turning his head, and grinned. Mr. Slimmey came out of the timber at full speed, galloping across the plain after the schoolboys, and still shouting.

"Don't look round, Franky!" chuckled Bob. "Mustn't let the dear man know we've seen him! I wonder if he will run after us as far as the ranch? We'll stand him some supper if he does!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums of the backwoods school rode on cheerily, in a merry mood. It seemed rather a lark to them to give Mr. Slimmey a hot chase across the plains.

They were better mounted than Mr. Slimmey, and, for that matter, were better riders, and the Cedar Creek master had no chance of catching them unless they chose.

"What the thump can he want though?" asked Frank Richards, as the chums dashed on side by side. "It can't be another row, can it?"

"Blessed if I know! Must be a row of some sort, or why should he be peeping after us at this rate?" said Bob. "But he can explain at the ranch. We're not going back to Cedar Creek this evening, I guess! Poor old Slimmey!" Bob took another cautious peep over his shoulder. "He's going it! He'll lose his specs soon, at this rate!"

Frank Richards laughed.

In the gathering dusk the chums dashed on, and the lights of the ranch-house gleamed in the distance at last. Rancher Lawless loomed up on the plain ahead, on his big horse, riding in from the range. He glanced towards the two schoolboys as they came riding up, not observing, for the moment, the pursuing figure in the dusky distance.

"Hallo! Racing home, are you?" said the rancher good-humouredly, as the Cedar Creek chums came alongside.

Frank Richards and Bob slackened pace to keep level with the rancher.

"Yep!" answered Bob. "I guess we're ready for supper, popper! We're giving Mr. Slimmey a race, too!"

"Mr. Slimmey?" repeated the rancher.

"Sure! He's on our track!"

"What for?"

"I guess I haven't the least idea; but we reckoned we'd give him a run for his money!" answered Bob, with a grin.

Mr. Lawless glanced back across the plain.

Mr. Slimmey was coming on fast, riding rather awkwardly, and evidently in a fatigued and breathless state. The rancher frowned.

"You young rascals! You should not play such tricks on your master!" he exclaimed. "If he wants you you should have stopped at once!"

"Well, we didn't know officially that he wanted us, uncle," said Frank Richards. "We just sighted him on the trail behind, that's all."

"I guess it's pretty clear that he wants you," said the rancher. "He's waving his hand to us now. Stop where you are."

"All right, popper," said Bob meekly. "We were only giving him a run to the ranch. I dare say he can do with some supper after his ride."

The rancher smiled slightly.

Frank and Bob halted, as Mr. Lawless had done, and the three of them waited for Mr. Slimmey to come up.

That gentleman was still at a good distance; the schoolboys had very nearly left him out of sight in the race. But he came on at a gallop, jolting in his saddle in a way that made the Canadian rancher smile.

Mr. Slimmey was a very estimable young man, but he was never likely to "witch the world with noble horsemanship."

He was breathless when he rode up at last and dragged in his horse on the trail.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless raised their Stetson hats to him very politely. They rather liked Mr. Slimmey,

though they had not been able to resist the temptation of giving him a "run for his money," as Bob expressed it.

"Good-evening, Mr. Slimmey!" said the rancher, as the young man sat his horse, gasping for breath. "I guess you are looking fur these young scallywags—what?"

"Yes!" gasped Mr. Slimmey.

"Well, here they are."

"Were you following us, Mr. Slimmey?" asked Frank Richards, with an air of dove-like innocence.

Mr. Slimmey spluttered breathlessly.

"You are perfectly aware that I was following you, Richards!" he gasped.

"Ahem!" murmured Frank. "I—I—"

"We couldn't make out what you were shouting, sir," said Bob Lawless meekly. "I—I reckoned perhaps you'd like supper at the ranch, sir."

"You will stay to supper now you are here, Mr. Slimmey?" said the rancher, with a smile.

Mr. Slimmey shook his head.

"I am sorry, Mr. Lawless—I must return to Cedar Creek at once, and take Richards with me."

The rancher frowned.

"What have you been doing, Frank? he inquired, glancing at his nephew.

"Nothing that I know of," answered Frank Richards. "I kicked Yen Chin to-day, and Miss Meadows caned me. I haven't any remembrance of doing anything else."

"Really, Richards——" exclaimed Mr. Slimmey angrily.

"Well, what have I done?" exclaimed Frank, in surprise. "I cannot imagine for a moment why you should ride after me from school like this, Mr. Slimmey!"

"This prevarication, Richards——"

"Prevarication!" exclaimed Frank.

"What else do you call it?" exclaimed Mr. Slimmey angrily. "You know perfectly well why I have followed you!"

Frank Richards flushed.

"I know nothing of the kind, sir," he answered very quietly. "I haven't the faintest idea. Neither has Bob."

"Lawless is not concerned in the matter," said Mr. Slimmey. "I am certain—and so is Miss Meadows—that he was not your confederate."

"My—my confederate!" ejaculated Frank Richards.

"Neither do I suppose that Beauclerc had any knowledge of your conduct," said Mr. Slimmey. "You alone are wanted, and you must return to Cedar Creek with me immediately."

Mr. Lawless broke in.

"What has happened at the school, Mr. Slimmey?" he demanded. "I am assured that my nephew is speaking the truth so far as he knows it. Tell me at once what has happened."

"A—a most unpleasant happening, Mr. Lawless," stammered Mr. Slimmey. "I—I am sorry to be the bearer of news which will be a great shock to you, I fear. There has been a theft at the school—"

"A theft!" exclaimed the rancher.

Frank Richards' face was flooded with colour. His eyes blazed at Mr. Slimmey.

"A theft!" he ejaculated.

"You know it, Richards."

"I did not know it," exclaimed Frank Richards fiercely. "And who dares to connect me with anything of the kind?"

"Richards, this bravado—"

"It's a lie!" exclaimed Frank, his temper blazing out. "You must be mad to accuse me of it, Mr. Slimmey! Uncle, you will not believe it, I know! Either Mr. Slimmey has gone mad or he is drunk!"

"Richards!" gasped the Cedar Creek master.

"That is not the way to speak to Mr. Slimmey, Frank!" rapped out the rancher.

"It is the way to speak to anyone who dares to call me a thief!" said Frank Richards savagely. "It is a lie—a rotten lie! And Mr. Slimmey must be out of his senses, I think!"

Mr. Slimmey gulped down his wrath. "Mr. Lawless, I have Miss Meadows' orders to take Richards back to the school at once—"

"He shall come!" said the rancher.

"I will come too—and you, Bob! The sooner this nonsense is thrashed out the better! Come!"

Mr. Slimmey wheeled his horse, and the rancher and his son and nephew followed his example. They rode together up the trail, back to Cedar Creek, in silence, Frank Richards' face still burning with anger and indignation.

And this indignation was perfectly justified. Frank knew nothing of the alleged theft, and it was only perfectly natural that he should feel absolutely dumbfounded at being accused of the robbery. Frank Richards was a name which stood for everything that was right and manly to the inhabitants of the Thompson Valley. There was not one of them who would not have trusted him with their last cent, and to have Mr. Slimmey, the assistant master at Cedar Creek School, who had hitherto regarded Frank in the same admiring light, accuse him of a common burglary and apparently believe in the accusation, taking his guilt as a foregone conclusion, was naturally a bitter blow to the young schoolboy.

Rancher Lawless quite apparently believed in his innocence, and the grim expression on his face as they made their way to Cedar Creek School plainly showed that he was only too anxious to have the matter thoroughly sifted, and his nephew's innocence once more established with those such as Mr. Slimmey and Miss Meadows, who at the moment were ready to condemn his nephew for a robbery he was entirely unaware of.

The first thing to be done was plainly to find the real culprit in the robbery at Cedar Creek.

CHAPTER 5.

The Blow Falls!

GALLOP! Gallop!

Miss Meadows looked from her window, in the lumber school-house at Cedar Creek.

Four horsemen loomed up on the trail

as the sound of galloping came through the dusk. They came riding in at the wide gateway—Frank Richards and Bob Lawless, Mr. Slimmey and Rancher Lawless—in silence, with grave and gloomy faces. The quartette rode up to the porch of the schoolhouse, dismounted, and hitched their horses. Miss Meadows appeared in the doorway.

Her face was troubled, and she avoided looking at Frank Richards.

"Please come in!"

The burly rancher swept off his Stetson hat, and tramped into the sitting-room. His son and nephew followed him in, and then Mr. Slimmey. Mr. Slimmey closed the door.

"Let's have this out, Miss Meadows!" Rancher Lawless said crisply. "Mr. Slimmey followed my son and nephew home from school, to bring Frank back here. He said that a theft had been committed, and that Frank was suspected. The whole thing seems utterly ridiculous to me. I would trust my nephew with every dollar I have in the world—as much as I would trust my own son or myself. I am certain a mistake has been made."

"I guess so!" muttered Bob Lawless indignantly. "As if Frank——"

"Please tell me exactly what has happened, Miss Meadows," said the rancher, and his manner, though civil, was rather grim.

"This morning," said Miss Meadows, "Richards was sent to my study to be caned. Mr. Slimmey sent him, and told him to wait till I came in, and Richards waited here till dinner-time, when he left without my having seen him."

"That is so," said Frank, "but I——"

"Let Miss Meadows finish, Frank," said the rancher.

"Yes, uncle."

"After school this afternoon," continued Miss Meadows, "after dismissing the school, I came here to do my accounts. I found that two bills were missing—a hundred-dollar bill and a ten-dollar bill. Although I knew quite

well where I had left them, I could scarcely believe that a theft had been committed, and I searched the whole desk without finding them. They had been abstracted. I remembered then that Richards had been alone in the room during the day—the only boy who had been in the room—and I sent Mr. Slimmey to bring him back at once to the school."

The rancher listened quietly.

"Is that all?" he asked; and there was a tone of contempt in his voice.

"I think that is enough, Mr. Lawless," said Miss Meadows, with a flash in her eyes.

"I guess not. Frank was here alone. How long?"

"About half an hour," said Frank.

"Did you go in the desk for anything?"

"I picked up a magazine that was lying on the desk to read while I was waiting for Miss Meadows."

"You did not touch the desk?"

"I leaned on it while I was reading."

"You did not touch anything but the magazine that was about the desk?"

"Nothing," said Frank.

"I fully believe you, my boy," said Mr. Lawless. "I have not the slightest doubt that you have spoken the exact truth. Miss Meadows, I guess I am simply astonished that you should accuse my nephew on flimsy grounds like this. Anybody might have come into this room and taken the bills. You might have lost them."

"I remember perfectly well placing the bills in a certain drawer," said Miss Meadows calmly.

"Admitting that they have been stolen, there are no grounds for suspecting my nephew, simply because he happened to be in the room for a time."

"No other boy entered the room, so far as can be ascertained," said the schoolmistress. "The pupils are not allowed to enter this room, excepting on order. Richards was the only boy who had the opportunity for abstracting the bills."

"Nonsense!" rapped out the rancher. "You say he was here during the morning. You missed the bills later than afternoon school. All through the afternoon, then——"

"Let me be more explicit," said Miss Meadows quietly. "After dinner I came to this room to rest until lessons recommenced. Later, when I left it to take my class, I locked my desk. It is generally kept locked, only this morning I was called suddenly into the kitchen by Dinah, and left hurriedly. The desk remained locked till I went to it this evening. The theft was, therefore, committed before dinner, and during the short space of time that the desk remained unlocked. For practically the whole of that time Richards was alone in the room."

"Oh!" muttered the rancher, rather taken aback.

"I was at the desk up to a few minutes past twelve, when Dinah called to me," said Miss Meadows. "Mr. Slimmey, at what time did you send Richards in?"

"Probably about ten minutes past twelve," said Mr. Slimmey.

"Then the room was vacant only for a few minutes!" said Mr. Lawless, tugging at his tawny moustache.

"Precisely! Richards left a few minutes before dinner, and it was again vacant till I came in after dinner. Richards was here practically the whole time that the desk was open."

The rancher looked at his nephew.

Frank Richards met his glance steadily.

The accusation was evidently more serious than the rancher had supposed at first. But his faith in his nephew did not falter.

"I guess you'll admit, at least, that there was some time, though a short time, in which someone else may have entered the room and found the desk open, Miss Meadows," said the rancher, after a pause.

"That is true. There is a possibility that Richards is innocent, and if it

should prove so no one would be more pleased than I," said Miss Meadows. "This has been a very painful shock to me; I have always had the highest opinion of Richards. I sent Mr. Slimmey after him instantly I missed the bills and failed to find them anywhere, in the belief that if he had taken them he would take them with him when he left school. I hoped that he would be brought back before he had had time to conceal them at home, and that they would be found upon him—if he had them."

The rancher's face cleared.

"I guess that's all right," he said. "Frank came back at once when Mr. Slimmey came up—he has not been in the ranch since he rode home—and he had not been alone at all. If he had the bills on him when he left school, he has them on him now."

"That was my supposition," said Miss Meadows. "If the bills are not found on Richards, I shall not adjudge him guilty, though the evidence is strong against him. He may, of course, have thrown the bills away on learning that he was suspected——"

"I have kept him under observation during our return here, Miss Meadows," said Mr. Slimmey mildly. "He has not done so in my presence."

"Very good. But he saw you, I suppose, following him?"

"True."

"Did you observe whether he threw anything away before you overtook him?"

Mr. Slimmey hesitated.

"I did not see anything of the kind," he answered. "But, as a matter of fact, these boys did not stop when I called to them. They rode on faster, and I was compelled to follow them nearly as far as the Lawless Ranch."

Sharp suspicion came into Miss Meadows' face at once, and Mr. Lawless looked a little uneasy.

"Why did you not stop, Richards, when you knew that Mr. Slimmey wanted you?" exclaimed the school-mistress.

Frank coloured.

"I—I—" he stammered.

"It was my idea," broke in Bob Lawless. "I guessed we'd give Mr. Slimmey a run, just for a lark. I suggested it."

"A very thoughtless act!" said Miss Meadows coldly. "It is very unfortunate that Richards should have run away in this manner, when he was wanted to answer such a charge. During his flight he had ample opportunity. I conclude, on throwing away the bills, for if he had them he must have known what Mr. Slimmey was following him for."

Frank bit his lip hard.

That harmless "lark" on Mr. Slimmey was likely to cost him dear.

"If the bills are not found on Richards, the suspicion remains that he threw them away on finding himself suspected," said Miss Meadows. "But on mere suspicion, however strong, I shall not condemn him. At all events, if a search does not reveal the stolen bills in his pockets, it is a point in his favour, for what it is worth. You have no objection to your nephew being searched in your presence, Mr. Lawless?"

"I demand it!" grunted the rancher.

"Very good. Perhaps you will be kind enough to turn out the boy's pockets yourself?"

"Sure!"

Mr. Lawless signed to his nephew to approach. Frank Richards came up cheerfully enough.

"I'm ready, uncle."

"You've acted foolishly, Frank," said the rancher. "You should not have played that trick on your master. It was disrespectful, and until the stolen bills are found it will lead to suspicion resting upon you. Not in my mind—I know you are straight—but others will suspect. But, at all events, I guess we shall soon prove that you haven't the bills about you. Turn out your pockets, my boy."

Frank Richards obeyed at once.

From one of the jacket-pockets he

turned out several old letters, and some crumpled manuscript. The rancher took them and sorted them out, and gave rather a start as he held up a ten-dollar bill.

"This is yours, I suppose?" he said, rather haltingly.

Frank stared at it.

"I—I—" he began.

"You had a ten-dollar bill, Franky," said Bob eagerly. "You remember Mr. Isaacs paid you ten dollars the other day? Yes Chin wanted to bag it off you—"

"I—I paid that ten dollars into the bank," said Frank. "This bill doesn't belong to me."

"What?" exclaimed the rancher.

"Kindly hand it to me, Mr. Lawless," said Miss Meadows calmly. "I have the numbers of the missing bills here."

The rancher silently laid it on the desk. Miss Meadows glanced at it, and referred to her account-book. Her face hardened as she looked up.

"The numbers are the same!" she said.

"Then—" stammered the rancher.

"That is one of the bills. The other, no doubt, is still in Frank Richards' pockets."

CHAPTER 5.

Guilt.

FRANK RICHARDS stood dumb-founded.

He wondered for some moments whether he was dreaming.

That he had not had a ten-dollar bill in his possession he knew; yet here was a ten-dollar bill turned out of his pocket from among the old papers there.

Bob Lawless stared at him, his jaw dropping.

The impossible had happened!

Rancher Lawless' bronzed face was hard and grim now. His faith in his nephew had been complete. But this discovery shattered it at a blow.

Frank read his sentence in his uncle's

eyes, and his face became almost haggard.

"Frank!" breathed Bob Lawless.

The rancher glared at him sternly to be silent. He fixed a cold, steady look on Frank's pale face.

"You may as well hand over the other bill now," he said.

"The—the other bill!" stammered Frank.

"The hundred-dollar bill."

"I—I haven't—"

"Did you throw it away?"

"No. I—"

"Mr. Slimmey, perhaps you will finish searching this boy," said the rancher, with a look of disgust. "I do not care to touch him."

"Kindly do so, Mr. Slimmey!" said Miss Meadows.

The young master reluctantly assented. Frank Richards stood like a statue while he was searched. After what had happened he would not have been surprised if the hundred-dollar bill, too, had been found upon him. Nothing would have surprised him now.

But it was not found.

That did not count in Frank's favour, however. One of the stolen bills had been found, and the natural conclusion was that he had thrown the larger one away when he was pursued, and had had no opportunity of getting rid of the smaller one unobserved.

"It—it is not here!" mumbled Mr. Slimmey, who was feeling extremely upset and uncomfortable.

"Of course it isn't there!" exclaimed Bob. "Frank never touched it, and—"

"Silence!" thundered the rancher.

"Father—"

"Silence!"

The rancher turned to Miss Meadows.

Frank stood dumb. His wits seemed to have forsaken him. He still felt as if in the grip of some horrid nightmare.

"Miss Meadows, my nephew has robbed you of one hundred and ten dollars," said Mr. Lawless. "The ten

dollars have been recovered. I shall return the rest."

He took out his pocket-book, and laid a hundred-dollar bill on the school-mistress' desk.

"I am responsible for this wretched boy. You cannot, I suppose, allow him to remain at Cedar Creek after this. The parents of the other boys would naturally object. I must consider what is to be done with him. For the present I shall take him home to the ranch. I can only apologise for the trouble that has been given you."

"I am sorry for this, Mr. Lawless!" faltered Miss Meadows.

"There is no fault on your side," said the rancher. "The boy has, I suppose, some kink in his nature that I have never suspected. Heaven knows what I shall do with him—a boy who cannot be trusted not to steal!"

Frank's eyes blazed.

"Uncle!"

"You need not speak," said the rancher. "Get to your horse."

"I must speak—I will speak!" exclaimed Frank, his words coming in a torrent now. "I never touched Miss Meadows' bank bills—"

"Silence!"

"How—how it came into my pocket I don't know—"

Frank's voice faltered and broke. The absurdity of the statement struck him even while he uttered it.

"Lying, I suppose, is own brother to theft," said the rancher bitterly. "But I guess you don't expect me to believe your untruths, Richards. You had better say no more."

"I tell you, uncle—"

"Hold your tongue, and get to your horse!" exclaimed the rancher gruffly.

Bob Lawless caught Frank's arm, and led him out of the room. It was evidently useless to say more then. It only added fuel to the rancher's anger.

The rancher followed his son and nephew out.

As they came to their horses, Frank stole a look at his uncle's face. That browned face, usually so genial and

kindly, was hard as iron now. In silence the unhappy boy mounted his horse.

They rode out of the gates of Cedar Creek, and Black Sam shut the heavy wooden gates after them. The thud of the closing gate struck upon Frank Richards' heart. It had closed behind him for ever—his days at the backwoods school were over—his schooldays in the Canadian West had closed, in disgrace and shame.

He choked back a sob.

In silence, the three rode down the trail, under the shadowy trees, and not a word was spoken before they reached Lawless Ranch.

CHAPTER 7.

Condemned!

FRANK RICHARDS sat in his room at the Lawless Ranch, alone.

He had eaten no supper; he could not eat. The blow that had fallen upon him seemed to have numbed his faculties; it left him with a curious sense of unreality.

What did Bob believe? What would Beauclerc believe, when he heard? Would even his own chums condemn him? Bob, when Frank had last seen him, had looked utterly miserable—that was all. But surely his faith in his chum was not destroyed! Frank did not wonder why Bob did not come to him in his solitude. He knew that the rancher had bidden his son keep away from the room.

Whatever Bob might believe, there was no doubt in the rancher's mind. And in proportion to his faith in his nephew while he trusted him, was now his anger and scorn.

Frank groaned aloud as he thought of it. What was it the future held for him?

He was dependent on his uncle. What he had earned by writing for the "Thompson Press" was little more than pocket-money. By his uncle's advice he had saved it in the Thompson Bank; he had two hundred dollars

there. Never for a moment had he felt his dependence. Mr. Lawless had taken his sister's son into his home, and to his heart, with generous kindness. In the ranch, Frank and Bob shared alike, and no distinction was made between them. But all that was changed now. Now that his uncle believed him a thief, he could not remain under that roof—to eat another morsel there would choke him. He had to go.

Where was he to go?

His father was in India, many a long thousand miles away. Frank prayed that he should never hear of this. His young sister was at school in England. To neither of them could he go. But to remain at the ranch was impossible.

There was a gentle tap at the door, and Frank looked round quickly. He hoped to see Bob.

But it was Mrs. Lawless who came in.

Frank rose to his feet, with a hot flush in his pale cheeks.

"Auntie!" he muttered.

"My dear Frank," Mrs. Lawless spoke gently, softly, and she kissed the boy on his burning forehead. "It is not true, is it, Frank?"

"No!" said Frank huskily.

"On your word, Frank?"

"On my word, auntie."

"I believe you," said Mrs. Lawless gently. "My brother's son is not a thief. But, dear Frank, you must not blame your uncle for believing it. Can you account for the bill being in your pocket?"

"No!" groaned Frank.

Mrs. Lawless looked at him searchingly. Woman's instinct, so often right when man's reasoning is wrong, told her that the boy was innocent; the proof against him was unanswerable, but she felt that he was guiltless.

"But I believe you, Frank," she said, after a pause. "You have been wronged. How, and by whom, I cannot even imagine. But if my brother should hear of this, he shall hear, too, that I believe in you, my poor boy."

"Thank you, auntie," said Frank,

with a break in his voice. "What does Bob think?"

"He believes in you, too," said Mrs. Lawless quietly. "He cannot think evil of you, any more than I can."

"Thank Heaven for that!" muttered Frank. "Deacons will believe in me, I feel sure."

"Your uncle wishes to see you now," said Mrs. Lawless. "You must listen to him with patience, Frank; remember that everything is against you, and a judge and jury would believe you guilty on such evidence. When—if—the truth is found out, my husband will be the first to do you justice."

"I don't blame him," groaned Frank. "What could he believe when he found the stolen bill in my pocket himself? I—I think he might have trusted me more, but—but he must have thought it was proof positive. I—I shan't forget how much I owe my uncle. He has always been kind, until now. Does he want me to go down?"

"Yes, Frank. Go now."

Mrs. Lawless, with tears in her eyes, kissed her nephew again, and Frank felt a sense of comfort as he went. There were some, at least, who believed in him still; some whose faith in him was not to be shaken by the most irrefutable evidence.

At the bottom of the stairs, Bob was waiting. He started forward and caught Frank by the arm.

"Remember, I'm sticking to you, old chap!" Bob whispered huskily. "I don't believe a word of it—not a pesky word! I know you never did it, Frank." Bob's voice was shaking. "I don't know how it happened; but you never did it; I know you never did—"

Frank pressed his hand in silence; his heart was too full for words just then.

He passed into the dining-room of the ranch, where his uncle was awaiting him.

Rancher Lawless stood with his back to the crackling log fire, his hands crossed behind him. His bronzed face was hard as iron; his eyes glinted as

hard as steel. Every trace of kindness was gone from the rancher's usually kindly face. He looked like a stern judge, before him a criminal waiting for sentence. The baseness of the crime that had been committed rooted out every vestige of sympathy for his unhappy nephew.

Frank came in quietly, but he raised his head proudly, and looked at his uncle. He was adjudged guilty; but he was innocent, and his pride rose up strongly against injustice.

The rancher's hard eyes fixed on him.

"I have been thinking over this matter, Richards," he said coldly. It was no longer "Frank." "You cannot continue at Cedar Creek. Even if it were permitted, you can scarcely wish to face your schoolfellows again, when they know what you have done."

"What I am supposed to have done, uncle," said Frank steadily.

The rancher made a gesture of impatience.

"We will not go into that," he said. "I do not choose to bandy words with you and listen to abominable falsehoods. You cannot remain at Cedar Creek. Neither can you continue to associate with my son. I believe that Bob's character is too strong to be easily contaminated even by bad associations, but it is my duty not to expose him to the risk. You will have expected this, I guess."

"If you believe me guilty, you will naturally not want me to see Bob any more," said Frank wearily. "I don't wonder at that."

"The question remains, what is to be done with you?" said the rancher. "When my brother-in-law fell upon evil times, he sent you out here to me, knowing that I would give him a cordial reception, and treat him as my own boy. I have tried to do so. I think you cannot say that any neglect on my part has led you to what you have come to."

"You have always been kindness

itself," said Frank. "I shall not forget that, wherever I go."

"The difficult question is, where shall you go?" said the rancher. "It is impossible for you to remain at the ranch. You can see that?"

"Yes."

"You have relatives in England, but I cannot send you to them, at least not without communications, which would take too long a time. I should have to tell them, too, the whole facts, and I guess they would be as unwilling to receive you as I am to keep you here."

Frank shivered.

"I have a right to ask you, uncle, at least, that nothing of this shall be said to my relations at home," he said. "I hope the truth will come out some day!"

"Enough of that! I shall inform no one of what has happened, unless I am compelled to," said the rancher. "I do not wish to brand you so early in life. You will suffer for what you have done, and the lesson, which will be severe, may be the saving of you. I cannot send you to your father—you cannot go to India, neither would it be possible, I think, for your father to receive you on an Indian plantation. I accepted you in trust, and I am prepared to fulfill that trust. I had hoped that as you grew up, you would take kindly to our Canadian life—that you would live on the ranch, and become a rancher yourself later. But that is impossible now—by your own act. I am explaining all this to you, Richards, so that you will understand that the decision I have come to is the only possible one."

Frank smiled faintly.

"What is it, uncle?" he asked.

"There is a school in Vancouver to which you can be sent," said the rancher. "Your education will be continued there, perhaps more completely than at the backwoods school. The master is known to me personally. He has had a great deal of success with the sons of emigrants of a low

character—people who have not learned to live up to Anglo-Saxon standards—Poles and Slovaks, and so forth. He has turned many of them into decent citizens. He is a conscientious man and will, I guess, take you in charge and do all that can be done for you. You will be under a strict but kindly rule. I do not pretend that your life will be like it has been hitherto—but for that you have only yourself to thank!"

He paused a moment.

Frank did not speak; but his heart was throbbing.

"You will remain one year in Vancouver," continued Mr. Lawless. "After that period, if the schoolmaster's report of you is favourable, I shall allow you to return here; and what has happened shall be forgotten and forgiven. You shall have every chance to make up for your fault. Keep on the straight path, and I shall always be your friend. Keep straight, that is all. And after your year of probation is over, your life shall be resumed where it left off here—and I shall trust you as before, and hope for the best."

Frank was still silent.

"You will realise, Richards, that you are being treated with leniency," said the rancher.

"If I were guilty, uncle, I should think so," said Frank. "I could only thank you for your kindness. If I were guilty, I ought to be sent to prison; and you are only offering to send me to a reformatory."

The rancher knitted his brows.

"The school is not a reformatory, Richards. It is necessarily somewhat of the character of one. But that is the only school to which I should be justified in sending you, after what you have done."

"I know you mean to be kind," said Frank. "But—"

"You will be prepared to start to-morrow morning, an hour after dawn," said Mr. Lawless. "I shall take you to Vancouver myself. That is all, Richards!"

Frank drew a deep breath.

"That is not all, uncle," he said.

"I must speak now. I shall not go to the school at Vancouver!"

"What?"

"So long as you believe me guilty," said Frank, a flash in his eyes. "I will accept nothing more at your hands. You shall not pay one dollar for me at Vancouver, or anywhere else; I will taste no food in this house while I remain. So long as you trusted me, I could accept your kindness with gratitude; I cannot accept it any longer. I am going away—"

"And where are you going?" rapped out the rancher.

"I don't know—yet. But I'm strong, and I'm not idle; there's plenty of work in Canada for a fellow willing to work," said Frank bravely. "I'm going somewhere where I'm not known, where this horrible disgrace can't follow me—and unless my innocence is proved, I shall never set foot in the Thompson Valley again!"

Mr. Lawless set his lips.

"You forget one thing," he said. "Your father placed you in my keeping, and I have my duty to do. I cannot and shall not allow you to go away on your own responsibility, to go from bad to worse, and to fall into more serious faults than you have already committed. My decision is taken; you will mount and ride with me in the morning. Till then, you will remain in your room. You may go now."

"Uncle! I——"

"That will do!"

The rancher raised his hand and pointed to the door. Without another word, Frank Richards quitted the room.

CHAPTER 2.

Frank's Flight.

NIGHT on the ranch!

The stars glistened in the sky; away in the far distance the snow on the summits of the mountains

showed in a dim white line. In the Lawless ranch-house all was silent. Frank Richards stood at his window, and looked out into the clear, cold night.

It was his last night at the ranch.

He was alone in the room; Bob had been forbidden there. His light was extinguished; but the clear starlight glistened into the room. Long had the boy stood at the open window, looking out on the wide grasslands under the stars.

Frank's mind was made up.

If he had had any hope by remaining to clear up the mystery of what had happened at the backwoods school, that hope was frustrated by his uncle's decision. On the morrow he was to ride with the rancher on the southern trail, down to the railway, on his way to Vancouver. That was inevitable if he remained at the Lawless Ranch until the morning sun gleamed over the Rocky Mountains.

He had to go!

His life had been happy at the ranch—how happy he had never realised till now at last the end had come. No more rides up the school trail with his chums in the morning sunshine, no more merry skating on the creek, no more gallops on the rolling prairie! All that was over for him. Before the sun rose he had to be far away.

Some day the rancher would know that he had done him an injustice. Till then, he should never see his nephew again. What the future held for him Frank could not guess—and he gave little thought to that. His heart was too heavy for speculations on the hidden future.

He turned from the window at last. The silence of the night was unbroken, save for the faint lowing of the steers in the distance. By the light of the stars, Frank made his simple preparations for departure.

He scribbled a note in pencil, and pinned it to the table, where it would be found in the morning. Then he packed his wallet, with the few things

that it was necessary to take, and which he felt justified in taking. Of money he had a few dollars. In the bank at Thompson two hundred dollars stood to his credit—his earnings as a schoolboy author. But he was to be far away before the bank opened in the morning. He hardly thought of it now.

He slung the wallet over his shoulders and put on his hat. He gave a last look round the silent room. Bob's lasso lay on the table. He had already noted it, and decided to use it for leaving the ranch. He could not go by the door downstairs without noise—and it was necessary to go in silence. He uncoiled the lasso, fastened one end securely to the bed, and dropped the other from the window.

Quietly and calmly he slipped from the window, and slung himself down the rope to the ground.

He stood for a moment or two, listening.

There was no light about the ranch—no sound there. All within were sleeping. But from the bunk-house occupied by the cattlemen a light gleamed out into the dusky night.

Frank carefully avoided the bunk-house as he trod softly away in the grass.

He followed the trail across the plain, and breathed more freely when the ranch-house was left well behind.

Before him lay the plain, wide and vast, uncertain in the starlight. The sound of hoofs came to his ears, and he stopped, and stood close in the shadow of a lone tree. Two horsemen came riding towards the ranch at a trot—two cowboys on a night round. They were chatting as they rode, and he recognised the deep tones of Billy Cook, the foreman of the ranch. He thought he caught the mention of his own name, and hidden in the shadow as he was, his cheeks flushed scarlet. The ranchmen knew, then—his supposed shame would be the talk of the ranch on the morrow, as it would be

the talk of the backwoods school! He could not be gone too soon—or too far!

The horsemen jingled by, without seeing the slight form that stood close in the tree's shadow. They disappeared in the direction of the ranch.

Frank Richards stepped out of the shadow and trod the trail again—over rugged prairie, through long, tough grass. He seemed insensible to fatigue.

He was far from the ranch now—beyond the bounds of the extensive ranch-lands that belonged to his uncle. In the hazy distance far ahead lay the camp of Silver Creek, where he hoped to get a lift in the post-wagon to carry him farther yet. Over the mountain-tops to the east came a faint rosy flush.

* * * *

The next day a score of riders were seeking for Frank Richards along the valley of the Thompson River. They hunted for him high and low for many a long mile. But they did not find him.

The fugitive schoolboy had too long a start and he had vanished from the vicinity of the Lawless Ranch—vanished as it seemed, from the Thompson Valley. And after all their hard riding the searchers had to ride home baffled and disappointed.

Frank Richards was gone!

CHAPTER 9.

Pests of the Prairie!

"L E COUTEAU—"
"Hush!"
"But—"
"Silence, I say!"

Frank Richards wondered if he was still dreaming as the muttering voices came to his ears through the thickets.

It was sundown. The red sun was already behind the western hills, and shadows stole over the plain. Frank Richards had been tramping all day

on a trail marked by hoof-prints, which led, in the dim distance, to Kicking Mule Camp. But the settlement was still many miles distant—how many he did not know—and he had given up hope of reaching it that night. Where the trail ran by the border of a timber belt the wearied schoolboy had thrown himself down in the thickets to rest.

He had closed his eyes, and he awakened again with muttering voices in his ears.

He wondered who the speakers were.

They were hidden from him by a screen of larches, but evidently they were close at hand.

The muttering ceased, and Frank raised himself quietly to his feet. He peered through an opening in the thicket, and saw the two figures suddenly. One was a burly, rough-bearded fellow, clad like a trapper; the other, a smaller man, was a dark-skinned half-breed, whose black, glinting eyes were fixed on the thicket that hid the schoolboy from sight.

Frank Richards drew a quick breath.

One glance was enough to show him that he had fallen upon two of the toughest characters in all the Canadian West. And he could see, too, that his presence in the timber was known.

"I guess it was a mink, or a lynx, perhaps, Le Couteau," said the burly man. "I guess—"

The half-breed made a fierce gesture. "Silence, I tell you, Yreka Bill!" he muttered savagely. "There is someone in the timber. Ah!"

He made a sudden spring, and the larches crackled and parted. A moment more and he was upon Frank Richards. The schoolboy started back and began to struggle as a fierce grasp was laid upon him. The half-breed whipped out a knife from his belt—a long, sharp "couteau de chasse," from which, apparently, he derived his grisly nickname. Yreka Bill came trampling through the thicket after his comrade.

"Hold on, pard!" he ejaculated. "It's a kid—"

"Let me go!" panted Frank Richards.

He ceased to struggle as the cold steel flashed before his eyes. He was unarmed.

"Stand where you are!"

Le Couteau released him, his black fierce eyes searching the schoolboy's face. He was evidently astonished to discover the schoolboy in the lonely timber belt, far from any town or settlement.

"What the thunder is he doing here?" exclaimed Yreka Bill, staring at Frank, as astonished as his comrade.

"Who are you?" rapped out Le Couteau. "Don't make a move to get away! It will be your last step if you do!"

"My name's Frank Richards," answered Frank quietly.

"Where do you come from?"

"Cedar Creek."

"Cedar Creek! Where is that?"

"On the Thompson River," answered Frank.

"You are forty miles from the Thompson River here," said Le Couteau harshly. "You have no horse. How did you come here then?"

"Tramped!" answered Frank bitterly and briefly.

"You are a schoolboy?"

"Yes."

The half-breed eyed him doubtfully and savagely. Frank Richards did not make a movement. He had no chance of escape, and he was at the mercy of the two ruffians.

He was wondering, too, what they were doing in the timber by the lonely trail. That they were there for no good purpose was clear enough from their looks and from their alarm at discovering that they were not alone under the trees.

Le Couteau made a motion with his hunting-knife, and Frank felt a cold chill run through him. But the dark-skinned ruffian held his hand.

"The kids do no harm, I guess.

pard," muttered Yreka Bill. "Rope him in a tree and put a wedge in his mouth till the horse-dealer's passed. He won't be able to give the alarm, I reckon."

Le Couteau muttered an oath.

"And suppose Black Pequod resists and hands in his cheeks before he parts with the dust?" he muttered. "We can't afford to leave a witness to mosey into Kicking Mule with the news. Pardieu, I do not want a cattleman's rope round my neck!"

The other ruffian seemed to hesitate. Frank Richards' heart throbbed.

That muttered exchange of words told him all he needed to know—that the two bulldozers were there on the trail for a robbery. He knew that his life hung on a thread.

Yreka Bill laid a heavy grasp on Frank's arm—a grasp that was almost as powerful as that of a grizzly bear. Le Couteau turned and strode back to the edge of the timber, whence he could watch the plain in the sinking light. Yreka Bill followed him, with the Cedar Creek schoolboy in his grasp.

CHAPTER 10.

The Catapult.

FRANK RICHARDS waited.

The half-breed was scanning the plain, and Frank, following his glance, caught a glimpse of a moving figure in the far distance to the south, along the dusky trail.

A horseman was approaching from the southward, evidently bound on his way up to the camp of Kicking Mule.

He was too far off for recognition; indeed, only a keen eye could have discerned him at all, so far, in the waving grass.

But the half-breed's eyes glinted as he turned back to his companions.

"C'est lui!" he muttered.

"Black Pequod!"

"Make out! It cannot be anyone else—but we shall soon see. He is riding fairly into our hands—with five

thousand dollars in bills in his belt." The half-breed's eyes glittered. "He has sold all his horses—he has none with him, save the critter he is riding. Black Pequod has done good business at Kamloops."

"And I guess we're goin' to do good business byer," grinned Yreka Bill. "If he passes in range, I guess we can drop his hoss with a shot from the timber, and run him down in a brace of shakes."

Le Couteau shook his head.

"Black Pequod knows there is danger on the plains for a man with five thousand dollars in his belt," he answered. "He will not ride within shot of the timber."

"Then I reckon we'd better get on the horses——"

"Wait!"

The half-breed turned to Frank Richards. His black, glinting eyes searched the schoolboy's face.

"Listen to me, boy!" he said. "You can be useful to us. You see that rider out on the plain?"

"I see him," answered Frank.

"He is Black Pequod, the French-Canadian horse-dealer of Kicking Mule. I watched him yesterday in Kamloops; I am waiting for him now. You savvy?"

"Yes."

"He has five thousand dollars, or more, in his belt. He is not going to carry it into Kicking Mule Camp!" grinned the half-breed. "But Black Pequod is a bad man in a tussle, and if we ride him down it will be shooting—and one or both of us may get a bullet, as well as the horse-dealer. You understand?"

Frank Richards nodded.

His heart was like lead in his breast.

He realised that he was to be asked to take a part in the robbery of the horse-dealer; in what way he could not yet divine. But he knew that a refusal meant one swift, savage thrust of the half-breed's knife, and the end of all things for the runaway of Cedar Creek.

Evidently the half-breed had concluded from his having tramped forty

miles to get away from his home that Frank was a bad lot, and as such should be prepared to help them.

Frank choked back the angry indignation that rose to his lips. His life was in this ruffian's hands; and life was dear.

"You can help us, and if you succeed I swear that you shall share in the loot," continued the half-breed. "Boy as you are, you shall finger five hundred dollars if we lay Black Pequod by the heels and clean him out!"

"I guess that's good enough for you, kid," granted Yreka Bill.

"What do you want me to do?" gasped Frank Richards.

He controlled his face well; the half-breed was watching him like a lynx. Frank was playing only for time now—for a chance to escape. Once out of reach of the ruffian's long knife it would be a different matter.

"You will show up on the trail, and speak to the horse-dealer," said Le Couteau.

"But——"

"Listen to me. He will not suspect you—a schoolboy. You will lead him into the trap easily enough."

Frank panted for breath.

So that was to be the task assigned to him—to lead an unsuspecting man into an ambush, for robbery, and perhaps murder. And still he did not allow his face to betray his horror and indignation. He knew that his real thought, if revealed, would be the signal for his death. Instinctively he played a part, under the half-breed's searching gaze; and he nodded in reply to Le Couteau with a thoughtful air.

"But how?" he said.

"You will tell him that your father lies in the timber here, injured by a fall from his horse——"

"My father?" said Frank. "My father is not in Canada."

"Fool! You will tell him so!"

"Oh, I—I see!"

"Your father lies in the timber injured, and his horse has run away," continued Le Couteau. "You beg him

to help. Black Pequod is a hard man, but he will not refuse. It will not take him far out of his way. He will come with you. You will point out the place——"

"And?" gasped Frank.

"He will be seized as soon as he is in the trees," said Le Couteau. "That is all. You savvy?"

"I understand!" said Frank Richards in a stifled voice.

"Five hundred dollars if you succeed."

Frank breathed hard.

"But if you try any trickery," said Le Couteau in a hissing voice, "remember that you are within range from the timber, and I will shoot you down like a coyote!"

"But——" panted Frank.

"Yes or no?" said Le Couteau gruffly.

Frank restrained his desire to dash his fist into the villain's swarthy face. His only object now was to lull the suspicion of the half-breed, and get out of his reach.

"You say the horse-dealer has five thousand dollars on him?" he asked calmly.

"Yes, yes!"

"You offer me five hundred——"

"Vrait!"

"That isn't good enough!" said Frank, speaking with a coolness that surprised himself. "I shall take as much risk as you. Make it a thousand dollars; and little enough, too!"

Yreka Bill burst into a guffaw.

"I guess that kid was born for the business, Le Couteau," he said.

"Solt!" said Le Couteau, with a smile. "Let it be so. A thousand dollars from the horse-dealer's belt for your share, boy, if you succeed."

"Try me!" said Frank.

"Then go!"

With a beating heart Frank Richards stepped out of the trees and strode away towards the horseman.

The two ruffians, keeping under cover, watched him, rifle in hand.

"I guess the kid'll do the trick, Le Couteau," muttered Yreka Bill. "And

If he lands Pequod in our hands he will earn the dollars."

"He may earn them," said Le Couteau, showing his white teeth in a savage grin. "But fingerling them will be a different matter. *Nous verrons!*"

Yreka Bill chuckled and nodded, and then the two ruffians watched in silence.

CHAPTER II.

In Deadly Peril!

FRANK RICHARDS' heart was thumping as he strode away from the timber. Behind him were the two ruffians, ready to shoot him down without mercy at a sign that he intended to fall them.

But for the moment he was safe.

It was evident that the prairie thieves shrank from an open encounter with Black Pequod. If they could avoid it, though they were prepared for any desperate step rather than losing their plunder. Frank's help promised them a safe job instead of a desperate affray, for there was little doubt that the schoolboy could have performed the trick with success, and led the horse-man into the ambuscade.

Frank Richards, of course, had no intention of doing anything of the kind. He had fooled the half-breed to escape the thrust of his knife, and for no other reason. His intention was to warn the horse-dealer of his peril as soon as he came within speaking distance.

There was no doubt, then, that the ruffians would ride out of the timber to try the chances of a conflict, two to one; and upon the result of that encounter Frank's life hung. The peril was terrible, though probably not greater than in trusting to the good faith of Le Couteau.

Peril or not, Frank would have died a thousand deaths rather than have acted as cat's-paw to the prairie thieves.

He moved quickly across the trail and out on the grassy plain, aiming to intersect the course the approaching horseman was following.

Black Pequod sighted him as soon as he left the timber, and Frank saw him drop his hand on his rifle. But he relinquished the weapon again as he saw that the stranger was an unarmed boy.

He was still a little distance when Frank Richards reached a spot directly ahead of him. There the schoolboy of Cedar Creek halted for the horseman to come up.

He was at a considerable distance from the timber now, easily within sight of the watching ruffians, however. But it was doubtful whether a rifle-shot would be effective in the dying light. Frank Richards had to risk that.

The horseman came up at an easy trot. His horse showed signs of fatigue. Black Pequod had ridden far that day.

Frank held up his hand, and the horse-dealer of Kicking Mule drew rein. He came to a halt, staring down curiously at the schoolboy, who stood knee-deep in the grass.

"Thunder! What are you doing here?" exclaimed the horseman. "Lost yourself on the prairie, kid?"

"I have a warning to give you, sir," answered Frank Richards quietly. "Don't look towards the timber while I speak—they may shoot if they know you are on your guard."

Black Pequod started.

But he did not look towards the timber; his sharp black eyes remained fixed on Frank Richards' face.

"What's that yarn you are spinning?" he asked.

"You are in danger," said Frank.

"Who's in the timber?"

"Two rascals. They call one another Le Couteau and Yreka Bill."

Black Pequod smiled grimly.

"I know them. I saw them yesterday in Kamloops. So they are laying for me on the trail?"

"Yes."

"And what have you to do with them?" asked the horse-dealer, with a suspicious stare.

Frank coloured.

"Nothing, except that they found me in the timber and threatened my life. They expect me to trick you into enter-

ing the timber. I was to tell you that my father lies injured there, and ask your aid."

The horse-dealer muttered an oath in French.

"And I should have gone into the trap," he said. "I should not have distrusted a boy. *Sacre bleu!* What is your name?"

"Frank Richards."

"Mine is Gaston Pequod. I shall not forget this, my boy. What are you doing here—alone on the plains?"

"Tramping," said Frank. "I have no home now. I—I was going to Kicking Mule to look for work."

Black Pequod smiled.

"Perhaps I shall help you," he said. "But to business. There are only two of them?"

"Yes."

"Have they horses—I guess they have?"

"Yes—fitted in the timber."

"I reckon they'll ride out if they don't get me into the trap."

"That is what they mean," said Frank. "They think you have five thousand dollars in bills in your belt."

"Le Couteau kept his eyes open in Kamloops," said Black Pequod. "But I have more than that, garçon. But Le Couteau will never finger a cent of it. You are unarmed?"

"Yes."

"And on foot?" said the horse-dealer. "Sapristi! If I ride on you will be left to their mercy, and after warning me—"

Frank shivered.

"I'm ready to take my chance," he said quietly. "I knew what I was risking."

Gaston Pequod laughed.

"But I shall not leave you here," he said. "I guess Black Pequod is a hard customer, but he knows how to help anyone who helps him. I will turn my horse towards the timber, as if I were going to ride there—as if you had told me the yarn they expect. Get up behind me. You can ride?"

"Ob, yes," said Frank, with a smile.

"Mount behind me, then, and hold on to me—and mind you don't fall," said the horse-dealer.

He swung his horse round towards the trees in the distance, and Frank clambered lightly up behind him.

In their ambush, Le Couteau and Yreka Bill exchanged a grin of satisfaction.

They had no doubt now that the schoolboy had played the part they expected, that the horse-dealer was about to ride into the trap.

But the next moment a change came over the spirit of their dream. As soon as Frank was mounted behind him, Black Pequod wheeled his horse suddenly, struck it with the whip, and started at a gallop, with his back to the timber.

Thud, thud, thud!

At a racing pace the horse-dealer dashed away from the timber out into the wide plains.

Le Couteau uttered a fierce oath.

"He has tricked us!" said Yreka Bill hoarsely. "He's warned Black Pequod, and he's making a run for it."

"The horses!" hissed the half-breed. "Quick!"

Yreka Bill rushed to unlatch the horses in the thicket, while the half-breed raised his rifle and took careful aim at the fleeing horseman.

The distance was considerable, and growing greater every moment, and the sun was almost gone. With as good an aim as he could contrive, Le Couteau fired.

A puff of white smoke came from the timber, and the crack of the rifle rang across the plain.

Difficult as the shot was, the half-breed came very close with it.

Frank Richards felt the wind of the bullet as it whizzed by him; a foot more to the left and it would have passed through his body and that of the horse-dealer in front of him.

But a miss was as good as a mile.

Black Pequod gave no heed to the

shot. He lashed on his horse into great speed, to put a wider distance between him and the timber. The animal was fatigued, but for some time the speed was kept up. Frank Richards, clinging to the horse-dealer to keep his seat, ventured to glance back over his shoulder.

Yreka Bill and Le Couteau, mounted now, came riding out of the timber with furious faces.

They were driven now to their last desperate resource, an open attack, without cover, on the dusky plain. They were two to one, for the unarmed schoolboy did not count; but the outcome was by no means a certainty. With their rifles gripped in their hands, they rode savagely on the track of the horse-dealer, gaining on him at every stride of their horses. Their mounts were fresh, and Black Pequod's steed was fatigued with a day's ride, and was double-loaded. So far as the race went, it could only end one way, and in a very short time. But at the end of it the hard-faced horse-dealer, wary and desperate, remained to be dealt with.

Crack, crack!

The pursuers fired together, but the leaping of the horses made aim too difficult. The bullets flew wide.

Black Pequod glanced back.

His hard, tanned face was unmoved. His life had been passed in many dangers, and this new peril, thrilling enough to the schoolboy, seemed to produce no effect on the horse-dealer's iron nerve.

"I guess they're gaining fast," muttered Gaston Pequod. "I guess the shooting will tell soon. But they haven't got the dollars yet. It will be a fight on the plain. Can you shoot, boy?"

"Yes," panted Frank.

"Good!"

Black Pequod reined in his horse.

"Jump down!"

Frank leaped to the ground. The horse-dealer dismounted a moment

later, and dragged his steed down into the grass.

He threw himself down, and Frank Richards followed his example. Only their Stetson hats showed over the grass.

The horse-dealer drew the revolver from his belt and passed it to his young comrade.

"If you can shoot, I guess that will be useful if they get close," he said. "Do your best, kid."

"Rely on me!" said Frank quietly.

He slipped the revolver into his right-hand jacket-pocket. His heart was beating very fast, but he was cool and collected. The horse-dealer, with his rifle extended before him, finger on trigger, watched the prairie thieves as they came on. Le Couteau and Yreka Bill fired again, and the bullets ploughed up the earth close at hand.

Crack!

Black Pequod pulled the trigger. He had the advantage of a good target for his fire as the horsemen came galloping on. Yreka Bill was a little in advance of his confederate, and it was upon him that the horse-dealer's rifle bore.

Frank felt his heart leap as the burly ruffian reeled in his saddle, with a loud and fearful yell.

The next moment his horse was dashing riderless across the plain, and the ruffian plunged headlong in the grass.

Thud, thud!

The half-breed came on furiously as his companion fell, and before Black Pequod could fire again he was upon them. Frank Richards pulled the gun from his pocket, and blazed away twice; but the leaping horse caught the bullets, and went plunging upon its side. Le Couteau leaped clear, and sprang at the horse-dealer, who fired at close range, and missed by an inch. The next moment the half-breed was upon him, and the two men went rolling in the grass, locked in a desperate struggle.

CHAPTER 12.

The Fight!

FRANK RICHARDS was on his feet now, the revolver gripped in his hand. But he could not shoot. Black Pequod and Le Couteau were rolling over and over in the grass, panting and gasping, almost at his feet. To shoot was as dangerous to the horse-dealer as to his assailant.

Out of the grass where he had fallen Yreka Bill staggered up. His bearded face was white, and his right arm hung helpless at his side. The bullet was in his shoulder. But he came tramping on unsteadily, his knife grasped in his left hand. But for the presence of Frank Richards the desperate struggle would have ended fatally for the horse-dealer. But Frank was there, and his nerve did not fail him. He raised the revolver to a level.

"Hands up!" he rapped out.

Yreka Bill, with a curse, plunged on towards him.

"Stop!"

Still the ruffian came on, and Frank Richards pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The knife went spinning from Yreka Bill's grasp as the bullet struck him above the elbow. The ruffian gave a hoarse cry of pain.

"Now stop!" shouted Frank Richards, his eyes blazing over the levelled revolver. "Another step and I'll send a bullet through your head!"

Yreka Bill stopped at that.

He was helpless now, and the loss of blood from his wounds was overcoming his brute strength. He sank in the grass and lay groaning.

Frank Richards turned to the struggling pair by his side. But his help was not needed by the horse-dealer.

Black Pequod was getting the better of the struggle.

The half-breed had drawn his knife, but the horse-dealer had twisted his wrist till he dropped it, and they were fighting without weapons, and the horse-dealer's size and strength told.

Strong and wiry as the half-breed was, he was gradually overcome, and forced down in the grass. The horse-dealer's heavy knee was planted on his chest, pinning him down, and under it Le Couteau wriggled and spat like a wild-cat.

"I guess this is my deal!" said Black Pequod grimly. "You can wriggle all you want, you son of an Injun, but you won't get out of that. Where is the other galoot, Richards?"

"Down in the grass," answered Frank.

"Did you wing him?"

"Yea," Frank shivered a little. "In the arm, I think. He seems to be badly hurt."

"Good! Go through this galoot while I hold him down, and take his weapons away."

Frank Richards jerked a revolver from the half-breed's belt. His knife was in the grass with his rifle. He had no other weapon. Le Couteau was still struggling, but his strength was almost spent, his breath came in thick and heavy gasps. But his eyes still blazed up like those of a wild animal.

"Now take off his belt," said Black Pequod.

Frank obeyed.

"You size up what you're goin' to get, you half-breed skunk!" said Black Pequod grimly. "I'm not goin' to tote you along to Kicking Mule, I reckon. You ain't worth the trouble. I'm going to hide you till you can't crawl, and I guess that will be a lesson to you to keep clear of Gaston Pequod. You savvy?"

The half-breed only panted.

Black Pequod removed his crushing knee, and Le Couteau began to struggle again feebly. But he was exhausted and helpless in the powerful grasp of the horse-dealer.

Black Pequod gripped him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him over. He grasped the belt in his other hand.

they he lashed and lashed, with the wretched prairie thief wriggling and panting and howling in his merciless grasp.

Frank Richards looked on grimly.

It was less than the rascal deserved for attempted robbery and murder, less than he would have received at the hands of the sheriff. But it was a terrible punishment. The heavy leather belt was a formidable weapon in Gaston Pequod's hand, and he did not spare the half-breed. The blows rained on the wretched ruffian, till Frank Richards was fain to turn away his eyes from the grim scene.

Le Couteau's struggling had ceased now, his howling had died into faint moans, and he hung helpless in the grasp of the horse-dealer, while the blows still rained down.

Frank Richards felt that he could stand no more at last, and he started forward.

"Stop!" he exclaimed. And as the horse-dealer did not heed, Frank caught at his descending arm.

Black Pequod gave him a dark and threatening look.

"Let up!" he said harshly.

"He's had enough," said Frank. "You're killing the man! Let him alone now—let him alone!"

"Stand back!"

With a rough shove, Black Pequod sent the schoolboy staggering, and he fell in the grass, and the heavy belt rained blows on the moaning half-breed.

Frank Richards sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing. Thief and cut-throat as the half-breed was, Frank had had enough of this. He ran at the horse-dealer, seized his arm, and tore away the belt from his grasp. Pequod, with an oath, swung round on him, letting the half-breed fall into the grass. Frank flung the belt far across the plain.

"You meddling cub—" began the horse-dealer furiously.

Frank Richards faced him coolly

enough. Black Pequod was evidently a hard case, but the schoolboy was not afraid of him. For a moment the horse-dealer looked as if he would spring at the schoolboy; but he restrained his anger, and turned away. He called to his horse, which came trotting up to him. The half-breed lay moaning in the grass, exhausted and powerless to move; at a short distance Yreka Bill's groans came at intervals. The conflict had been disastrous enough to the prairie thieves, but it would have ended very different without the interposition of Frank Richards. Probably the horse-dealer realised that, for his brow cleared. The last sun-rays were sinking into gloom, darkness was overspreading the prairie as Black Pequod mounted his horse.

"I guess we've come out the big end of the horn, sonny!" he said. "I ain't forgotten what I owe you; but you'd better remember that Gaston Pequod ain't the man to be checked or to interfere with. But you've done me a good turn. I reckon I'm seeing you safe to Kicking Mule. Jump up behind me."

Frank Richards hesitated.

"The wounded man yonder—" he began.

The horse-dealer laughed.

"Let his pard see to him when he feels better," he said. "Saprist! I guess I'm not caring. You're a tender-foot, I reckon. If you want to look after Yreka Bill, stay here alone and look after him. He will knock you on the head when you've done it. Are you coming or not?"

He made a movement to start.

"I'm coming," answered Frank Richards quietly.

"That shows you've got some hoss sense!" answered Black Pequod, in a jeering tone. "Jump up, and don't waste any more time fooling!"

At a steady trot the double-laden horse moved on northward as the stars came out one by one in the sky. Frank Richards did not speak. He was not

inclined to talk with his strange and surly companion, glad as he was of a lift into the settlement. Black Peguod was equally taciturn. He did not utter a word as they rode over the darkened plains. A bunch of glimmering lights appeared in sight at last, and then Frank Richards spoke.

"Is that the camp?"

"I guess so!"

Silence again, broken only by the trot of the wearied horse, until they were riding into the rugged, unpaved street of Kicking Mule. Then Black Peguod half-turned his head and spoke.

"You've told me you're on tramp looking for a job?"

"Yes," said Frank.

"Got anywhere in camp to sleep to-night?"

"No."

"I guess you're up against it," said the horse-dealer, not unkindly. "But you've done me a good turn, and I reckon I'm giving you a roof over your head to-night. Know anything about horses?"

"Something," said Frank. "I've lived on a ranch."

"I guess I might be able to give you a job if you understand horses, and want to make yourself useful."

Frank did not answer at once.

The grim, forbidding-looking horse-dealer was not the man he wanted for a boss, and he could not forget the ruthlessness with which Black Peguod had treated the half-breed. But he reflected that beggars could not be choosers, and that he might go farther and fare worse. Any job was better than nothing to the homeless school-boy.

"Well," rapped out the horse-dealer, "what do you say?"

"Thank you for the chance. I'll do my best," answered Frank Richards.

"I guess I'll try you, then."

And a few minutes later Frank Richards dismounted with Black Peguod at the gate of the horse-ranch.

CHAPTER 12

At the Horse Ranch:

"GET down! We're home." Frank Richards dismounted. A glimmer of moonlight showed up a long building of pine-logs laid flat, surrounded by a wooden veranda painted green. Outbuildings and corrals loomed dimly out of the shadows, backed by clumps of fir and pines.

Black Peguod, the horse-dealer of Kicking Mule, crashed his riding-whip on the door of the ranch-house.

Crash, crash!

A light glimmered through the shutters of a window, and there was a sound of footsteps within.

The horse-dealer crashed his whip again impatiently as the bolts were withdrawn inside.

The pinewood door opened, and a lantern gleamed out into the spring night.

Frank Richards was tired—so tired and sleepy that he found difficulty in keeping his eyes open. His long tramp on the prairies that day had thoroughly fatigued him. He hardly looked at the fellow who opened the door—a squat, burly Indian half-breed.

The latter came out and took Black Peguod's horse, to lead it away to the corral, and the horse-dealer strode into the house, followed by Frank Richards.

He found himself in a room which was evidently the living-room of the horse-ranch. An uncovered pinewood table of planks laid on rough trestles stood in the centre, and the chairs were simply formed of up-ended boxes. At one end of the room was a black iron stove. Supper was laid on the table, evidently in readiness for the return of the master of the house.

"I guess you can sit down!" granted the horse-dealer.

Frank Richards sat on one of the boxes at the table.

"Hungry?"

"Yes."

"Set to, then."

Black Pequod was a man of few words. But Frank was too tired to want to talk or to listen. He started on the bread and cold meat with a keen appetite, following the example of his new employer. The half-breed came back into the room, and boiled the door again.

"Anything more, master?" he asked, looking at the horse-dealer and taking no notice of Frank Richards.

"No; you can vamoose."

The half-breed disappeared.

Black Pequod ate in grim silence with the appetite of a wolf. Then he lifted a large black bottle from a box, and half-filled a tumbler with potent spirit.

Frank laid down his knife and fork.

"Finished?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Then go to your bunk. You'll have to turn out at sun-up."

"I shall be ready." Frank rose to his feet and glanced about him.

"Where shall I sleep, sir?"

Black Pequod jerked a stubby thumb in the direction taken by the half-breed.

"You'll find a bunk in the next room, with Pete. You'll bunk down there."

"Good-night, Mr. Pequod!"

The taciturn horse-dealer gave a grunt which might have meant good-night. Frank Richards passed into the next room, which was quite in darkness. He was rather startled to find two luminous eyes fixed upon him from the gloom. Pete, the half-breed, was looking at him over the edge of a bunk.

"You stay here?" he asked.

But Frank Richards was tired.

He turned into the bunk in his clothes, and drew the blanket over him. The night was cold. Rough as his quarters were, they were better than the open hillside where he had expected to spend the night.

The half-breed spoke again, but Frank did not answer. He hardly heard him. He was too tired for talk. In a

couple of minutes he was deep in slumber, and his eyes did not open again until the morning sun was gleaming down upon the horse ranch of Kicking Mule.

CHAPTER 14.

Frank Richards New Job!

"TURN out!"

A sharp, rough voice broke in on Frank Richards' slumbers.

He sat up in the bunk a little confusedly, and blinked round him. The early sun rays glimmered in at a little window. Pete's bunk was empty; the half-breed was already out.

Black Pequod, looking blacker and grimmer than ever by daylight, stood by Frank's bunk, with his Stetson hat on his head and a heavy quirt, or cowboy whip, under his arm. Frank Richards blinked at him, and rubbed his eyes.

"It's daylight!" grunted Gaston Pequod. "No slackers on this ranch, Richards. Turn out!"

"I don't want to slack, sir," answered Frank. "I'm ready to turn out."

"Get a move on, then! You'll have to ride in a quarter of an hour."

"Very well."

The horse-dealer tramped out in his heavy boots, and Frank jumped lightly from the bunk.

A sound sleep had refreshed him, and though he was still feeling the effects of the previous day's fatigue, he was ready for the new day and its work.

Frank did not want to slack, and it was pretty clear that life was strenuous on the Pequod Ranch.

Of washing facilities there appeared to be none, and Frank emerged from the bed-room, and found Pete, the half-breed, in the living-room, grabbing at food on the table and eating a good deal like a hungry coyote. Pete grinned at him.

"Anywhere to wash here?" asked Frank.

"You wash in the creek if you want," answered the half-breed.

"Is that where you wash?"

"No wash."

"Oh!" said Frank.

"You tenderfoot," grinned Pete, "you no waste time, or Black Pequod after you with his stockwhip. Work hard here, you bet. Black Pequod no good temper dis morning; tanglefoot last night."

Pete jerked a brown thumb towards an empty bottle lying among straw and rubbish on the floor.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Frank.

He was half sorry that he had accepted Gaston Pequod's offer of employment on the horse-ranch. But he had accepted it now, and he was determined to see it through. It was not Frank's way to give in because there were difficulties or hardships. And he had to fend for himself now, and earning one's bread in the Canadian West was no sinecure at the best of times.

Mr. Pequod had told him he was to ride in a quarter of an hour, so there was no time to waste.

But Frank was accustomed to his morning tub, and during his tramp on the prairie he had had to miss it, and he missed it very much. So he looked for a towel to take down to the creek. There was no towel to be found in the bunk-room; but he annexed a strip of rough canvas, and, with it on his arm, hurried out of the house.

The sun was coming up over the Rocky Mountains in the east, and the scene that burst on Frank Richards' view was one of glorious beauty.

During his ride to the ranch with Black Pequod it had been dark, and he had been too fatigued to note his surroundings very keenly. Now in the sunrise he saw them clearly, with a catch of the breath at the beauty of the scene.

Eastward rose range on range of hills, far away towards the snow-capped mountains of the Rockies. Belts of firs and pines glimmered in the sun.

Here and there a sheet of water, or a creek caught the sun, and flashed back the light in waves of gold.

Westward, in front of the ranch-house, the hills fell away to the plains, thick woods interspersed with huge, barren rocks, with here and there a leaping torrent.

Away in a valley he caught a glimpse of the clustered roofs of the camp of Kicking Mule.

The thick grass and saskatoon grew right up to the house, and he was knee-deep in it as he strode out.

Behind the buildings the creek flowed, the bank trampled and muddy from the hoofs of many animals. Two or three savage-looking dogs snarled at him as he passed. A ranch hand, in leather trousers, red shirt, and a Stetson hat, came lurching by, and stared at him, and gave a grunt in response to Frank's cheery "Good-morning!"

He stripped by the creek under a clump of trees, and plunged into the water. It was cold and sharp, but it was delightful to the schoolboy, who had not changed his clothes for several days.

But he did not stay long in the water. He jumped out, rubbed himself dry on the rough canvas, and donned his clothes rapidly. Feeling much better for "tubber," he hurried back to the house, hoping that there was time to snatch breakfast before his duties commenced.

Pete was gone; but there was cold meat and corn-bread on the table, and Frank hurriedly made a meal. The stove was unlighted, and there was no sign of tea or coffee; but luxuries of that kind the schoolboy of Cedar Creek had already learned to do without. He was munching bread and meat as fast as he could, when Black Pequod's voice was heard outside:

"Jonas!"

"Hallo!"

"Where's that boy?"

"Durned if I know!"

"Rouse him out!"

The rough ranch-hand looked into the room. Evidently this was Jonas.

"You're wanted!" he snapped.

"Hustle about, can't you?"

"Right-hot!" answered Frank.

He shoved the remainder of a sandwich into his pocket, and hurried out of the house.

Black Pequod greeted him with a scowl.

"I guess I'm waiting for you!" he snapped.

"I'm quite ready, sir."

"Saddle up, then!"

"Where is my horse?"

"In the corral, you fool!"

"Oh!"

Frank ran into the corral. There were six or seven horses there, running loose. Frank caught one of them easily enough, and he found the necessary trappings in a shed. In record time he had saddled and bridled the horse, mounted, and joined the horse-rancher outside. There was no word of commendation from Black Pequod for his rapidity. As he came riding up, the rancher started, and Frank rode with him.

The track they followed slanted down towards the valley where Frank had seen the roofs of the camp.

Frank, as he looked about him, wondered at finding a ranch in so hilly and broken a country. It was very different from his uncle's cattle-ranch in the Thompson Valley, where the horses and steers wandered over rolling prairie.

Here the ground was broken and rugged, and rough acclivities were numerous, and the track wound through patches of timber, sometimes blocked by a fallen trunk. In a short time Frank found that they were ascending, and so far as he could see, they were following no track at all.

But it was not his business to ask questions; he followed his employer without a word.

It was Black Pequod who broke the silence after an hour's riding.

"Keep your eyes open for the horses."

"The horses!" repeated Frank.

"Yep."

"Very well," said Frank, without clearly understanding.

"We've a dozen to round up," explained Pequod. "They've got to be roused out and driven down to the corral. They're wild and skittish, and you'll have to use your senses—if you've got any! Keep your eyes on the likely places, and don't go to sleep!"

"Very well, sir."

How loose horses were to be roused out of that tangled wilderness was a mystery to Frank Richards. But he soon found that the task, though difficult, was not impossible. He understood that the horses were turned out to feed and wander at will until tracked and rounded up. The rancher and his companion had ridden ten miles in, what seemed to Frank, a trackless wilderness, when Black Pequod stopped at last, in a patch of swamp, and pointed with his riding-whip. In the soft mud of the swamp, horse-tracks, unshod, were clearly visible.

"I guess you know a horse-track when you see it?" he grunted.

"Yes, sir."

"Now look for the critters."

He waved Frank away in a different direction, and in a few minutes he was out of sight.

Frank lost no time.

He had learned a good deal of tracking from his cousin Bob, on the Lawless Ranch; and his knowledge came in useful now. In a short time he came on a bunch of horses, feeding by a spring, and he tried his hand at driving them.

He cracked his long whip as he started towards them, and the horses galloped, with Frank behind them.

Two of them broke away and bolted; but, with luck, he kept five of them in a bunch, heading them off as they

tried to escape, and drove them down the hill.

He had only the vaguest idea of the way he had come from the ranch; but Black Pequod had left him to his own devices, and Frank could only do his best.

He was surprised himself at his success in keeping the five half wild animals together. He drove them before him in a bunch. He found himself following a hoof-marked track that led down through belts of timber and shrub; and he was greatly relieved when Black Pequod emerged into the trail, driving a bunch of horses before him.

It was long past noon now, and the sun was hot, and Frank's face was wet with perspiration. The rancher gave him a glance, and a grunt of approval.

"You're no fool!" he remarked. "Keep the horses together until I come back!"

"Right!"

Frank had a dozen horses in his charge now, every one of whom was looking for a chance to bolt, so his task was not easy. He had to keep constantly on the alert, riding round the bunch, cracking his whip, and heading them along the trail.

He lunched on the remains of his breakfast, which he was glad he had placed in his pocket; the keen, mountain air made him very hungry.

It was an hour later that Black Pequod rejoined him, with four or five more horses.

What had seemed so difficult to the schoolboy of Cedar Creek, was easy enough for the experienced rancher. Black Pequod drove the horses on, and Frank had little to do after that. The sun was sinking in the west when they arrived at the ranch.

"Get the critters into the corral!" grunted Pequod.

"Yes, sir."

The rancher strode into the house, leaving Frank to dispose of the horses. Jonas came to his help, and the animals

were driven into the corral, and the pinewood bars dropped into place. The ranchman grinned at him.

"Tired—hay?" he asked.

"A little!" gasped Frank.

As a matter of fact, he was stumbling with fatigue, after a heavy day's work from sunrise to sunset.

"I guess you'll get used to it," grinned Jonas. "Black Pequod is a hard case, I reckon."

"Is it like this every day here?" asked Frank.

"More or less, I calculate."

"Oh, my hat!"

"What's Mr. Pequod giving you?" asked Jonas.

"He hasn't mentioned wages yet."

"Waal, whatever it is, you'll earn it," said the ranchman. "Black Pequod will see to that. Keep clear of him when he's been at the tanglefoot, kid. You'd better."

"Oh!"

Frank Richards stumbled away to the ranch-house. As he came in at the door he was greeted by a loud howl of anguish.

CHAPTER 15.

Frank Richards—Chore-Boy!

CRACK, crack, crack!

It was the rancher's stock-whip that was cracking, and it was cracking on the shoulders of Pete, the half-breed.

The wretched chore-boy was dodging round the living-room, yelling as the horse-dealer whipped him.

Frank Richards stood in the doorway and stared.

"Fast asleep—hay?" roared Gaston Pequod. "Stove out—hay? Where's my supper, you lazy thief?"

Pete yelled dismally by way of reply.

He made a dart for the door, with the angry rancher just behind him, still lashing out with the stock-whip.

Frank had a sickening feeling. He had seen already that his new employer was a hard case, but he had not

expected brutality like this. The half-breed stumbled in the doorway and fell, and the heavy lash of the whip smote him as he lay.

"Sir, Pequod, stop!" shouted Frank.

"What?"

"Let him alone."

"Why, you pesky young fool," roared Black Pequod, in surprise and anger, "do you want some yourself?"

Frank's eyes blazed.

Pete stumbled to his feet, and Black Pequod seized him by the shoulders and swung him outside. Then he kicked him furiously.

"Git!" he roared. "Let me see the last of you! Vamoose the ranch, you copper-coloured thief! Git!"

A powerful kick sent the half-breed flying.

He dropped on his hands and knees several yards away, picked himself up, howled, and fled.

Black Pequod turned back into the house with a curse.

His eyes glinted at Frank.

"That pesky scallywag's sacked," he said. "You'll take his place, Richards, and if you don't do better, look out!"

Frank breathed hard.

The horse-dealer was evidently accustomed to laying the stock-whip about the half-breed, when he felt so disposed; but Frank was not quite prepared to stand such treatment as that. Fortunately, Black Pequod threw his whip aside, and dropped into a seat.

"You're doing the chores now," he said. "Get moving! Don't stand there like a stuck pig! You know how to cook, I suppose?"

"I—I'll try."

"Get a move on then, you fool!"

Frank Richards restrained the hot reply that rose to his lips, and set about his new duties. He was fatigued, but it was no time for fatigue. He made his way into the kitchen and started.

Pete had done the "chores" in a very rough-and-ready manner. Frank found everything dirty, and nothing in its place. However, he contrived to turn

out a supper at which Mr. Pequod did not grumble. After that he took a broom and swept up, and washed up in the kitchen. It was ten o'clock when he got to bed at last, tired out.

When Frank turned out in the morning nothing was to be seen of Pete.

That wretched youth was evidently gone for good, possibly not much afflicted at the loss of such a job. Frank Richards had to take on his duties, being now the "chore-boy" of Pequod Ranch. But Frank was no slacker, and he was cleanly in his ways, and he turned out a breakfast for the rancher in a style very different from Pete's. After breakfast he washed and swept, and fetched water from the spring, and set his kitchen in order. He was called out to help with the horses during the morning; but in the afternoon there were no duties for him to perform on the ranch, and he turned out the kitchen, and cleaned everything from beginning to end.

Two or three days passed in like manner, Frank Richards doing his best to settle down to his new job. But he found it difficult enough. A chore-boy's life was not an easy one, but Frank would not have minded that; he was not lazy. But the continual round of hard work from sunrise to sunset was wearing, and the black looks and grunting of the early horse-dealer did not make the place a cheerful one.

Frank realised that the Pequod Ranch was not likely to be his home for long; but he "stuck it out" courageously, doing his duty with a stout heart. He was learning a good deal, and preparing himself for a better job, at least. And at least he hoped to save a few weeks' wages, to give him a start when he left, and went further afield to seek his fortune. On Saturday Mr. Pequod handed him six dollars, his pay, and it was agreeable enough to receive cash of his own earning. Late that afternoon Mr. Pequod mounted his horse, and rode away down the valley trail to Kicking Mule.

Jonas, the ranchman, led his horse out of the corral a little later, and stopped at the door to speak to Frank Richards.

"I guess I'm off," he remarked. "You keep the doors and windows bolted, young Richards. I shan't be back till Monday; but the boss will be home to-night; and when you let him in you'd better hike off and sleep in the corral-shed."

"What for?" asked Frank.

Jonas grinned.

"The boss fills up on Saturday nights," he explained.

"Fills up?" said Frank.

"Tanglefoot!" said Jonas. "He will hang on at the Mule Saloon till they close, and then he'll come up the trail feeling red. If you don't want his stock-whip around you, you'd better keep clear of him till to-morrow. You savvy?"

Frank's eyes glistened.

"You mean he will come home drunk?" he asked.

"That's about the size of it; and when he's drunk and ugly, Black Pequod is a galoot to keep away from," said Jonas. "I'm giving you the cinch for your own good. Keep clear of him till he's slept it off, and don't answer a word to anything he says. So-long!"

And, with a nod, the ranchman rode away down the trail, evidently bent on a week-end "bender" in camp.

Frank Richards was left alone.

He was not in a very happy mood.

His first job since leaving his home in the Thompson Valley was not a promising one. The thought of the burly, savage-tempered rancher returning late at night, drunk and violent, was dismaying. Frank was strongly tempted to give himself the "sack," and turn his back on the horse-ranch there and then.

But a sense of duty to his employer restrained him from taking that step. He made a round of the corrals and enclosures in the red sunset, seeing that the animals were safe, and as darkness came on he went into the

house and lighted the lamps. He bolted doors and fastened windows, and then hunted out an old coverless magazine, and sat down by the stove to read until his master came home. As he had to let Mr. Pequod in when he returned, he could not go to bed.

Midnight came and passed, and Frank was asleep in his chair by that time, leaning on the table, his head on his arm.

He was awakened suddenly by a thundering uproar at the door. The butt of a stock-whip was crashing there.

He started up from slumber and rubbed his eyes.

Crash, crash!

"Asleep—hay?" roared the voice of Black Pequod outside. "Let me in, you slacking scallywag! Open this door, you pesky vermin!"

Crash, crash!

Frank hurried to the door.

He jerked back the bolts and opened the door, and the rancher was revealed in the lamplight, standing there unsteadily, with a crimson face and ruffled beard, his Stetson hat on the back of his tousled head. His look showed that undoubtedly he had "filled up" at the Mule Saloon.

He gave Frank a savage glare.

"Sleeping, hay?" he grunted, as he strode in.

"I fell asleep, Mr. Pequod," answered Frank. "It's very late."

"You'll keep awake next time. Take that!"

"That" was a savage lash of the stock-whip.

The heavy thong struck Frank Richards across the shoulders, and he started back with a cry.

"I guess I'll learn you!" said Black Pequod, and he followed the chore-boy as he retreated, lashing out with the whip.

This was evidently the treatment Mr. Pequod had been accustomed to mete out to Pete, the half-breed, when he was "drunk and ugly." But he had very different material to deal with in

this case, Frank Richards darted round the table, his eyes blazing.

"Keep off, you drunken fool!" he shouted.

"What?"

"Stand back!"

With an oath, the horse-dealer lurched round the table after him, lashing out with the stockwhip.

Another and another lash caught the chore-boy of Pequod Ranch. Frank Richards caught up a heavy wooden stool.

"Hands off!" he shouted.

Lash!

Frank hesitated no longer. He hurled the heavy stool fairly at the ruffian. It struck Black Pequod on his broad chest, and the rancher went with a crash to the floor.

CHAPTER 16.

A Lesson for Mr. Pequod!

BLACK PEQUOD crashed down, the stockwhip falling from his hand.

He sprawled on the pine planks at the chore-boy's feet.

Frank caught up the whip, and tossed it out of the open doorway into the darkness.

Black Pequod sat up unsteadily. The crash of the stool on his chest had hurt him, and he seemed dazed. There was something very like murder in his black eyes as he scrambled up.

Fortunately for Frank, the liquor the horse-dealer had consumed was too much for him. He rolled over again, helplessly, uttering curses in mixed English and French.

Frank did not linger.

He backed out of the room, his eyes on the ruffian, and stepped out of the ranch-house into the night.

As he went he heard Black Pequod raising himself by clinging to the table. The horse-dealer was on his feet at last, muttering savagely. He lurched out of the house, evidently looking for his rebellious chore-boy; and if his powerful hands had fallen upon Frank

Richards then, the chore-boy of Pequod Ranch would have suffered severely. But Frank was safe in the darkness. He crouched by the corral fence, hidden in the shadows, while the intoxicated ruffian lurched and stumbled to and fro in search of him.

The horse-dealer gave it up at last and stumbled back into the ranch. Frank remained where he was, not in an enviable mood.

His limbs were aching from the savage lashes of the stockwhip. And he realized that this was the end of his job at the Pequod Ranch. Hardships and hard work he did not mind, but this was the limit. He quitted the corral fence at last, and approached the house. Black Pequod had left the door wide open, and Frank could see into the living-room, where the lamp still burned.

There was a gargling of liquor, and then the crash of a falling bottle. Then he heard the rancher roll over on the floor to sleep.

He stepped into the house.

Black Pequod, stretched on a bear-skin on the floor, was fast asleep, and he did not move as Frank entered.

Frank watched him for some time in silence.

The sight of a man overcome by liquor was revolting enough. How long the brute would remain asleep Frank did not know; but he knew that when the horse-dealer awakened he would awake in a savage temper, and ready for any brutal violence. Frank had determined to quit the ranch, but he could not take the trail until the morning. He was not disposed to plunge into the wilderness in the middle of the night.

He went into the kitchen and found a coil of rope, and came back to the living-room.

Then he bent over the rancher, and proceeded to secure him. Pets, the half-breed, certainly would never have ventured to lay hands upon his savage master, but Frank had no hesitation

In doing so, He intended to teach Black Perrod a lesson before he left.

He knotted the rope to the rancher's ankles and wrists, and secured it to the legs of the heavy table.

He left a loose length of rope to allow the man free movement; but Black Pequod was securely fastened to the table, and when he came to his senses he would be unable to get on his feet.

Satisfied that he was secure from mischief, Frank Richards went to the bunk-room after locking up, and turned in.

In a few minutes he was fast asleep in his bunk.

It was a couple of hours later that he was awakened by movements in the adjoining room.

He sat up in the bunk and listened. Black Pegoud had come to himself, and was probably astonished to find himself secured like a recalcitrant horse. He struggled and stumbled for some time, and then shouted to the chore-boy.

"Richards!"

"Hallo!" called back Frank.

"Did you tie me up like this, you young scallywag?"

"Yes."

"I guess I'll lambaste you till you can't crawl!" roared the enraged rancher.

"I guess not," answered Frank coolly.

"Come and let me loose!"

"Rate!"

"Wun-a-ti"

"You're going to stay like that all morning," answered Frank Richards, "and don't make a row—You're keeping me awake."

A yell of rage was the answer.

"Will you be quiet, Mr. Pequod?" asked Frank Richards. "I'm going to take the trail in the morning, and I want some sleep."

"Come and loose me!"

"Shut up!"

"I'll skin you! I'll smash you! I—I—I'll——" The horse-dealer spluttered with rage.

"Will you be quiet?"

A torrent of savage oaths answered. Frank Richards slipped from his bunk, took a stockwhip, and went into the living-room with a grim look on his face. The fastened man on the floor met him with a glare of ferocious rage.

"You're going to keep quiet, Mr. Pequod," said Frank Richards coolly. "Another yell from you, and you get some of your own medicine! Savvy?"

"I—I'll smash you! I'll cut you in pieces! I'll— Yaroooooh!" roared the rancher, as the stockwhip came down on his broad shoulders.

Frank put his beef into that liah, and it hurt. It was some of the horse-dealer's own "medicine," but he did not seem to like it. He struggled with the rope and roared like a buffalo.

"Will you be quiet now?" asked the chore-boy.

Black Pequot was very far from quiet. He roared and struggled, and so great was his strength that he dragged over the heavy table to which handed out the stockwhip pretty freely of crockery round him on the planks.

"Very well," said Frank, setting his lips. "You've asked for it, Mr. Pequod, and you're going to get it. You've handed out the stockship pretty freely yourself. Perhaps some of it will do you good. A thrashing may bring you to your senses."

And with that the chore-boy laid on
the whin.

The hapless ruffian roared and howled and struggled, dragging the heavy table after him round the room as he strove to escape the lashes. Chairs and boxes and crockery went flying right and left. If the ruffian could have got loose then, the chore-boy of Pequod Ranch would probably have been murdered on the spot. But Frank had done his work well with the ropes, and Black Pequot was quite secure.

So long as the torrent of curses lasted Frank laid on the whip, and the horse-dealer was silent at last, gasping, spluttering, and looking at the chore-boy.

with wolfish rage and hate in his eyes.

"That's better," said Frank cheerfully. "Now keep quiet, Mr. Pequod, and I'll leave you alone."

The rancher opened his mouth to hurl out a fresh torrent of curses, but as Frank raised the stockwhip he forbore. Black Pequod was already learning the very necessary lesson of self-control.

Frank Richards returned to the bunk-room, and turned in. A few minutes later he heard the rancher's voice, very subdued now.

"Richards!"

"Well?"

"Come and let me loose, boy! I guess I'll look over what you've done."

Frank Richards laughed.

"Do you think I'm duffer enough to trust you?" he said. "You're going to stay like that till morning!"

Frank Richards was soon asleep again, and he slept soundly till the morning sun glimmered in. Whether the horse-dealer slept or not he did not know, and cared little.

In the sunny morning Frank turned out and went down to the creek to bathe, taking no notice of the horse-dealer. He came in and cooked his breakfast in the kitchen, and after disposing of it he brought in breakfast for the rancher, placing it within his reach.

Black Pequod did not touch it. It was Frank he wanted to touch—hard! But the chore-boy was out of his power now.

"There's your rations," said Frank Richards. "I'm going now, Mr. Pequod. I hope you'll treat your next chore-boy a bit more decently. I've done my best to give you a lesson."

Black Pequod gritted his teeth.

"Let me loose, then!" he muttered.

"So that you can handle me before I go?" said Frank. "Not likely."

"You can't leave me like this!" panted the horse-dealer. "Jonas won't be back till to-morrow."

Frank nodded.

"I'll loosen one of the ropes," he

said. "Just enough for you to work one hand free in about an hour. Then you can untie yourself. It will take time. I've put in plenty of knots. It will keep you busy till about noon, Mr. Pequod. While you're busy you can think what a surly brute you are, and make some new resolutions for the future Savvy?"

A curse was the only reply.

Frank finished his preparations for departure. He had little to carry, and his preparations were few. Then he came back into the living-room and loosened the rope round one of the rancher's wrists. He was very careful not to loosen it too far. He did not want Black Pequod galloping on his trail when he left.

"That will do," said Frank, rising. "You can get that paw loose in about an hour, Mr. Pequod."

"A thousand curses——"

"Hold your tongue! I'm jolly well inclined to give you some more of the stockwhip before I go, anyhow."

The horse-dealer contented himself with a savage glare, and Frank left him.

It was high noon when at last the savage horse-dealer was free and able to tramp out of the ranch. By that time Frank Richards was many a mile away, free as air, and glad enough that he was no longer the chore-boy of Pequod Ranch.

CHAPTER 17.

Hold Up!

"H ALT!"

Frank Richards stopped in his tracks.

Over a rough boulder on the rocky trail ahead of him a Stetson hat rose into view, and a rifle-barrel glistened in the sun.

A moment before that rocky trail, winding up the canyon from Hard Pan, had seemed utterly deserted and desolate, the silence broken only by the tramping feet of the wandering school-boy.

Frank had left Hard Pan at sunrise, on his way to the placer diggings at Indian Creek, and he had begun to doubt whether he had missed the trail. But in the solitary foothills of the Cascade Mountains there was no indication of the route, and he could only push on and trust to luck. He did not look scared, though he was startled, as the rifle-barrel bore on him from the boulder in the trail. The outcast of Cedar Creek had nothing to lose; he was not worth the while of the hardest-up road-agent to be found between the Yukon and the American border.

"Put up your hands!" came the rapped order, as Frank Richards stopped.

Frank put up his hands.

There was no arguing with a levelled rifle within a dozen feet of him, even if he had been inclined to resist. A slight smile came over his sunburnt face as he obeyed the order. The road-agent—if road-agent he was—was booked for a disappointment when he came to "go through" his victim.

"Right-ho!" called back Frank. "Up they go!"

The man rose further into view from behind the boulder.

Frank gazed at him rather curiously.

He was a big, powerful man, with a face tanned by sun and wind almost to the hue of copper. But he was a white man; his features showed that. His face, though rugged, looked honest enough. As he looked at it, Frank wondered whether he was, after all, a rustler on the trail for plunder. He did not look the part; but what other object he could have, in holding up a lonely traveller was a mystery.

The big man came down the rocky trail towards Frank. He had lowered the rifle now, but still held it ready for instant use. His deep-set, keen eyes scanned the schoolboy.

"Keep 'em up!" he snapped.

"Right!"

"Where are the others?"

"What others?" asked Frank.

"You're not alone here?"

"Yes."

"I guess that's a lie!"

The bronzed man looked past Frank, scanning the windings of the wide, rocky canyon below. A gopher was to be seen in the distance, sunning himself in a patch of scrub; that was the only living thing in view.

"Are you heeled?" asked the bronzed man abruptly, his glance fixing on Frank Richards again.

"Armed? No!"

"I guess I'm going to see."

Dropping his rifle into the hollow of his arm, the bronzed man ran his hand through Frank's pockets.

The schoolboy submitted quietly.

There was nothing of value to steal; and besides, he had realized by this time that the bronzed man, whatever he was, was not a thief.

The man found no weapon about him, excepting a pocket-knife, which he left in Frank's pocket. He puckered his brows in a puzzled way as he stared at the schoolboy.

"You're not heeled," he said, "and you're only a kid! I reckon you was sent up here as a spy!"

"What the thump is there to spy on in these foothills?" exclaimed Frank.

"You've never heard of Bronze Bill?"

"Never!"

"Never heard that he's located a rich strike in the foothills that a crowd of galoots are after?"

"No."

"I guess I can't afford to take that on trust," said the bronzed man. "You've come up here, and you'll stay. Get a move on, and walk in front of me. If you try any monkey-tricks, remember there's a loaded rifle just behind you!"

"But——"

"Get a move on!"

Bronze Bill made a motion with the rifle.

There was nothing for it but to obey.

Frank Richards moved on, and the big man followed him—every now and then turning his head to scan the can-

you behind him. But the wild rocks and scrubby larches were silent and deserted as ever as he marched his prisoner away.

CHAPTER 11.

Held in Bondage!

FRANK RICHARDS tramped on ahead of the big miner, wondering how the strange adventure was going to end.

But he was not feeling particularly troubled by the scrape he had fallen into. Frank was down on his luck; there was hardly a cent remaining in his pockets, and his chance of making a "strike" at Indian Creek was very problematic. His old home was barred to him; Cedar Creek School seemed almost like a vision of a dream when he thought of it now. He did not mean to be kept a prisoner if he could help it. But at least, so long as Bronze Bill detained him he would have to feed him—and Frank had been wondering where his next meal would come from. So his spirits were not dashed in any way as he tramped on in front of the broad-shouldered miner.

"Stop!"

Frank halted.

Twenty yards or so along the rough canyon from the spot where he had been captured, Bronze Bill rapped out the order to stop.

Frank looked round him.

He had gathered that the big miner was working on some hidden claim in the foothills; but there was no sign of a claim to be seen here. He glanced back inquiringly at the bronzed man.

In this spot the canyon wall rose in an almost perpendicular rock, to the height of several hundred feet.

In the rocky wall was a narrow opening, not more than three feet across, and as black as a pit.

Bronze Bill jerked his thumb towards the narrow cave.

"That's the way!"

"Into the cave?" asked Frank.

"Sure!"

"Oh, all right!"

Frank stepped out of the burning sunlight into the dark, cool shadow of the cave.

The change from sunshine to shadow blinded him for some moments, and he stumbled and groped his way with his hands.

Behind him the miner's heavy boots rang on the rock.

Frank felt the rocky wall on either side of him as he stumbled on, the big miner close behind.

In a few minutes a glimmer of light came to his eyes.

Light of the sun, and a breath of fresh air fanned his cheeks. He realised that what he had taken for a cave was a kind of natural tunnel, leading into a deep and narrow gulch.

On all sides the gulch was enclosed by high walls of rock, bare and desolate. But at the bottom there was a rippling spring, round which grew herbage and several stunted trees.

The spring bubbled and rippled away in a creek, and by the side of the creek Frank discerned the tools of the placer-miner—spades and picks, rough wooden cradles for washing the gold. This was the hidden claim that Bronze Bill was working, ten miles into the foothills from the camp of Hard Pan.

"Oh!" exclaimed Frank.

"Get on!"

Frank Richards moved on into the open air of the locked gulch.

"Is this where you camp?" he asked.

"I reckon so."

"You've got a good claim here?" asked Frank.

"I reckon you know it," said Bronze Bill dryly. "I reckon them galoots sent you spying to nose it out!"

"You're mistaken about that—I'd never heard of you before," said Frank patiently.

Bronze Bill shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I reckon you're lying," he said coolly. "But, lying or not, I ain't taking any chances with you, young'un. You're

hyer, and hyer you're goin' to stay, dead or alive!"

"Alive, if it's all the same to you," said Frank Richards.

"I guess that depends on you. If you make a step to vamoose the ranch, you get winged instantar."

There was no doubt that the bronzed man meant what he said. Frank made no reply, but his intention was not changed. He did not intend to remain a prisoner in the locked gulch if a chance of escape presented itself.

The big man bent to a boulder that lay beside the opening of the tunnel and rolled it. It blocked the tunnel sufficiently to make it impossible for anyone to pass without removing the boulder.

As that was the only precaution he took, Frank could guess that there was no other way out of the locked gulch.

And, indeed, a single glance round him revealed that the high walls of rocks shutting in the gulch were inaccessible to a climber.

Frank's heart sank a little.

The gold-miner, who was watching his face, laughed grimly as he saw the schoolboy's expression change.

"I guess you're in for it, and you may as well make up your mind to it," he said. "It's your own funeral; you came up here of your own accord."

"You've no right to keep me a prisoner here," said Frank hotly.

"I guess safety comes first, young 'un. I found this hyer claim, and I'm workin' it, and I guess I ain't sharin' it out with all the loafers of Hard Pan!"

"You could register the claim, and make it your own legally," said Frank. "Then no one could touch it."

Bronze Bill laughed.

"I guess we're a bit too far from the towns for that," he answered. "That gang wouldn't take much notice of a sheriff thirty miles away. Write don't run in these foothills, sonny. Sides, the claim will peter out when I've worked it a few weeks. It's a rich placer, but it won't last. I guess I've taken out more'n half the dust already. I reckon

I hoped I'd clean up and get clear before that gang got on my trail. But Le Couteau scented it out, the half-breed hound!"

"Le Couteau?" exclaimed Frank.

"The galoot that sent you up hyer spryng," said Bronze Bill. "I reckon you know the name well enough."

Well enough indeed Frank remembered the name of the French-Indian half-breed.

"I know the name," he said. "If it is the same man, I have seen him."

"A breed, nearly as dark as an Injun," said Bronze Bill.

"I stopped him from robbing a rancher near Kicking Mule Camp some time ago," said Frank. "That's all I know of him. I did not know he was in Hard Pan."

"Mebbe, mebbe," said Bronze Bill. "But I'm not taking any chances. I know that Le Couteau was in Hard Pan last time I went down for tack, and I know he watched me changing dust at the hotel, and followed me into the hills arter, with three or four other breeds. I know I've sighted him on the foothills twice since, and that he's put a bullet through the rim of my hat at long distance. I guess I've been on the watch since, and I ain't taking any chances."

There was evidently no moving Bronze Bill from that determination, and Frank Richards had to make the best of it.

"Behave yourself hyer, and you won't get hurt," continued the big miner. "Try to vamoose, and I'll rub you out like a mosquito. You'll be wise to make the best of it. I've got grub hyer for a month, and you won't starve; and you can help me with the cradles, as I'm not going to feed you for nothing. Savvy?"

Frank nodded.

It was a curious situation, and not exactly a pleasant one; but Frank Richards felt no ill-will towards the mountain fossicker.

If the half-breed, Le Couteau, was watching for a chance to jump his

claim, the man was justified in keeping well on his guard, though it made matters awkward for Frank Richards.

"Hungry?" asked the big miner, with a change of manner.

In spite of his suspicions, Frank's look and manner had impressed him a little, and he seemed prepared to treat his prisoner well.

"Yes, rather," said Frank.

"I guess you can feed with me?"

Close by the rocky wall was a wooden shack, made of saplings and branches fastened together with withies. It was the rudest of shelters, and only of use in the summer months. Bronze Bill's camp in the locked gulch was evidently a very temporary one. From the shack he rolled out a rough box, which appeared to be his larder. Frank Richards sat on a boulder, and shared the rough and ready meal with his host or captor. There was hard corn-cake and cheese and bully beef, washed down by water from the spring. Bronze Bill added something stronger from a keg in the shack.

When the dinner was over, Bronze Bill filled a black pipe, and began to smoke. Frank was glad to lean back against the rock and rest. He had tramped a good many miles that morning, and he was tired.

But the rest was not of long duration.

The miner finished his pipe and put it away, and rose and stretched himself.

"I guess we're working now," he remarked.

"You want me to help?"

"Don't you want to work for your grub?"

"Certainly."

"I guess you'll have to, anyway," said Bronze Bill. "You could have kept clear, if you'd liked. Now for it, and don't shirk."

And Frank Richards set to work.

He was new to placer mining, though he had watched it sometimes in the Thompson Valley, and had a rough idea of the work. But under the directions

of Bronze Bill he worked cheerfully enough. He was, after all, earning his keep, and that was something. The shovelling of sand and gravel, the creaking of the rough cradles, went on industriously, and Frank soon saw that the claim was a rich one, though evidently limited in extent.

For centuries probably the little creek had been washing out the golden grains from the rocks, and the precious metal had gathered and reposed in the sandy bed of the stream. From the sands, golden glimmers came through the purling water, showing how rich was the deposit. But it was a small one, though rich, and it was not likely to take an experienced placer-miner more than a few weeks to "clean up" all that was to be gathered.

After that, it was Bronze Bill's intention to "pull up stakes," and clear off with what he had gained, abandoning the worked-out claim.

It was not till sundown that the two workers "knocked off." The big miner was pleased to give Frank a word of approval.

"I reckon you don't slack," he remarked; "and I guess, sonny, that if you stick it, and don't play any gum game, I'll squeeze out a handful of dollars for you when we strike camp. You can figure it out that you're booked to work for me for a few weeks, and pay to come. If it's true that you was looking for work, that'll suit you."

"It's true," said Frank, "and I'm willing to accept the offer, but not as a prisoner."

"I guess you're a prisoner till I've cleaned up here, sonny. And there's a bullet ready for you if you try to skip," said Bronze Bill gruffly.

Frank made no reply to that.

While the burly miner was preparing his evening meal, Frank wandered along the creek to the end of the locked gulch, to survey his surroundings. The miner raised no objections. It was clear that there was no way out, excepting by the tunnel. Frank followed the creek to its end, where it flowed through

a split in the rocky wall, over a sheer precipice. He could hear the sound of waters tumbling beyond, but he did not venture anywhere near the fall. There was no escape that way, excepting for a bird.

He had, in fact, satisfied himself that there was no chance of escape, unless on some occasion when Bronze Bill was absent from the gulch. From his meeting with the miner that morning, he knew that the lonely gold-seeker emerged sometimes into the open canyon, to scout for his expected enemies. On the next occasion Frank resolved to try his luck in getting through the tunnel; for the present, he could only make up his mind to yield to circumstances.

He rejoined Bronze Bill, who gave him a rather grim smile, no doubt guessing the cause of his exploration of the gulch. But he made no remark, and they ate their evening meal in silence. Then the miner tossed Frank a blanket from the shack; and he rolled himself in it, under the stars, and slept soundly enough.

CHAPTER 15.

The Enemy!

"WAKE up!"

The prod of a heavy boot in his ribs awakened Frank Richards from slumber.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, throwing the blanket aside.

"No slackers here, sonny!" said Bronze Bill. "I reckon there's work to be done."

"I'm ready," answered Frank.

He jumped up actively enough, and after a dip in the creek was quite ready for breakfast. The fare in the lonely miner's camp was hard enough; but Frank Richards had roughed it too long to be fastidious. He ate with a hearty appetite, and turned out cheerfully to work at the placer.

Bronze Bill left him at work during the morning, rolled the big boulder aside, and disappeared into the tunnel.

Apparently he was going out to take a survey of the canyon again, now that the sun was well up.

Frank paused in his labours when he was gone.

He had resolved that he would make an attempt to escape as soon as he was left unobserved. But doubts assailed him now.

Bronze Bill was not likely to be far from the a-gress of the tunnel, and he was certain to be on the watch. And he had made quite clear his determination to shoot if he saw his prisoner attempting to escape.

Frank Richards thought it out, standing idle, spade in hand.

He would have been willing to accept a fair offer from the fossicker, to work for him at a fair wage; but working under compulsion, and as a prisoner, was quite a different matter.

He came to a resolution at last.

Leaving the tools by the creek, he went to the shack for his wallet, and slung it on, and then stepped to the rocky tunnel.

He listened for a few minutes, with the suspicion in his mind that Bronze Bill might be in the tunnel watching for him.

But there was no sound, and the schoolboy determined to chance it at last.

Stepping softly, lest the watchful miner should be at hand in the shadows, Frank entered the tunnel.

With hardly a sound, he crept on through the shadowy passage till the daylight in the canyon beyond struck on his eyes.

A minute more, and Dead Man's Canyon lay wide and open before him, with the hot sun glistening down on rock and scrub.

Frank did not emerge at once from the cave.

He knew that the bronzed miner must be somewhere at hand; and, keeping back in the cover of the rock, he scanned the canyon for Bronze Bill.

He could not see the gaffer.

But far away down the canyon he

caught sight of five or six moving figures that were advancing.

Distant as they were, Frank Richards could tell by their dark faces that they were half-breeds.

"Le Couteau and his gang!" he muttered, his heart beating faster.

If Le Couteau, the trail robber, was among the copper-skinned gang, he was too far off for recognition. But Frank could have no doubt that these men were the gang that Bronze Bill feared. If they had been hunting for the solitary goldseeker, they were getting very near to his hiding-place at last.

Crack!

He could not see Bronze Bill, but it was evident that the miner had seen the half-breeds, as the crack of a rifle suddenly awoke a thousand echoes in the canyon.

There was a yell from the distance.

Frank, with beating heart, watching the bunch of half-breeds, saw one of them stagger as a Stetson hat spun from his head. But the man recovered himself at once. The bullet had carried away his hat.

The next moment the gang had vanished from sight, burrowing into cover among the rocks like so many prairie rabbits.

Frank Richards heard a hearty curse near at hand.

"Missed him, by thunder! I reckoned I'd got Le Couteau that time, darn him!"

From a clump of larch and sassafras, Bronze Bill's hairy form rose into view, not a dozen yards from the cave mouth.

He came hurrying back towards the cave.

Now that he had seen his enemies, and that his shot had put them on their guard, the miner evidently did not wish to encounter them in the open wide canyon, where their numbers gave them the advantage. If they tracked him to the narrow tunnel under the hillside it was a favourable place for defence.

Frank Richards stepped back in the darkness, his heart thumping.

Bronze Bill was running towards the cave, and in a minute or two more he would know that his prisoner had been attempting to escape.

Frank thought of darting back to the locked gulch; but he knew that his footsteps would be heard before he could get clear of the tunnel. There was no concealing the fact that he had sought to escape. A hard, angry look came into Frank's face. He had a right to his freedom—a right to fight for it. He crouched back in the darkness, with a lump of rock in his hand. If Bronze Bill raised his rifle against him—

The miner's heavy footsteps rang at the opening of the cave; his burly figure was framed there in the sunlight.

Crack!

A rifle-shot rang from the canyon.

To Frank Richards' horror, a hoarse cry broke from the bronzed miner, and he staggered forward into the cave, and fell heavily.

The rock dropped from Frank's hand.

Bronze Bill rolled on the rocky floor of the cave at his feet, groaning. This man, whom Frank had been prepared to fight for his freedom, lay at his feet, wounded by the bullet from behind, and helpless. From the canyon there came a yell. The man who had fired had seen the fall of the miner, and knew that his bullet had taken effect. Distant, but drawing nearer, came the sound of running feet on the rocks.

A deep groan burst from Bronze Bill.

"They've got me! They've got me! The game's up!"

He made an effort to rise, and sank back again. Frank Richards sprang to his side, and seized the fallen rifle. The running feet in the canyon were close now.

The wounded man's eyes turned on Frank, seeing him for the first time. A bitter look came over the bronzed face.

"Shoot, you young villain!" he muttered. "I was a fool not to shoot you when I had the chance! Now it's your turn!"

Frank did not heed him. With the

miner's rifle in his hands, he turned to the mouth of the cave.

Crack! Crack!

He fired twice, and there was a yell and a sound of rapid retreat. For the moment the attack was stopped.

CHAPTER 20.

A Desperate Defence!

FRANK RICHARDS reloaded the rifle, panting. He kept well back in the narrow mouth of the cave, and it was well that he did so. From the canyon came the crackling of three or four rifles, and bullets struck on the rocky mouth of the tunnel. Two or three of them, glancing on the rock, whizzed into the tunnel and dropped. But the rush of the half-breeds was stopped. They knew that there was a ready rifle within, and they did not venture to show themselves in the open before the cave.

Bronze Bill raised himself on one elbow, staring blankly at the school-boy. Frank's action had taken him utterly by surprise. Only the school boy's prompt defence had saved him from the knife of Le Couteau.

Frank glanced round at him as he heard him move.

"They've stopped!" he said.

"They reckoned I was alone here," mumbled Bronze Bill. "They knowed I hadn't a pard with me. I guessed as you was one of them, sonny——"

"You know better now!" grunted Frank.

"Sure!"

There was a sound without, and Frank Richards turned quickly to the opening. A boot had scraped on the rocky ground.

"Stand back there!" shouted Frank. "I shall fire if you show yourself!"

"Pardieu! He is not alone!" Frank heard a savage voice exclaim, and he thought he recognized the voice of Le Couteau.

"They'll rush us!" muttered Bronze

Bill. "There's half a dozen of them, and if they find it's only a boy——"

"We've got to get out of this!" said Frank hurriedly.

"I can't move!" muttered the miner, with a groan.

"I shall have to help you."

"If they rush——"

"We've got to chance that."

It was clear that a determined rush of the half-breeds would have settled the matter. And Frank was aware that they were creeping cautiously close round the mouth of the cavern, though he yet carefully keeping out of the line of fire. When they were near enough they would make a rush.

He slung his rifle on his back, and stepped over Bronze Bill.

The miner was wounded in the shoulder, and a pool of blood had formed beside him on the rock. His bronzed face was white under its tan. He was hard hit; but it was death to remain where he was.

"Help me, kid, and I'll do my best!" he gasped.

"It's not far," said Frank. "Once through, in the gulch, we can stall them off!"

"I guess I'll try."

Frank Richards bent all his strength to the task, and Bronze Bill exerted himself to the utmost, though the effort cost him dear. His face was like chalk, and beads of perspiration rolled down his skin as he struggled. But somehow he was got along the tunnel, and he sank down in the grass under the sunny sky in the locked gulch at last. Still, the rush of half-breeds had not come. Probably they knew nothing of the tunnel through the rock, and only supposed that the hunted man had taken refuge in the cave, and believed that they had him cornered.

Leaving the wounded man in the grass, Frank turned to the big boulder with which Bronze Bill was accustomed to bar the tunnel.

He struggled to move it, but it was beyond his strength.

For several minutes, with sweating

brow, he struggled at the task, but the mass of rock hardly shifted. Bronze Bill watched him hopelessly.

"I reckon you can't do it, hub," he muttered. "You ain't hefty enough for that. It was all I could do."

Frank Richards gave it up at last, panting for breath.

He seized his rifle again and looked into the dark tunnel.

There was blackness before him, with indistinguishable sounds from the distance.

He fired at random into the rocky tunnel.

There was a roar of echoing noise as the rifle-shot rang, and a clinking of falling fragments of rock. Through the din Frank thought he heard a yell of alarm.

He hastily put a fresh cartridge into the rifle.

The way was open for the half-breeds, if they had the nerve to make a rush through the dark tunnel; but it was natural enough that they should hesitate to rush into darkness and the unknown. But that the attack would not be long delayed was certain. Frank fired another shot into the tunnel while he strove to think out a plan.

It was upon him, the prisoner of an hour ago, that the defence fell. Not that he had any more mercy to expect than Bronze Bill from Le Couteau and his gang. Frank had quite forgotten his rough treatment at the hands of the bronzed miner; his only thought now was to save the wounded man from the knives of the gold-robbers. The miner's faint voice made him turn his head, though he kept on eye on the tunnel and his rifle ready.

"Are they coming, sonny?"

"I think so," said Frank. "I fancy they're creeping through in the dark, but as soon as I see——"

"You can't stop them."

"I'm going to try."

"You're a good plucked kid," said Bronze Bill gratefully. "If I get outter this, I reckon it's you who've saved my life."

Frank smiled faintly. He did not see much chance for either of them to get out the fearful extremity alive, though he was determined to fight to the last if the half-breeds came to close quarters. He listened for a sound in the tunnel under the rock, and he thought he detected the faint noise of creeping boots. He could guess that the gold-robbers, on hands and knees, were creeping forward in the darkness, puzzling their way through, knife in hand for an encounter in the shadows. Ere long they would see the daylight at the inner end of the tunnel, and would know that there was an outlet. Then would come a rush——

Frank gritted his teeth, prepared to meet it.

"You can't stop them, kid. There's only one way—a way I reckoned on if I was ever cornered," muttered the miner faintly. "If you've got the nerve——"

Frank gave a rather harsh laugh.

"I've got nerve enough if there's a way," he said. "I don't see a way. I shall drop one or two of them, and then——"

"You've seen the little chest in the shack, where I keep my cartridges?"

"Yes."

"Have you got the nerve to handle dynamite?"

"Dynamite?" repeated Frank, with a start.

"Sure!"

Frank breathed hard.

"Yes," he said; "but——"

"There's a big stick of dynamite in the chest, same as they use in the quartz-mines," said Bronze Bill. "That was what I meant, if they hunted me out—to chuck it into the tunnel and close it up——"

It was on Frank's lips to say that the blocking of the tunnel meant their imprisonment in the locked gulch. But he did not speak. That was better than death under the knives of Le Couteau and his gang.

"If you've got the nerve, kid."

Frank did not stay to hear more.

He ran into the shack and opened the

chest. In a few seconds he came dashing back, with the stick of dynamite in his hand.

A false step, a stumble, and he would have been blown to atoms. But it was no time for fears. The wings of the angel of death were hovering over him and over his comrade, and his nerve did not fail.

He looked into the opening of the tunnel again. He was framed there, with the sunlight behind him as he stood, and there came from the darkness of the tunnel a sudden ringing shot, and a bullet whizzed past him. The enemy was near.

Frank did not hesitate.

He raised his hand, with the stick of dynamite in it, and with a tremor he hurled it with all his strength along the rock tunnel.

As it left his hand he sprang back and threw himself in the grass.

It seemed at the same instant that there came a blinding, deafening roar from the heart of the rocky hillside.

Crash, crash!

The rush of air from the tunnel swept past the schoolboy as he lay. The roar of the explosion deafened, almost dazed him. He lay dizzy, with the crash of falling rocks in his ears.

The din died down at last.

Frank Richards staggered to his feet.

He had his rifle ready, in case any of the enemy should have escaped on the near side of the explosion. But there was little chance of that.

He peered into the tunnel.

Only a few yards from him it was blocked with masses of blasted rock, not leaving a space that a prairie rabbit could have crept through.

And the half-breeds—

Frank shuddered.

If the gang had been in the tunnel when the explosion came, nothing could have saved them. Such as were in the cave were undoubtedly buried, crushed out of all human semblance, under the fallen tons of rock from above.

Frank's face was white as he turned away.

There was no further danger of attack, by way of the tunnel, at all events. The gold-seekers were shut in the locked gulch; but Le Couteau and his gang, if any survived, were shut out.

A grin of triumph came over Bronze Bill's grim face as he met Frank Richards' eyes.

"I guess that's stopped 'em," he said.

"Yes," said Frank, in a low voice.

"I reckon it was their lives or ours, pard," said Bronze Bill. "They'd have knifed us when they got near enough, you bet your boots. I hope Le Couteau went under with the rest. But he's as cunning as a fox; I guess he may have kept clear. But we're safe hyer now. I reckon you'd better do what you can for this hole in my shoulder, sonny."

Frank Richards nodded.

With a white face, but steady hand, he examined the miner's wound. The bullet had passed clean through, and Frank washed and bandaged the wound, which was serious enough, but not fatal, with care, and with the big miner's iron constitution to help him through. But it was certain that Bronze Bill would have to lie helpless for some time, cared for by the schoolboy he had driven into the locked gulch as a prisoner.

"We are both prisoners now!" Frank Richards remarked, with a faint smile.

Bronze Bill nodded.

"I guess while there's life there's hope, sonny," he said. "I reckon we'll find a way out, somehow, when it's time. You and me, kid, is pardners now in this hyer claim—share and share alike. When we've cleaned up the gold we'll get out of this hyer trap, somehow. Never say die!"

* * * * *

Beyond the rocky barrier, in the sunlight of Dead Man's Canyon, Le Couteau, the half-breed, brandished his fist and spat out curses. He had

escaped the explosion, being well to the rear of his gang, but the force of it had hurled him out of the cave, half-stunned. He had recovered, to find himself alone, and an impenetrable barrier between him and the gold he sought. He shook his dusky fists, and cursed in mingled French and Indian and English, mocked by the hollow echoes among the rocks of Dead Man's Canyon.

CHAPTER 21.

A Startling Acquisition!

"DINNER'S ready!" Frank Richards called out that announcement in cheery tones.

It was past midday, on the Cascade Mountains of British Columbia.

The sun blazed down into the narrow, rocky gulch, and upon the glimmering creek where Frank and his "pardner," Bronze Bill, had been working at the placer claim through the hot May days.

For two or three weeks now Frank had been camped with the big miner in the locked gulch, and every day he had turned out cheerfully to work on the placer.

The deposit of golden grains in the creek bottom was almost worked out by this time, and the little sack of gold in the shack had grown to quite respectable dimensions.

It was drawing near the time for the gold-seekers to "pull up stakes," and find their way out of the locked gulch.

The store of provisions in the camp, too, was growing very slender, though it was eked out by the game occasionally found in the thickets on the rocky slopes of the gulch.

Frank had been cooking the dinner at the camp-fire. Bronze Bill was resting in the shack after a morning out with his rifle. The big miner had now almost recovered from the wound he had received in the encounter with Le Coupeau and his gang, though so far

Frank had done most of the hard work on the placer.

"Dinner, Bill!"

There was no answer from the shack. Frank Richards looked round.

As a rule, Bronze Bill was prompt to the call of meal-times. Frank Richards called again.

"Coming!" came a deep voice.

The bronzed miner emerged from the shack.

Frank started as he looked at him.

Since the fight with the half-breeds the two had been on the best of terms, and Frank had very willingly accepted Bronze Bill's offer to make him his "pardner" in working the claim.

He had found the big miner rough-and-ready in his ways, but kind and good-humoured enough. But there was no good-humour in Bronze Bill's face now. His expression was hard and grim as he came towards the camp-fire.

"Anything up, Bill?" asked Frank.

"I guess so."

"Dinner——"

"Never mind dinner, for a shake," said Bronze Bill. "I guess you and me has got to have a talk first, Richards."

"I'm jolly hungry!"

"I guess you can wait a bit, sonny!" said the big miner grimly. "This hyer business won't wait."

He sat on a log, and to Frank's surprise drew the big Navy revolver from his belt.

"Want the dickens——" began Frank.

Bronze Bill lifted the revolver so that the muzzle bore upon his schoolboy "pard."

Frank stared at him blankly, wondering whether it was sunstroke.

"You needn't put up your hands, sonny," said Bronze Bill quietly. "But don't try any gum-games, or I reckon this hyer shooting-iron will go off some. You get me?"

"I don't understand you in the least," said Frank Richards indignantly. "If you're trying to pull my leg——"

"I guess I mean cold business from the word go!" said Bronze Bill. "Look hyer, ain't I treated you fair and square since we became pardas?"

"Yes," said Frank; "I've nothing to grumble at."

"When you came moseying up Dead Man's Canyon and lighted on me," continued Bronze Bill, "I reckoned you was a spy sent by Le Couteau and his gang to nose out my claim. I roped you in. Then you stood up for me like a little man when the breeds tried to jump my claim, and I calculate you saved my life. I ain't forgotten that. I reckon that's the reason why I don't drop you in your tracks this pesky minute. But you ain't played fair, Richards. You oughtn't to hev gone back on the galoot what made you his pardner fair and square."

"What the thump do you mean?" exclaimed Frank angrily. "How have I gone back on you?"

"I reckon you know."

"Haven't I done my share of the work on the claim?" demanded Frank. "More than my share, if you come to that, as you've been laid up with your wound."

"Correct; and you've nursed me through, too," said Bronze Bill. "I ain't denying it. Up till now you've played up like a little man; and arter what you've done, I'm going to forgive you, and let you have your share in the dust; but I ain't going to let you rob me."

Frank jumped.

"Rob you!" he exclaimed.

"That's about the size of it."

"Are you mad?"

"Oh, come off!" said Bronze Bill.

"I'm going to treat you fair, young Richards, though you don't deserve it arter robbing your pard. Where's the gold-sack?"

"The gold-sack?" repeated Frank.

"Yep."

"In the shack, in its usual place, under the bearskin, I suppose," answered Frank Richards.

"Come off, I tell you!" exclaimed

Bronze Bill impatiently. "Do you figure it out? that I can't believe my own eyes?"

"Do you mean to say that it isn't there?" demanded Frank, in astonishment.

"I reckon so."

"My only hat!"

"There ain't nobody in this hyer gulch excepting you an' me," said Bronze Bill. "The tunnel from the canyon is blocked up with about a hundred ton of rock, and nary a gopher could find a hole to creep through, let alone a man. No living galoot can get into this hyer gulch, and I reckon it's going to be a hefty job for us to find a way out arter we're done here now that the tunnel's blocked. Only you an' me, Richards, and one of us has lifted the gold-sack—and it wasn't me. So it was you. Savvy?"

Bronze Bill nodded slowly.

"There ain't any way out of the hunting for it," he said. "I reckon you're my game, Frank Richards, if you don't hand over the dust. But you can root into the shack if you like, though it's wadin' time."

Without answering, Frank Richards turned and strode away towards the shack, Bronze Bill following him, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER 22

Bitter Blood!

FRANK RICHARDS was breathing hard, and his handsome face was crimson with anger.

But he was puzzled.

Bronze Bill, though rough in his ways, was honest as the day, so far as Frank Richards could judge. Frank would never have suspected him of "bagging" the proceeds of the work on the placer. But if the gold-sack was gone, there was nothing else to think.

Bronze Bill—driven to the same conclusion by the same circumstances—suspected him.

There was no third party to be suspected.



"Le Couteau!" Frank Richards whispered the name. In the circle of light from the fire a man sat on a log. He had a small canvas sack open on the ground and was running his fingers through the contents—grains and nuggets of gold! "Cover him!" breathed Frank to Bronze Bill, "but don't shoot!"

The disappearance of the gold-sack, therefore, could only be imputed to one of the partners.

Frank entered the little shack.

Under the big bearskin on the floor was an excavation, in which the canvas gold-sack had been kept, concealed from sight.

Every evening there had been a little more to add to the store of gold in the sack. The previous evening it had been opened, as usual, and the gains of the day added. Then it had been left under the bearskin, and Frank Richards had not seen it since. There was no reason to visit the store of gold until the evening came again.

As for keeping watch on it, that had not occurred to him, knowing that he and his partner were shut up alone in the locked gulch.

He tossed the bearskin aside, and revealed the excavation in which the canvas sack had been kept.

It was empty!

Evidently the gold-sack had been removed.

Frank Richards was well aware that he had not removed it; but he looked round the shack, searching every corner.

Bronze Bill stood in the doorway, watching him with a sarcastic smile on his tanned face, the revolver still in his hand.

His look was that of a man patiently watching another going through a meaningless comedy.

Frank turned to him at last.

"You ain't found it," said Bronze Bill rancorously.

"No."

"I reckon you'd better mosey along to the place where you've hidden it," said Bronze Bill. "I ain't waiting much longer."

Frank stepped out of the shack into the sunlight.

His face was set.

"You rotter!" he said, between his teeth.

"I guess——"

"The gold-sack's gone," said Frank,

his eyes blazing. "Do you think you can bluff me? It's gone, and only one of us can have taken it. I did not take it. You've robbed me!"

"What?" roared Bronze Bill.

"You needn't have done it," said Frank. "The claim was yours, and it was your own offer to me to become your partner in working it. I'd have looked after you while you were laid up with your wound, without that. But I've put in two or three weeks of hard work on the claim, and I'm entitled to something for that. Give me ordinary miner's wages for what I've done, and keep the rest. We'll part at once."

Bronze Bill stared at him blankly.

"I guess I don't make head or tail of you," he said. "I'm asking you to hand over the gold-sack you've stole, you young scallywag!"

"And I'm telling you that you've taken it, and hidden it, because you want it for yourself, and you're trying to bluff me," exclaimed Frank savagely. "And I tell you you can keep it, and be hanged to you!"

"Nuff said!" exclaimed Bronze Bill. He raised the revolver. "I've given you a fair show, Richards, and now you've got to hand over the dust!"

"Keep it up!" said Frank disdainfully. "Do you think you'll make me believe that you haven't taken the gold-sack? Who could have taken it if you haven't? There's nobody else here."

"You've taken it!" roared Bronze Bill.

"Liar!"

"By gosh!"

For a moment it seemed that Bronze Bill would pull trigger. But he restrained his fury.

"I guess I won't drop you," he said, his tanned face red with wrath. "I want to know where the gold-sack is, and you've got to tell me, Richards; and I reckon you couldn't if I blew you out as you deserve, you scallywag! If you don't point it out instantly, I'll rope you till you do!"

"Try it!" said Frank fiercely.

Bronze Bill thrust the revolver into

his belt, and started for the shack. He picked up a rope, and came back towards the schoolboy of Cedar Creek, his grim, savage look leaving no doubt of his intentions. Frank made a spring for the pick he had been using in the creek. He grasped it, and stood on his defence.

"Put down that pick!" shouted the miner savagely.

"Hands off, then."

"I'm going to rope you till you hand over the gold-sack!" roared Bronze Bill.

Frank, keeping the pick in his hands for defence, looked at him with growing wonder.

Unless Bronze Bill was mad, there was no accounting for his actions, unless the seemingly impossible had happened, and a third party had penetrated the gulch and lifted the sack.

Impossible as that seemed, Frank began to believe that it must be the case, for it was pretty clear now that Bronze Bill believed in his accusation, and Frank was conscious of his own innocence.

"Hold on a minute, Bill," said Frank Richards. "Is it possible that somebody else has lifted the sack during the night?"

"Pesky rubbish!"

"We slept outside the shack, as the night was hot," said Frank, "and if some other party could have been in the gulch——"

The miner laughed scornfully.

"I guess I'm not swallowing a yarn like that," he said. "You'll hand over the sack, or I'll rope you till you do. That's kind. Now——"

"Keep off!" shouted Frank.

"I reckon not."

The miner rushed at him, gripping the coiled rope. Threatened as he was, Frank could not find it in his heart to strike with the pick. But he drove the head of the pick against the miner's chest as he came on, and Bronze Bill, with a grunt of pain, slipped and fell. The next instant Frank had dropped the pick, and, springing for-

ward, he jerked the revolver from his partner's belt.

Before the stonzed miner could rise, Frank was standing over him, the revolver aimed at his face.

"Hands up!"

Bronze Bill blinked at him.

"You young scallywag——"

"Hands up, you fool!" shouted Frank.

The trigger rose a little under the pressure of his finger. He did not mean to shoot; but Bronze Bill's hands went up quickly enough as the trigger moved. He sat, panting with fury, his hands above his head.

"You young villain!" he gasped. "I oughter have dropped you instantar, I would have, only you saved my life from the breeds. Now shoot, you pesky scallywag, and keep the gold-sack!"

"You fool!" said Frank, lowering the revolver. "If I had robbed you I should shoot. Haven't you sense enough to see now that I haven't touched the gold?"

"That's a lie!"

"Oh, you haven't the brains of a prairie rabbit!" exclaimed Frank impatiently. "Keep your hands up! I'm going to take your rifle; it's too dangerous a toy for a fool like you, Bill!"

"You scallywag——"

Frank picked up the rope with his left hand, the miner watching him furiously. Frank looped the rope round Bronze Bill's upraised arms.

The miner made a movement to resist, and the muzzle of the revolver was pressed to his temple.

"Quiet, you fool!"

Quivering with rage, the big miner submitted. He had no doubt that Frank was ready to press the trigger.

With one hand Frank contrived to loop the rope round the miner's arms, and draw the loop taut.

Bronze Bill was helpless now.

Then Frank put the revolver into his own belt, and lifted the rifle from the miner's back. Then he gave a little more attention to the rope, knotting it

securely, so that the miner had no chance of getting his arms loose.

Bronze Bill watched him with bitter rage in his tanned face.

"Now what's your game?" he asked, in a choked voice. "You may as well put a bullet through my head, you pesky rascal!"

"You deserve it for your foolery," snapped Frank. "But I'm going to leave you tied up while I find out what's become of the gold."

"You've got it."

"Fool!"

Leaving the bronzed miner to himself, Frank Richards walked back to the camp fire. His dinner was more than ready, and he was more than ready for it. He sat down on a log to eat it, thinking the while, Bronze Bill watching him from a short distance with burning eyes.

CHAPTER 22.

The Trail of the Redskin!

FRANK RICHARDS rose at last.

Taking no heed of the furious looks of his partner, he went to the shack to begin his examination.

In the old days in the Thompson Valley Frank Richards had learned a great deal of woodcraft from his Canadian cousin, Bob Lawless, and the skill he had acquired stood him in good stead now.

Any "sign" that might have been left inside the shack had been destroyed by the search the miners had made. It was outside that Frank started his examination.

The ground was dry and "stony," and retained no trace of footprints.

But within a dozen yards the spring bubbled and rippled, and by the spring and the creek Frank hoped to find some trace.

From what direction the intruder had come he could not guess; only he knew that the unknown thief must have descended from the rocky walls that shut in the gulch on all sides.

It was half-an-hour before Frank's search was rewarded. But it was rewarded at last.

In the mud by the creek a footprint showed up under his eyes; and the print was that of a moccasin, and could not have been left by either Frank or Bronze Bill, who, of course, wore boots. "An Indian!"

Frank Richards uttered the exclamation, with a gleam in his eyes. His suspicion was a certainly now.

He raised his head and looked around him. The rocky sides of the gulch, broken here and there by patches of scrub, met his eyes, apparently untrod-den by human foot. It seemed that only an elk could have obtained footing among those inaccessible rocks. But here, under Frank's eyes, was the proof that during the night a Redskin had crept into the camp, and he could only have come from beyond that rocky barrier.

Bending his head again, Frank sought for further "sign," and picked it up again on the farther side of the shallow creek. This was evidence that the Indian had waded through the creek to reach the shack, and was a rough indication of the direction from which he must have come.

Frank pushed on, looking for more "sign."

There was no chance that the Indian was still in the locked valley. He must have fled before the dawn with the plunder he had stolen from the shack. But the trail, if it could be followed far enough, would reveal the way of escape from the gulch.

There was a shout from behind Frank in the distance. In his eagerness and excitement he had forgotten Bronze Bill.

The bound miner, sitting with his back against a boulder, had been watching him, at first in sheer fury, then in astonishment, and now with the keenest curiosity.

"Richards!"

Frank turned his head.

"What do you want?" he called back.
 "I guess I want to know what you are arter."

"The man who bagged the gold-sack."

"There ain't any galoot—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

Frank Richards turned impatiently to the trail again. Bronze Bill scrambled to his feet awkwardly, with his arms tied, and came striding towards him. Frank did not heed him.

He was progressing slowly, picking up sign after sign of the moccasined foot, and the miner overlooked him at last.

"Now, what are you arter?" demanded Bronze Bill.

Frank halted.

"Look and see for yourself," he snapped. "If you've got eyes in your head you can see the trail of an Indian here."

"An Injun—"

"Look!" snapped Frank.

He pointed to a hollow, where rain had left a damp patch of earth. In the soft soil the print of the moccasin came out clearly.

"Moccasin!" Bronze Bill dropped on his knees, his eyes almost starting from his head as he read the sign. "Injuns! Jerusalem crickets!"

"Do you understand now?" growled Frank Richards.

Bronze Bill looked dazed.

"Three months I've located in this hyer gulch," he said, "and nary galoot came nigh till you came moseying up through Dead Man's Canyon, Richards. I never allowed there was any way over them hills."

"You can see now that there must be."

The miner nodded slowly.

"Unless"—sudden suspicion gleamed in his eyes—"unless you've been playing a trick with an Injun moccasin to pull the wool over my eyes, you young scallywag!"

Frank Richards compressed his lips.

"I'm fed up with you and your silly suspicions," he said. "You're not my partner any longer, Bronze Bill. You

can stay here, and be hanged to you, while I get after the Indian."

The bronzed gold-miner seemed to waver.

"Arter all, we reckoned p'raps we'd find a way out," he muttered, "and if there's a way out there's a way in. Some Injun hunter, p'raps, lookin' for elk; and comin' into the gulch from up yonder, mebber he spotted the light of our camp fire one night, and came spyin' around. Mebber been watching us for days, and we never knowed. Richards, sonny, I reckon as I've made a mistake, and it wasn't you that collared the gold-sack arter all."

The big miner spoke shamefacedly.

"I'm glad you've got sense enough to see that at last," said Frank Richards coldly. "You can sit in camp and chew on it while I'm finding out where the Redskin went."

"I allow I was mistaken," mumbled Bronze Bill. "Let's go this together, Richards. I calculate I'm a better hand at following a trail than any ornery schoolboy."

"It's a bit too late to propose that, after threatening me with a revolver," said Frank Richards dryly. "I can't trust you with your paws loose, Bronze Bill."

The big miner bit his lip.

"I deserve it for suspectin' you," he confessed. "But then agin, you suspected me afore you found this hyer trail, Richards."

"Well, that's so," admitted Frank. "Seeing that we were alone here, as I believed, I—I thought—"

"Same as I thought," said Bronze Bill, with a rather wry smile. "I reckon we can call it quits, Richards."

Frank hesitated.

"That's all very well," he said. "But are you satisfied now that there was a third party on the scene? If I let you loose, will you get a bee in your bonnet again, and start playing the fool?"

Bronze Bill shook his head vigorously.

"Think I can't read 'sign'?" he demanded. "I know now that there was an Injun here last night, and he

sneaked into the shack and robbed us while we were snoozing under the trees. There ain't no time to waste, Richards. He's got a good start of us as it is with all the dust we've earned. The claim's nearly worked out—we was thinking of pulling up stakes in a few days. Let's take this chance of getting clear. I reckon you can trust me; I've been a fool, I allow, but—but you can keep the shooting-irons."

Frank, without replying, cast loose the rope with which Bronze Bill's brawny arms were secured.

"That's the real white article," said Bronze Bill, stretching his arms. "Now I reckon I'll get a bite, and we'll take the trail."

"Here's your rifle," said Frank.

"Keep it, kid!"

"Rot!" said Frank Richards, smiling. "I can trust you now you've come to your senses."

Bronze Bill slung the rifle on his back shamefacedly.

"Keep the revolver," he said. "You may need it if we come up with the Injun. Pack your grip while I get a feed. I reckon we're following this trail right out of the gulch."

"Right-to!" said Frank.

And the preparations for departure were soon made, the queerly-assorted "partners" being once more on the best of terms, now that the black cloud of mutual suspicion had passed.

CHAPTER 24.

Tracked Down!

BRONZE BILL was, as Joe had said, a better hand at picking up a trail than the schoolboy of Cedar Creek. He picked up the Indian "sign," and followed it faster than Frank Richards could have done.

The partners travelled "light." The mining implements were left in the shack, and they packed only the remains of the provisions in their wallets. If they ran down the Indian thief, and recovered the gold, the loss of the fools

would not be a serious one to the successful miners, while, if they failed, they could always find their way back, and work out what little remained of the gold deposit in the creek. That was how Bronze Bill put it, and Frank agreed with him. It was necessary to travel light, in order not to lose time on the trail. The Indian had had at least twelve hours' start, and it would not be an easy task to run him down in any case.

From the bottom of the gulch, the "sign" led them up the rocky slopes, by difficult paths. Here and there they had to climb with their hands, and on more than one jag of rock they discovered some torn fragments from the Redskin's moccasins or leggings. They stopped on a rough plateau of rock about a hundred feet above the level of the camp. There Bronze Bill gave a shout.

"That was what he was arter; that's what led him over the hill!" he exclaimed, pointing to a dark mass on the rocks. It was what remained of the dead body of an elk.

A black vulture rose leisurely on the wing, and fled screeching over the cliffs as the trackers came up. The skeleton of the elk had been picked almost clean. Frank turned his head from the sight; but Bronze Bill examined it with a careful eye. He nodded his head several times, as if in confirmation of unspoken surmises.

"I reckon it's fair clear," he said at last. "The Injun was arter that elk, and the brute hit it over the hill, and down on this side, the Red arter him. The Injun got him byer, and killed him, and then I reckon he spotted our camp-fire down below. Look back, Richards, and you'll see our camp just as if it was spread out to view."

Frank nodded as he glanced back from the height.

Far below, the creek ran like a silver ribbon in the sunlight, and the shack and the dying fire showed up clearly by it, and the placer workings were clearly seen.

"He never knowed there was a white man near till he got to this spot," continued Bronze Bill. "Then he saw us at work—saw us take the day's gold into the shack, I reckon, and leave it there. Arter dark he came creeping down, the way we've come up. Us sleeping out of the shack gave him his chance, and he loaded in and hunted for the gold, and found it. I reckon if we'd been inside the shack, we'd have got a few inches of his hunting-knife, too. But he wouldn't risk it, as he got the gold safe without. I reckon one of us would have woke and put the cinch on him. He bagged the gold and hooked it—that's how I figger it out, Richards. And the way he followed that elk into the gulch is the way I'm going to foller him out, I reckon."

"That's it," said Frank.

"Kin on!"

It was clear enough now what must have happened. The trackers pressed on, the track growing steeper and wilder under their feet. More than once Bronze Bill came to a dead halt.

But for their knowledge that an elk and a pursuing Redskin had come by that route, the partners would have given it up, more than once, in despair. But the knowledge that it had been done once was a proof that it could be done again.

In one place, baffled by a perpendicular rock that barred all further progress, they chafed and sought a way out, and half an hour was wasted. But the mystery was elucidated at last.

"I reckon he jumped it," said Bronze Bill, "an' the Injun jumped it arter him! But he had to climb back, I reckon, and where he climbed we can climb or bust!"

And after a long search a rag on a point of rock revealed where the Indian had climbed, and after several essays and failures, the partners succeeded in clambering up the perpendicular rock, and threw themselves down breathlessly to rest at the top.

Above was a ledge little more than fifteen inches wide, and on that giddy

verge they lay at full length, and rested for ten minutes or more. Below, it looked like the wall of a house that they had climbed. Above, rock rose over rock in endless disorder. The climb had been fatiguing, but after a short rest they struggled on again.

Climbing, clambering with feet and hands, they won their way higher and higher, and still here and there Bronze Bill's keen eye picked up traces of the passage of the elk and the Indian hunter. They came out at last into a narrow gorge between two peaks.

"I reckon this is the top of the divide," said Bronze Bill, as he sank on a boulder to rest. "We've done the climb, Richards. I guess I could pick my way from here to Hard Pan by the sun and stars."

"Good!" gasped Frank.

The sun was sloping down in the west now, but it was still warm. Only a few minutes were allowed for rest. Bronze Bill improved the occasion by filling his pipe and lighting it. He wrinkled his brows thoughtfully as he puffed out blue clouds of smoke.

"I reckon it was about noon when he got back hyer—that Injun," he remarked, at length. "I reckon he wanted a rest; it's hot at noon, too. He'd look back from the last point where there was a view of the gulch, and he'd see that we wasn't arter him yet, so he'd reckon he had plenty of time, even if we was able to foller him at all."

"That's so," assented Frank.

"Sure! And so I reckon he never humped himself after getting this far; he'd take a rest, and he'd take it easy," said Bronze Bill. "That's all to the good, if I've-figured it out correct, Richards. From this hyer point he won't have such a long start. But howsumdyever far he leads us, I reckon I'm hankin' on the heels of that Injun till I get the dust back, and his scalp along with it. Come on!"

Under the westerling sun the partners tramped down the gorge. They were over the highest part of their

climb now; they had crossed the "divide" from the locked gulch, and their path was now perceptibly downward. Bronze Bill halted at a spot where a mountain torrent roared down the gorge.

"The Indian camped here!" he said.

There were plain traces of it—the embers of a camp-fire by the water and remains of elk meat thrown carelessly away. The Indian had cooked elk-meat and eaten there by the shadow of the rocks, and the embers still retained a trace of warmth. The trackers were not far behind. Close by the camp-fire embers they discovered a few golden grains glittering up from the rock. Frank uttered an exclamation as the golden glitter caught his eye.

"He opened the gold-sack thar, to look over what he'd stole!" said Bronze Bill sententiously. "Spilled a few grains, the careless fool! He got the dust easier than we did, I reckon, and he could afford to. I reckon he took it purty easy arter getting out of the locked gulch; we ain't so far behind him now. Let me just get a bead on him with this hyer rifle, and I guess he won't give more'n one hop. Kin on!"

The trailers pressed on.

They were weary to the bone by this time, but they did not stop to camp and rest as the Indian gold thief had done. Every minute was precious now, for they had to make the most of what remained of the daylight. The setting sun was flooding the hills with crimson and gold as they tramped resolutely on.

From the gorge they emerged into a wide green valley, restful to the eye after the expanses of barren rock they had traversed. Bronze Bill halted, his eyes fixed on the distance ahead, and Frank followed his example, though he could not see what attracted his companion's gaze.

"What is it?" he asked at last, after Bronze Bill had stared steadily for

several minutes, his hand shading his eyes.

"I reckon we don't want to pick up 'sign' any longer," answered Bronze Bill. "But keep your peepers open. That there Injun has run up against a snag."

"I don't see——"

"Look! Them Johnny crows——"

Frank started.

Far ahead, in the distance, three or four black vultures, dots against the blue, were circling and settling.

"Johnny crow comes down for carrion!" said Bronze Bill tersely. "I reckon that Injun's dead meat."

"But who—what——"

"I reckon we'll find out. Keep your eyes peeled."

Frank's heart beat fast as he hurried on after his companion. Hardly conscious of fatigue now, they broke into a run. As they drew near the spot where the vultures had gathered they heard the screeching and squabbling of the obscene birds.

"Don't loose off at them," warned Bronze Bill, as Frank touched his revolver. "I reckon there may be trouble within hearing. Kick the brutes!"

With loud screeches and flappings, the vultures scattered as the hunters ran up. They retired only a few yards, however, watching hungrily close at hand, till they should have access to their prey again. Frank Richards shuddered as he saw what their prey had been.

On his back, on the ground, was stretched an Indian—a hunter in deer-skin leggings and moccasins. He was dead; his coppery face, set in a frozen scowl of anguish and hatred, was turned like stone to the sky. It was evidently the Indian that Frank Richards and his partner had tracked so far, and they had found him—thus!

Bronze Bill stood looking down upon him, with a grim brow. His hand rested on his rifle—the rifle was not needed now.

Bronze Bill pointed. The crimson was oozing through the Indian's deer-skin, where a knife had struck home in his breast. Bronze Bill dropped on his knees beside the body.

"One drive, and that cocked his goose," he said coolly; "and I reckon it wasn't long ago, or the Johnny crows would have gobbled him before this; it don't take them long to smell out carrion. He got this fur with the gold-sack, and then he hit trouble bad. The gold-sack's gone—the gidoot what stuck him froze on to that, you bet—and now I reckon that's the galoot we've got to find. And I guess we ain't fur to look!"

"You think——"

"Look!"

Frank Richards followed the direction of the miner's pointing finger. Against the gathering darkness, in the distance, a red glow leaped up—the glow of a camp-fire!

CHAPTER 25

"Hands Up!"

"**L** E COUTEAU!"

Frank Richards whispered the name.

In the circle of light from the fire, a man sat on a log. The firelight played on his dusky face, showing up the thin, cruel lips, the white teeth, the black, glittering eyes.

A score of yards away, Frank Richards and Bronze Bill halted. They had crept as silently as the lynx towards the lonely camp-fire in the valley; the half-breed sitting on the log had not heard a sound to cause him to turn his head.

He had a small canvas sack open on the ground as he sat, and was running his dusky fingers through the contents—golden grains and small nuggets of the precious metal.

On the canvas of the sack was a stain of blood, still wet; but that was of small account to Le Couteau, the half-breed.

With glittering eyes in the firelight he counted over the nuggets, and weighed the gold-dust in his hand.

"Cover him!" breathed Frank. "But don't shoot; there's no need to shed blood, Bill. I tell you——"

Bronze Bill ran forward into the firelight, his rifle up. His first impulse had been to shoot the half-breed dead at sight; but he yielded to his schoolboy partner.

"Hands up!" he shouted, with the rifle raised.

Frank Richards followed him fast, revolver in hand.

The half-breed started violently at the sight of the burly miner and his schoolboy comrade. His hand flew to his belt, to the handle of the long "*couteau de chasse*," from which the ruffian derived his nickname.

"Touch that stick, and you're a dead man!" rapped out Bronze Bill.

The half-breed's hand did not reach the knife.

The rifle-muzzle was looking him full in the face, and the miner's finger was on the trigger.

The canvas sack dropped at his feet as his dusky hands were raised above his head.

He fixed his black eyes, glinting with rage and hatred, upon the tanned miner and the schoolboy of Cedar Creek.

"You here!" he muttered.

"I guess so, as large as life!" answered Bronze Bill. "Keep your paws up, you durned breed; I'm watching you! Richards, pick up that sack, sonny."

"You bet!" said Frank.

He stepped forward, and stooped to secure the canvas sack.

A quiver ran through the half-breed as he saw his prize in the hands of the schoolboy of Cedar Creek.

"So you have turned gold-thief, Bronze Bill!" he sneered.

"I guess you know the owner of that sack," said the miner. "If you don't, you're going to learn. That gold-sack belongs to me and my pardner. It was lifted from our camp in the gulch last

night by an Injun; and we've found the Injun dead down the valley yonder. It was you that gave him his quietus, I guess."

"It is false!" muttered the half-breed. "I—"

"That's the sack, Frank?"

"That's it," answered Frank, "and the stuff is all here. We've been jolly lucky, old scout!"

"It is mine!" hissed the half-breed.

"There's blood on the sack!" said Frank, with a shudder.

"The Injun's juice, I guess," said Bronze Bill. "You pesky breed, you rubbed out that Injun less'n half an hour ago, I reckon, and bagged the gold-sack off him. I guess if it wasn't for my pardner hyer I'd drop you in your tracks instant!"

The half-breed quivered with rage.

"Take away his sticker, Frank. He's safer without that; though I reckon it would be safest to serve him as he served the Injun."

Frank Richards disarmed the half-breed, removing the knife and revolver from his belt.

Le Couteau's black eyes glittered at him.

"Now rope him up," said Bronze Bill. "Fasten his paws behind his back, and he'll keep safe till morning."

"Nem d'un nom!" muttered Le Couteau between his teeth. "It is your turn now, scelerate! But—"

"Nuff chin-mus!" interrupted Bronze Bill. "Make a safe job of it, Frank. He ain't to be trusted any more'n a rattlesnake!"

"Leave it to me," said Frank.

He drew the half-breed's hands behind him, and secured the wrists together, knotting the rope with great care.

Then Bronze Bill lowered his rifle.

Le Couteau had made no resistance; he could see that the big miner was ready and anxious for an excuse to drive a bullet through him. It was only on account of Frank that the prospector held his hand. Le Couteau's life hung on a thread.

He sat on the log again, with his hands securely bound, and black and bitter fury in his face.

Then Bronze Bill examined the gold-sack with a grin of satisfaction on his tanned face.

"I reckon it's all hyer," he said. "All but a bit of the dust that has been spilled. I reckon this lot will figure out at a thousand dollars, and more, when we get it safe to Hard Pan, Frank."

"Good!" said Frank.

"We're camping hyer to-night," continued the miner, "and I guess we'll light out for Hard Pan at sunrise. You're goin' to have our company till mornin'. Le Couteau."

The half-breed replied only with a savage scowl.

CHAPTER 25.

A Desperate Deed.

FRANK RICHARDS was glad to roll himself in his blanket, with his feet to the fire, and sink into slumber.

The day had been a hard one for the wandering schoolboy, and he was aching with fatigue in every limb.

Tired as he was, he was feeling satisfied and at ease as he lay down to sleep. The gold—the fruit of weeks of hard work at the claim in the locked gulch—had been recaptured; from the Indian gold-thief it had passed into the hands of Le Couteau, and from Le Couteau back to the owners. And Frank, who had seen a great deal of hard luck since the day he quitted his home at the Lawless Ranch in the Thompson Valley, found fortune smiling on him at last. His half of the gold would amount to at least five hundred dollars, and that was a handsome nest-egg for the future. It was a turn of fortune's wheel that gave the schoolboy of Cedar Creek much satisfaction.

He sank into a deep slumber, and dreamed of his old home and comrades in the Thompson Valley, and of Cedar Creek School—the backwoods school

where he had spent many happy days, and upon which he had looked his last.

Bronze Bill stamped out the camp-fire before he turned in.

Lonely as the valley in the cascade foothills was, it was possible that the light might be seen from afar by some wandering Indians or lawless white man, and the miner was running no unnecessary risks.

He examined Le Couteau's bonds before he rolled himself in his blanket to sleep, and left him secure.

Darkness blotted out the camp when the fire died out. But the stars were coming out in a velvety sky, and a dim light was shed on the sleeping camp.

Le Couteau did not sleep.

The half-breed writhed his wrists in the cord till the skin was chafed and bleeding, but he could not get his hands loose.

An hour passed, and then he ceased, from sheer pain and exhaustion, and lay breathing hard, staring up at the glimmering stars, his perspiring face fanned by the breeze that blew through the valley.

From where he lay he could see the gold-sack.

It lay between the two sleepers, partly covered by a corner of Bronze Bill's blanket.

The half-breed's eyes turned upon it again and again feverishly.

If he could but get loose—

Bronze Bill slept with his hand on his rifle, and if he had awakened and found the half-breed loose he would have have shot him down like a coyote. But Le Couteau was ready to take the risk if he could but get loose. But his hands were held as though by iron manacles.

A sudden flare of light broke the darkness and made the watching half-breed blink.

A half-dead ember in the camp-fire stamped out by the miner's big foot had been smouldering in the heap, and it was fanned at last to a sudden blaze by the wind.

The flame leaped up and danced, cast-

ing strange lights and shadows on the forms of the sleepers and the dark trees near at hand.

The sleepers did not stir.

But into the eyes of the half-breed, as he watched the flickering flame, there came a sudden gleam.

He moved silently, softly, as a panther stealing on its prey, creeping closer to the fire.

He made no sound that could disturb the sleepers.

With his back to the flicker he held out his bound hands behind him so that the flame licked the cord that secured his wrists.

It licked his wrists also, and the agony of the burn caused the perspiration to start out on his dusky forehead in big drops.

But he set his teeth like iron, and was silent.

With the Indian blood that ran in his veins the half-breed had many of the red man's attributes. A grim and stoical endurance of pain was one of them.

No white man could have endured the licking of the flame upon his flesh without a cry. But not a sound passed the set lips of the half-breed.

Hardy as he was, and bitterly determined, the anguish forced the half-breed to withdraw his wrists from the contact of the flame.

He strained to burst the cord, but it still held.

With set teeth he extended it over the licking flame again.

The sweat poured down his face like a stream. His heart was beating in irregular spasms. But he still endured.

And suddenly, as he strained his tortured wrists, the charred cord burst.

He was free!

CHAPTER 27.

AT DAY!

LE COUTEAU lay silent on the ground beside the dead fire, breathing long and slowly.

He was free, but for the time he could

not move; the pain he had endured had exhausted even his iron frame.

The light of the flickering ember died down and vanished. All was dark again save for the glimmer of the stars.

But the half-breed was free!

He moved at last, and softly chafed his scorched and tortured wrists. His eyes were on the sleepers, watchful as a cat's.

But they did not stir.

It was an hour more before Le Coubeau felt himself able to make another move. The pain in his wrists had settled down into a dull, grinding ache, a torture that would have been almost unendurable to a white man. But the breed bore it in grim silence.

He moved at length, creeping stealthily closer to the sleepers.

His hand was on the gold-sack at last.

The thought was in his mind of groping for a rock and dashing out the brains of the sleepers as they lay.

But he did not dare to risk it. One, at least, of them would have awakened in time, and a bullet would have laid the half-breed dead on the ground before he could escape. And his scorched and quivering wrists were scarcely equal to the striking of a deadly blow.

The day of vengeance should come, the ruffian promised himself. Now he was thinking only of escape and of the gold.

Inch by inch, with infinite caution, he drew the gold-sack towards him till it was clear of the sleeping miners.

Then he rose to his feet.

He threw the strap of the canvas sack over his shoulder and buckled it. One last look he gave at his sleeping enemies.

Again the impulse seized him to attack them before he fled, to hurl a rock at an unconscious head. But it was too risky. Bronze Bill's arm was over his rifle; Frank Richards' hand was on his revolver under his blanket. It was impossible to touch the weapons without awakening them. Vengeance

upon one meant death at the hands of the other, and the half-breed restrained the murderous impulse.

With silent steps he stole away in the darkness.

In a few minutes the shadows of the night had swallowed him up.

Still the miners slept on.

They were weary from the long day's trail, and they did not open their eyes until the early sunlight was creeping into the valley over the mountain-peaks to the east.

Bronze Bill was the first to awaken.

He sat up as the early sun-rays glimmered on his face, and gave a deep yawn and threw his blanket aside.

His hand groped instinctively for the gold-sack at once.

Then a change came over his face as he was startled into full wakefulness.

He leaped to his feet.

The gold-sack was gone, and a rapid glance showed that the half-breed was gone also.

"Gone!" stuttered Bronze Bill. He drove his boot against the sleeping form of his comrade. "Wake up!"

Frank Richards started up.

"What——" he began drowsily.

"He's gone—and the gold!" roared Bronze Bill furiously.

Frank Richards was on his feet in a second.

"Gone!" he repeated blankly.

"Look!" yelled Bronze Bill.

"My hat!"

Frank Richards stared round him.

"Gone!" hissed Bronze Bill between his teeth. "He's got loose and lit out, taking the gold with him. You durned young fool, you never tied him safe!"

"I did!" exclaimed Frank. "He couldn't have got loose——"

"Ain't he gone?" roared Bronze Bill.

"I can't understand it——"

Bronze Bill picked up the fragments of the charred cord. He stared at them, and held them up for Frank to see.

"By gosh!" he said in a hushed voice. "Look at that! Injun all over! There was a bit of the fire left, I reckon, and

he burned the cord through. That's Injun."

"But—but he must have burned his wrists, too," said Frank. "How could he—"

"I guess he stood that, like the darned Injun he is!" growled Bronze Bill. "I reckoned I'd stamped the fire out, but it blew up agin, I guess. Your fault—"

"Yours, you mean," said Frank warmly. "You must have left an ember—"

"Your fault, for stopping me putting a bullet through his cabeza!" exclaimed the bronzed miner savagely. "I reckon this wouldn't have happened if I'd dropped him dead in his tracks, as I wanted, you young jay!"

Frank Richards was silent. His partner was right, there was no doubt about that. But Frank could not regret what he had done.

"The fire's dead and cold hours ago!" said Bronze Bill, feeling among the ashes. "I reckon he lit out by midnight. You young jay! If you'd let me put a bullet through him—"

"No good slanging now," interrupted Frank Richards. "We're wasting time, Bill. We've got to get after him."

"Jest let me get a bead on him agin!" said the big miner savagely. "I reckon I'll pull trigger instantar. Get a move on! There ain't any time for feeding. We've got to get arter the cuss afore the trail's cold."

Without a word more the miner began to hunt for the "sign" of the half-breed, and he was not long in picking up the trail.

Le Couteau had left as little "sign" as he could, but he had not been able to avoid leaving a trace here and there on the soft soil of the valley bottom.

"He went up the valley," said Bronze Bill, after a few minutes. "He's not striking out for Hard Pan. I reckon he'd be afraid of meeting us agin there. He's goin' north, to strike over the range, I guess, headin' for the rocks, where he won't leave a trail. But I'll

run him down, if I have to follow his track as far as the Yukon River."

With his rifle in his hand the bronzed miner started, and Frank hastily slung on his wallet and followed him.

Within five minutes of the awakening the camp was deserted, and the partners were pressing on swiftly up the valley.

A mile from the camp Bronze Bill halted on the bank of a stream. He picked up a great deal of sign on the bank.

"I guess the cuss was feeling that burning some!" he said with a savage grin. "He stopped here to bathe his wrists, I reckon. I guess he won't get over it for some time. He ain't got such a cinch on us as he figured out. He's unarmed. We know that. And he's hurt. He must have burned his wrists bad in charring off that rope. I calculate we'll have him sooner or later. Kim on!"

The "sign" of the trail led up the hillside beyond the green level. After a couple more miles there were rocks under the feet of the trailers, and the trail was harder to pick up. But it led by a steep ascent into a narrow, shadowy gorge. On either side the steep gorge was shut in by wall-like cliffs, and here the trail was certain enough, for the fugitive could not have turned either to the right or to the left.

Bronze Bill's brow was knitted as he tramped on and upward, his eyes keenly about him.

"What did he vamoose this way for, young Richards?" the miner exclaimed suddenly. "This hyer trail only leads up to the peaks. There ain't no escape for him on the hill-tops, I reckon. He's got a reason for going up this way. Keep your eyes peeled!"

"He's unarmed," said Frank. "He can't think of stopping and holding us off."

"I guess he can't be thinking of anything else, or he wouldn't mosey into a trap like this," said Bronze Bill.

"But—"

"Look out for a rock coming down the trail, you young jay!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Frank.

His heart beat faster.

The narrow gorge was merely a split in the mountainside, in some places not more than four or five feet across, with almost perpendicular walls.

The ascent was steep and rugged.

A heavy rock hurtling from above would have swept through the gorge, down the steep slope, crashing from side to side. And at the thought of it Frank felt his cheek grow paler.

But there was nothing for it but to keep on and take the risk.

Le Couteau knew—he must know—that the miners he had robbed would follow him with unshaken determination. He was unarmed, and he was partly disabled, at least. It was only too probable that he intended to choose his own spot for turning on his pursuers. Unless he could rid himself of them he would be tracked down at long last. Was it for that reason that he had chosen to follow the steep path up the gorge?

Frank Richards felt that it was so, and he knew that with every step he and his comrade were taking their lives in their hands.

But he did not think of a halt.

The gold-sack was in the hands of the fleeing half-breed, and at any risk the robbed gold-seekers were resolute to keep on the pursuit.

The gorge narrowed still more as they ascended.

The cliffs on either side were lower now. In a cleft of the rock a stunted pine-tree jutted out. Ahead of them the ascent ended on a rocky plateau.

"Once there, I reckon we're clear of this!" muttered Bronze Bill. "But if I figure it out right, I guess that cuss is there ready for us. Look out!"

The words had hardly left his lips when there was a sudden, grinding roar farther up the acclivity.

From the edge of the plateau above a great boulder was displaced, and it came rolling down the slope with a noise like thunder.

"Look out!" panted Frank Richards.

For an instant, far ahead, he caught sight of a dark-skinned face and a pair of flashing black eyes. It was the half-breed! But there was no time to shoot. Down the rocky slope, grinding and roaring, came the rolling boulder, crashing from side to side of the narrow gorge as it rolled, leaping and roaring towards the two doomed trailers who stood in its fatal path.

CHAPTER 26.

The Last Struggle!

CRASH!

Crash!

From side to side of the narrow gorge the great rock crashed and bounded, sending rocky splinters in a shower.

For a moment Frank Richards stared at it as if transfixed. There seemed no possible escape for the trailers in the path of the rushing, leaping rock.

High above them, at the top of the gorge, a dark face grinned down, blazing with savage malice and vengeance. Le Couteau, the half-breed, had turned at bay, with some effect. He had lain in wait for the pursuers he knew would come, with the big rock ready to roll down the slope; and now it seemed certain that they must fall, crushed to death under the boulder as it roared down the gorge.

Frank Richards was white as chalk. There was no way of escape. On either side the rocky walls shut him in.

"The tree!" panted Bronze Bill.

Frank felt himself seized by a powerful hand and lifted. He caught a branch as the big miner swung him into the tree that jutted out from a rocky ledge three or four feet up the side of the gorge. Hardly knowing what had happened, what was happening, he clung on, dazed and dizzy, with the roar of the crashing boulder deafening his ears.

Crash, crash!

The boulder struck again the rocky

side of the gorge and rebounded, and crashed on its downward way.

Bronze Bill dragged himself into the tree beside Frank.

"Hold on!" he breathed. "Hold on for your life! There's a chance. Hold on——"

Frank clung dearly to the branch, the bronzed miner beside him. It had all passed, so far, in a few seconds.

Crash!

The rock seemed like a thing of life as it bounded and leaped down the slope.

Had the trailers remained in its path nothing could have saved them from being swept away, crushed and shattered out of all semblance to humanity. But the tree that jutted out above had enabled them to drag themselves from the path of the rushing rock, though the stunted pine was already sinking under their weight.

Crash!

The boulder had reached them after what seemed an age, though it was but a few seconds.

It struck the side of the gorge just under the ledge where the stunted pine jutted out with the two trailers clinging to it.

But they were a couple of feet above it as it crashed, though the tree to which they clung was sinking down, and evidently would only support their weight for a time that could be counted in seconds.

But it was long enough!

The boulder rolled on, crashing, grinding, roaring on its way to the bottom of the gorge.

There was a tearing sound as the roots came rending out under the stunted tree, and the trunk sank down lower, and fell. It dropped the two trailers to the ground in the very spot where the rolling rock had crashed half a minute before.

But the rock was past now. Far down in the distance its crashing echoed back to their ears.

Frank Richards reeled against the

rocky wall of the gorge, panting, dizzy, almost overcome.

The fearful danger, so narrowly escaped, had unnerved him for the moment.

Crack!

It was the report of Bronze Bill's rifle that awoke the echoes of the gorge.

The bullet whizzed within an inch of the evil, dark face that peered down from the top of the ascent.

Le Conteau sprang back with a fierce oath.

He had counted on the destruction of his enemies; he had watched and waited and planned for it, and it had seemed a certainty; it had seemed that only a miracle could save the two trailers from a terrible death. But the miracle had happened!

He barely escaped the bullet as he leaped back into cover.

"Come on, Richards!" roared Bronze Bill.

He was racing up the ascent, eager to get to close quarters with the half-breed before another rock could be displaced and sent hurtling down.

Frank Richards pulled himself together. One fearful danger had been eluded as if by a miracle; but the hunters were not out of the wood yet. If the half-breed had time——

But he was not given time.

He was struggling to roll a heavy rock to the verge, and set it spinning down, when Bronze Bill came tearing over the last rise, and, raising his rifle as he ran on, fired again.

There was a yell from the half-breed, following the ring of the miner's rifle.

The bullet gashed along his cheek, as he turned his head, leaving a red mark where it had torn.

"Ho's our meat now!" roared Bronze Bill.

He rushed on, without stopping to reload the rifle, clapping the weapon as he ran, to crash the butt down upon the head of Le Conteau.

The half-breed sprang away, showing his white teeth in a snarl like a wild animal.

He had no weapon; and he turned to fly as the clubbed rifle-butt whirled over his head.

Crash!

The rifle-butt came crashing down, but a desperate spring saved the litheascal from the blow, and the rifle struck a boulder with a force that smashed the stock.

Bronze Bill uttered an oath.

With the swiftness almost of a hunted elk the half-breed fled across the rocky plateau, the burly miner panting on his track.

But it is a foot-race the lithe half-breed was more than a match for the Canadian miner. Bronze Bill gritted his teeth, and threw aside the useless rifle.

"Frank!" he panted.

"Coming!" gasped Frank Richards. He came up panting for breath.

"The shooter—quick!"

Without a word Frank Richards handed the revolver from his belt to his partner.

The half-breed was already fifty yards distant, leaping from rock to rock like an elk; the gold-sack strapped on his shoulders. Bronze Bill dropped on one knee, revolver in hand, rested his left elbow on a boulder, and used his left hand as a rest for the revolver as he took aim.

Frank Richards stood panting—without speaking a word. It was no time for him to interfere, as he had done before. It was a fight to the death for the gold-sack; and already the trappers had been fearfully near to death. Le Couteau must take his chance; he had brought it upon himself. Frank spoke no word.

Crack!

The ring of the revolver was answered by a scream from the fleeing half-breed.

He had leaped from one rock to another when Bronze Bill pulled trigger, and for the moment his wild figure had stood out black against the sky; and at that instant the miner had

fired. The next instant Le Couteau was plunging headlong down the rock.

"Winged!" panted Bronze Bill.

He rushed on, revolver in hand, with Frank Richards at his heels. The half-breed lay crumpled on the ground, sprawled over the gold-sack, his dark, savage face upturned.

Bronze Bill's finger was on the trigger, but the revolver was not needed.

The fierce face of the half-breed was fixed; Le Couteau, the gold-thief and murderer, had paid the penalty!

Frank Richards turned away his face.

CHAPTER 29.

Hitting the Trail!

FRANK RICHARDS and his partner camped for the remainder of the day and the following night at the head of the gorge in the lively foothills. They were almost worn out, and needed a rest before they started on the long trail to Hard Pan.

It was Frank who drove away the black vultures that gathered by the body of the half-breed. He scooped a shallow grave with his knife in a hollow of the rocks, and Le Couteau was laid there, and Frank piled boulders above to keep off the ravening beaks of the obscene birds. It was all he could do for his old enemy—the lawless rustler who had fought so desperately for the gold-sack and failed.

It was with a saddened face that Frank Richards turned away when his task was done. Bronze Bill was examining the contents of the gold-sack with grim satisfaction in his tanned visage. But there was no satisfaction for Frank Richards at that moment. He was thinking then of his old home in the settlement of the Thompson Valley, and feeling a revulsion against the wild, savage life of the foothills. Gladly enough he would have turned his back on the mountains and taken the trail for the Thompson Valley, shaking the dust of the gold-mines from his feet.

But his old home was closed to him; at Cedar Creek the shadow of shame rested upon his name.

Would it ever be lifted? Frank wondered, with an ache at his heart. Bronze Bill looked up as his schoolboy partner came back to the camp, and nodded to him with a smile.

"I guess we score this deal, Frank!" he remarked. "Thunder! You don't seem to look rosy over it!"

Frank smiled faintly.

"I'm jolly glad we've recaptured the gold-sack," he said. "I suppose we start for Hard Pan at sunrise."

"Sure! I guess it's five hundred dollars each for us," said Bronze Bill with satisfaction. "Share and share alike, like good pards. I reckon we've both worked for this, and fought for it, too, by thunder! What are you going to do when we strike Hard Pan, Richards?"

"I don't quite know yet," said Frank. "What are you going to do, Bill?"

Bronze Bill grinned.

"I guess it's me for a bender!" he said impressively. "I'm goin' on a regular bender, Richards, and don't forget it! I guess if you hang on in Hard Pan you'll see your old pard painting the town red—real crimson! Just a few!"

"Then I don't think I shall hang on in Hard Pan," said Frank, with a smile.

"Nope! I reckon a bender ain't much in your line, sonny," grinned Bronze Bill. "You're a tenderfoot, you are! I reckon you'd better put your share of the dust in your grip, and hit the home-trail, and get back to your people, wherever they are."

Frank's face clouded.

That was what he would gladly have done; and what he could not do. Not till his name was cleared at Cedar Creek.

Until they turned in for the night, Bronze Bill made frequent allusions to the "bender" he was planning, and chuckled with anticipation of the happy prospect. They turned in at last, and slept under the summer stars.

At sunrise the next morning the partners took the trail down the mountain.

It was late afternoon when they "struck" Hard Pan.

Frank Richards tramped into the mining-camp with his partner, tired but cheerful. Only a few weeks before he had struck Hard Pan, footsore and almost on his "uppers," looking for a job. Now he was re-entering the camp with gold-dust and nuggets in his possession to the tune of five hundred dollars or more. It was a change in fortune for the wandering schoolboy, and Frank felt considerably elated.

At the lumber hotel, where they put up for rest and refreshment, the gold taken from the claim in the locked gulch was disposed of, and the partners divided the sum of one thousand and fifty dollars in Canadian bankbills. Frank Richards retired to his room to sew up the greater part of his money in his belt for security, keeping only a few bills in his pocket for immediate use.

Bronze Bill did not follow his example.

After long hardship and privation in the mountains, the bronzed miner was bent upon indemnifying himself by "going on a bender," as he expressed it; and his "bender" started the same evening. With the result that after a particularly glorious evening Bronze Bill spent the remainder of the night in the camp calaboose.

In the morning a wagon was leaving Hard Pan on the southern trail, and Frank Richards decided to take a seat in it. He had had enough of the diggings, and with his little capital safe in his belt he hoped to make a successful start in a more settled region. Bronze Bill was out of the calaboose in time to bid his schoolboy partner good-bye.

The wagon rolled away with Frank Richards, Bronze Bill waving a horny hand after him in farewell. Probably his bender was resumed that day—how long to last, Frank did not know; but probably till the proceeds of his success-

ful gold-seeking had disappeared, when Bill shoulder spade and pick, and "hit the trail" for the mountains, gold-seeking again.

Frank Richards had had luck at the diggings, but he was not sorry to turn his back on the foothills. In the creaking wagon, under a sunny sky, with five hundred dollars sewn up in his belt, he rolled away southward, and he was glad to see the green ranch-lands fresh and bright before his eyes at last.

CHAPTER XX.

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.

Way back at Cinnamon Camp, in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, Frank had spent one hundred dollars from his little capital of five hundred, in buying a horse, together with saddle and bridle and other necessary articles of equipment.

Comfortably fitted out as he was, and riding his own horse, the outcast of Cedar Creek was feeling very satisfied with himself.

He 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 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 had 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 a revolver in his belt. His 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 a moment he did not comprehend the actions of a 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 a 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, thought 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 guess I took you for one of the gang watching the trail," he said.

"You look the part, stranger."

"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 back that, if the boss 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 blump 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 sunk off his horse."

"And you left him?"

"I guess I wasn't stopping to argue. I guess his ribs was paying Sam Slick to guide him, not to scrap with rustlers," answered the man coolly. "I reckon they won't hurt him. They only want his spendables. He's a big prize for the Black Sacks—a real Jim-dandy from the Old Country." Sam Slick chuckled. "I reckoned I warned him this was dangerous country, but he only blinked at me through a glass eye, and said 'Really!' I guess they'll make his lordship pay through the nose afore they let him go. Waal, it's his funeral, ain't it?"

"His lordship?" asked Frank.

"A real 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 Beauchere, 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, Algernon, had paid a visit to Cedar 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 look-out for rustlers.

CHAPTER XX.

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 firs, with his hand over his 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' 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-rope, 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 rode in complete silence. Not a sound, save the tread of the horses and jingle of harness, reached Frank, as he stood, silent and breathless.

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 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 cloak 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. And in silence, save for the faint jingle of harness, and the horses' tread, the strange file wound on into the foothills.

CHAPTER 37.

In the Rustlers' 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 horseman 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 dark 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 for 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 so 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 im-

possible now, for a horse could not have turned in the passage, and the way behind was blocked by the incoming rustlers. Frank could only ride on, knowing that when the bell rang for the 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——"

"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 widening, 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 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. Above the muttering he heard the sharp, rapping tones of the captain.

"The bell can't lie, you fools—there's a stranger in the gulch! The passage is closed, and he can't get out. Search for him, and shoot on sight!"

"You bet, cap'n!"

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 in full 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 spluttering behind him as he ran.

CHAPTER 32.

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 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 minutes—before they sighted him again.

Frank's brain worked quickly.

In his cloak and sou'-wester he was easily recognisable if the torch-light 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.

Frank Richards bent over him, his weapon ready for another blow; but it was not needed; the ruffian was stunned.

He lay like a log without a movement. Frank looked up. The torch was flaring farther off—the rustler's comrades had seen nothing. Frank picked the revolver from the fallen man's hand, rose, and hurled it through the air with all his strength. It fell with a clatter among the rocks at a distance. The rustlers shouted, and rushed in the direction of the sound.

The ruffians were on a false scent for the moment, at least. It gave the hunted schoolboy breathing space.

He 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 outlaw's 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 sides 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. Austells' 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 from 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 not 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 the name," he said. "My brother has mentioned it in his letters. But—"

"I am here to save you. I have taken this outfit," whispered Frank. "You understand now?"

"Good heavens!"

"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, darn 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 darn 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.

"You'll write a letter before you're an hour older, giving instructions for the cash to be paid!" he said threateningly.

"I shall do nothing of the kind!"

"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.

CHAPTER 12.

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 soundrecks 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; knocked out, and his sack gone. The galoot we're looking for has taken it and rigged himself up. I guess he's rigged up as one of us, and he—"

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 fled from under his sack before the rustler 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.

"Is that you, cap'n—?"

"What—?"

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

Loud oaths answered him, and the

two rustlers followed on, as Frank, with 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 at their heels, but 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.

"Well hit!" gasped Frank.

Lord St. Austells caught up the rifle as it clattered from the fallen rustler's hand. He turned on the two Black Sacks who were following up the rift, and pulled 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 as a great boulder blocked the rift ahead. It was the rock the captain had rolled from a cave in the rock wall, to close the passage after his entrance.

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

"They won't hurry on if they think we're waiting here for them," said Frank. "Come on!"

Once on the open hillside they tossed aside the disguising black sacks. Lord St. Austells drew nearer to his young companion and peered at him, as a glimmer of moonlight showed through the clouds.

"And you are Frank Richards?" he asked.

"Yes," said Frank.

"My nephew's friend, whom my brother has often mentioned in his letters. 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, 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.

CHAPTER 15.

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.

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 horse-men who rode into the rugged, unpaved street, and stopped a short distance from the hotel. There were four horse-men, 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 horse-men 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.

The man 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, I think, Richards," said Lord St. Austells, removing his cigar.

"Yes," said Frank.

"We've had a good rest here—and I needed it, by gad!" said his lordship. "I fancy I've had enough of exploring the foothills; I want to see nothing more of such gentry as the Black Sack Gang. I'm going on to Fraser to rejoin the friends I've been travelling with."

"Yes," said Frank again.

"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 back-woods 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. Will you come back with me?"

"I—I can't!"

"You have quarrelled, perhaps?"

"No, no!"

"I think you ought to tell me how matters stand," said Lord St. Austells quietly. "I shall be in the Thompson Valley in a few days, and naturally shall refer to the fact that I have met you up here in the mountains."

"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 keen grey eyes fixed on Frank's crimson face.

"My friends did," said Frank. "Vere and Bob and my aunt—they trusted me against all the evidence. Nobody else."

Lord St. Austells smoked his cigar for a few minutes in silence. Frank sat quiet.

What was passing in his lordship's mind, he could not guess; but he felt that Lord St. Austells, a stranger to him, could scarcely accept his bare word that he was innocent. He had told his story frankly, and there was nothing more to be said. Lord St. Austells had to form his own opinion. Inside the smoke-room, the black-bearded man stood silent, listening, with a peculiar expression on his face.

Lord St. Austells spoke at last.

"That is why you will not come with me to the Thompson Valley?"

"Yes. It's impossible."

"Your uncle——"

"He believes me guilty," said Frank. "But he would keep me in his care; my father sent me out to Canada to be in his charge. But I can't accept anything from him—not unless he believes in me. And I can look after myself."

"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. Austella, 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. Austella, 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. Austella. "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," murmured Frank, "you—you're willing to trust me with a thousand pounds?"

Lord St. Austella 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. Austella 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. He's not taking chances this time. There'll be a dozen galoots, and the'll all be heeled. I got that out of the landlord."

There was a muttering of curses among the ruffians.

"Then the game's up!" granted 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 there, talking. The kid's staying in Gold Brick after the peaky 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 on me, 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 Jug-dandy out of our hands, and it's worth five thousand dollars to us. He hasn't done with the Black Sacks yet."

CHAPTER XX. In Great 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-tops.

There Frank Richards turned to walk back. He came almost face to face, as he turned, with a thickset, 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 street of Gold Brick unsuspected. Something cautious and watchful in the red-faced man's look warned Frank that the fellow had been following him.

With a quick glance, too, he noted a black bruise on the man's forehead under the rim of the Stetson hat. He wondered whether this was the ruffian

he had stunned with a clubbed revolver in the fight at the rustlers' retreat in the hills.

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 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's-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.

Lord St. Austells had shown his firm faith in him by entrusting the dollars to his charge; but if the money was lost what might not the earl think in that case?

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

But it was necessary to be sure beyond the shadow of a doubt that his enemies had ventured to follow him into the camp, and that they were on the watch.

After thinking the matter out, Frank descended the steps of the veranda, and walked up the street, passing before the door of Red Pete's cabin.

He walked on to the end of the street, and stopped to look on where a perspiring man in shirtsleeves was caulking corrugated iron on a shack in course of erection.

While he watched carelessly the building operations, he glanced back along the street with the tail of his eye, as it were.

The black-bearded man had emerged from the cabin, and was strolling towards him, smoking a cigar.

He did not pass Frank, but stopped to look in at the building, as if interested in the operations.

Frank remained there ten minutes or more, and the black-bearded man remained at a little distance, smoking one cigar and then another.

Frank walked back into the camp,

The black-bearded man walked back also.

Frank went into the lumber hotel, satisfied now that his suspicions had not led him astray.

He was watched—and he had four enemies to deal with, for evidently the four in the cabin were the same gang.

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 on the lonely trail, 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 the 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, but 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. He was

aware of the kind of prospecting that Red Pete & Co. did in the mountains.

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.

CHAPTER "7.

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 smoking and drinking, 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 chinks 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 farthest corner of the room, and sat on the pinewood 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 come 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-a-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 glistering 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 the 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 Sanders!" 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.

CHAPTER 26.

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 Backs 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 dispatched 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 at 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 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 in-

capable 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 shamed 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. AUSTELLA."

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 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. Austella, 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. He had been weighed in the balance, and had not been found wanting.

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. Austella. His money was diminishing, and he looked for a job on the railway to keep him going while he waited. "Doing the chores" at a rough siding on the Canadian Pacific railroad was a hard life; but Frank was glad to be taken on, and he did the "chores" industriously and conscientiously. 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!"

"Bob!" gasped Frank Richards. "Beauchere!"

"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.

CHAPTER 25.

The Home Trail!

"BUT—" said Frank Richards doubtfully.

"You've got to come!"

"But—"

"Bother your buts!" said Bob Lawless cheerily. "You've got to come home, old scout, and we've come to take you."

"Yes, rather!" said Vere Beauchere, with a smile. "We're not going without you, Frank."

"But—"

"We're two to one, I guess," grinned Bob Lawless. "If you don't come, Frank, we shall rope you up like a steer and lead you home at the end of a trail-rope!"

Frank Richards laughed.

He was glad—more glad than he could have expressed—to see his old chums again.

His wanderings, since he had turned his back on the Lawless Ranch and Cedar Creek School, had lasted only a few weeks, but it seemed almost like years to him since he had seen his chums.

It had been the happiest moment of his life when Bob and Beauchere had ridden up in the street at Albert Station and joined him.

Now the chums were arguing it out.

Bob and Beauchere had come to fetch Frank Richards home, but Frank was still dubious.

"But your father, Bob!" urged Frank. "You see——"

"Popper believes in you now," said Bob.

"But——"

"Beau's uncle is staying at the ranch now," explained Bob. "He's brought popper round. Lord St. Austella is a real brick—the genuine white article."

"The real goods?" said Beauclerc, smiling.

"He's told popper of the little stunt he played on you," continued Bob Lawless. "He left a lot of money in your hands, to put you to the test, Frank, and you came out as right as rain. That's evidence good enough for any galoot with any horse-sense."

"Yes; but—but it doesn't alter the fact that Miss Meadows was robbed at Cedar Creek, and that I was suspected," said Frank.

"I guess I haven't told you all the yarn yet," said Bob Lawless. "While you've been cavorting around in the merry North-West, there's been some happenings at Cedar Creek. Since you left there's been two more robberies."

"Oh!" ejaculated Frank.

"Mr. Shomey has had a fifty-dollar note bagged from his cabin, and Mr. Shepherd has lost twenty dollars," said Bob. "There's no trace of the rascal that pinched the goods, but nobody could reckon it was you, Frank, when you were a hundred miles or more away. And most of the fellows have figured it out that if there's a thief in the school—as there certainly is—it was most likely the same galoot that pinched Miss Meadows' dust in the first place, and put it on to you."

Frank Richard's face brightened.

"By Jove, that alters the case!" he exclaimed.

"Popper was beginning to reckon that he's made a mistake, like Miss Meadows and the rest," said Bob. "In fact, it was getting pretty clear. Then Lord St. Austell stepped in, and told us how you'd rescued him from the rustlers in the Cascade Mountains, and how he'd trusted you with a heap of dollars that you'd sent back to him safe and sound."

After that, only a silly jay could have doubted you, and popper isn't a jay."

"No, but——"

"There you go, bailing again!" exclaimed Bob. "Don't I keep on telling you it's all right? Popper wants you to come back—and mopper, too. She never really believed it against you, any more than I did, or the Cherub here. Popper's anxious to see you and beg your pardon."

"Oh!"

"Miss Meadows is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt," said Beauclerc. "She's told us that her opinion has altered very much since the new thefts in the school. She said that she hopes you may be cleared."

"Coming, Franky?"

Frank Richards made up his mind.

There was a rift in the clouds, at least; and, although he was not cleared, the way was open for his return, and once at Cedar Creek again he would have a chance to fight to clear his name.

He nodded at last.

"I'm coming!" he said.

"You won't regret it, Frank," said Beauclerc. "I'm sure it will turn out all right."

"I—I hope so," said Frank. "If it doesn't, I can hit the trail again, that's all."

"If it comes to that, I guess we'll jolly well come with you," said Bob Lawless. "But it won't! The galoot who's pinching the dust at Cedar Creek will break out again, I reckon, and sooner or later we'll put a cinch on him. Now, then, saddle up!"

And a little later Frank Richards, with a very cheerful face, was riding on the home-trail with his old chums.

CHAPTER 40.

At Cedar Creek Again

"FRANK RICHARDS!"

"By gum!"

"Richards is back again!"

"Hallo, Franky!" roared Chunky Todgers.

"Velly glad to see ole Franky!" chuckled little Yen Chin, the Chinese. "Nicey ole Franky."

It was a few days later, and Frank Richards—home again at his uncle's ranch—was returning to school for the first time.

He rode up the old familiar trail through the timber with Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc, and arrived at the gates of Cedar Creek.

His face was a little flushed, and his heart was beating fast, as he rode up to the backwoods school in the sunny summer morning.

Exactly what his reception would be like he hardly knew. But he knew that he was glad to be back.

Unless the truth came to light, and his name was cleared, he would have some difficulties to face, some humiliations to endure; but at least he would have his two tried and trusty chums to stand by him, and the hope in his breast that he would be righted at last.

At the ranch all was well with him; his uncle, Rancher Lawless, had asked his pardon frankly for having doubted him. The late happenings at Cedar Creek had quite changed the rancher's opinion, added to what Lord St. Austell had told him. At the ranch Frank had taken up his old place in the old atmosphere of friendly confidence. It remained to be seen what place he would take at Cedar Creek.

Frank's return to the ranch was known at the school, and when the three chums arrived at Cedar Creek that morning a crowd gathered round the gates to meet them.

Upon the whole, the greeting was very friendly and cordial.

Chunky Todgers grasped Frank's hand with a fat paw, and worked at it as if it were a pump-handle.

"Jolly glad to see you, old scout!" said Todgers. "Of course, I never believed anything against you—hardly, anyhow. Of course, it looked bad. I say, I hear you've been at the diggings."

"Yes," said Frank, with a smile.

"Had my luck?"

"Yes."

"Brought any dust home?" asked Chunky, with wide-open, eager eyes.

"Three hundred dollars."

"Jerusalem! I—I say, Franky, I swore all along that you were innocent!" exclaimed Chunky Todgers. "I'd punch any galoot's nose that said you weren't! I say, can you lend a Chap ten dollars for a few days?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We all believe in you, Frank," said Molly Lawrence. "I never doubted you, for one."

"Thank you, Molly," said Frank softly.

"Same here," said Tom Lawrence. "I reckoned that there was some mistake somewhere. And then the fresh robberies happened—why, then I said to Molly that it was the same galoot all along. Didn't I, Molly?"

"I said it to you, you mean," said Molly, laughing.

"Well, it comes to the same thing; we both said it," said Lawrence. "I guess I'm real glad to see you back, Richards!"

"Same 'ere," said Harold Hopkins.

"I guess so," said Dick Dawson.

"All friends here, Franky."

"Mind your pockets!" called out Eben Hacke.

Frank Richards flushed crimson.

Hacke's was the only disagreeable voice in the crowd; but the taunt struck the returned wanderer hard.

"Shut up, Hacke!" roared Bob Lawless savagely.

"I guess—"

"Go and guess somewhere else, then, you rooster!" exclaimed Bob, and he made a rush at Eben Hacke.

That youth went sprawling along the ground as the rancher's son hit out, and he rolled over, roaring.

"Well hit!" grunted Beauclerc.

"Hold on, Bob!" exclaimed Frank Richards, as Bob Lawless swung up his trail-rope over the sprawling Hacke.

"I guess I'm going to give him ginger!" exclaimed Bob savagely.

Frank caught his cousin's arm.

"Hold on! Let him alone!"

"I guess I'll smash you!" roared Hacke. "I guess——"

He scrambled up, and rushed at Bob. The rancher's son dropped the trail-ropes, and put up his hands. In a minute or less Eben Hacke was on his back again, and this time he was not in a hurry to rise.

The Cedar Creek fellows gathered round in a crowd, looking on with grinning faces as Hacke received that rapid and thorough licking. It was evident that their sympathies were with Frank Richards.

While Hacke was bathing a seriously-damaged nose in the creek, Frank Richards & Co. walked into the playground, in the midst of a crowd. Mr. Slimney and Mr. Shepherd were in the playground, and they both came up and shook hands with Frank Richards.

Then Frank went into the lumber school-house to report his arrival to Miss Meadows.

He found the Canadian school-mistress in her little sitting-room, and she bade him enter in a kind voice.

Frank stood before her with a flushed face.

"I—I've come back, Miss Meadows!" he stammered.

Miss Meadows held out her hand.

"I am very glad to see you, Richards," she said kindly.

"Then—then you don't believe any longer——"

"I hardly know what to believe, Richards. The fact remains that a hundred and ten dollars were taken from my desk at or near the time when you were in this room, and that the ten-dollar bill was discovered in your pocket. That fact remains."

"But——" stammered Frank.

"But since then other things have happened," said Miss Meadows. "Twice a robbery has been perpetrated here since you left. It is only natural to suppose that all three robberies were perpetrated by the same

person, and that, in the first instance, he succeeded in saving himself from suspicion by placing the smaller stolen bill in your pocket. I will say frankly, Richards, that I do not feel certain of this; but I think it is very probably the case, more especially as you had always borne a spotless character until that time. It is my duty to give you the benefit of the doubt, and to allow you to return to Cedar Creek."

Frank bit his lip.

"I—I suppose that is all I can expect from you, Miss Meadows," he said, in a low voice. "But—but I do not want to return to Cedar Creek on those terms."

"That is for your uncle to decide," said Miss Meadows, rather curtly.

Frank Richards shook his head.

"Not wholly, Miss Meadows," he answered. "My uncle believes in me now, and he is sorry for having doubted me. He is assured that there is only one thief in Cedar Creek—the fellow who has committed thefts since I left. He would not want me to come back here against my will."

"Then——" said Miss Meadows.

"But I want to come," said Frank. "because I think I may be able to find out the guilty party. If I do not succeed in that, I shall not remain at Cedar Creek. I cannot stay here with a stain on my name. But I hope that I shall be successful."

Miss Meadows nodded.

"You have my best wishes for your success, Richards," she said kindly. "I only hope it may turn out as you wish. In the meantime, you will take your place in the class as if nothing had happened."

"Very well, Miss Meadows."

And when the bell rang for school, Frank Richards took his old place in Miss Meadows' class; and he found friendly faces all round him—with perhaps one exception. But Eben Hacke was too busy rubbing a swollen nose to pay much attention to Frank Richards.

CHAPTER 41.

Light at Last!

"NICEY ole Flanky!"

Frank Richards smiled.

It was the second day after his return to Cedar Creek School, and he was strolling in the playground after morning lessons when Yen Chin came sidling up, with his perpetual grin.

The little heathen had been one of the most cordial in welcoming the returned wanderer; but Frank Richards knew Yen Chin too well to trust him very far. The little heathen was truly Oriental in his manners and customs, and much given to "ways that are dark, and tricks that are vain."

"Well?" said Frank, stopping in his walk. Frank was busily engaged in thinking out the problem of his position and prospects at Cedar Creek, and did not welcome the interruption. But he had always been kind to the little Celestial, and his kindness did not fail now.

"Nicey ole Flanky back again," said Yen Chin. "Me velly glad see ole Flanky. Ciy velly muchy when Flanky goey away."

"Gammon!" said Frank cheerily.

"Pool lil' Chinees ciy velly muchy," said Yen Chin reproachfully. "Likey nicey ole Flanky."

"Have you been playing fan-tan while I've been away?" asked Frank. He had not forgotten Yen Chin's little ways, and he guessed that the heathen was "handing out" smooth words now as a preparation for asking for a little loan. The Chinese's predilection for gambling had often landed him in serious trouble.

Yen Chin shook his head.

"No playee fan-tan," he said. "Chinees good boy; velly good little chap. Promise Flanky no play, and keepee promise."

"I hope so," said Frank, very doubtfully however.

"Flanky bitng home doller fom diggings?" asked Yen Chin.

"Yes, I had some luck."

"How muchee?"

"Three hundred."

"Flanky nicey ole teller," said Yen Chin. "Flanky solly to see pool lil' Yen Chin's fatheres soldes up."

"Eh? Is John Chin's laundry going to be sold up?" exclaimed Frank.

Yen Chin nodded mournfully.

"Pool ole John Chin ruined," he said. "Sellee up pool ole John Chin if no payee fiftes doller to-day."

Frank looked at him doubtfully.

He knew Yen Chin's yarns of old, and he did not, as a matter of fact, believe a single word of the heathen's statement. It was far more probable that Yen Chin had been playing fan-tan again at the Chinese "joint" in Thompson town, and had lost all his money, and was seeking to "sick" Frank Richards for a fresh supply of cash.

"Flanky believe pool ole Yen Chin?" said the Chinese. "You goey to Thompson, you see bill of sale stuck up on John Chin's laundry. Velly hard lines on pool ole man. Suppose you lendee me fiftes doller—"

"Same old game—what?" broke in Bob Lawless' voice. "You young rascal!" Bob caught the little Chinese by his pigtail and jerked it, and there was a loud howl from Yen Chin. "Pulling Franky's leg again—eh?"

"Yow-ow-ow! Lettee goey!" wailed Yen Chin.

"Is there anything in his yarn, Bob?" asked Frank.

Bob Lawless chuckled.

"If there was I wouldn't let you shell out fifty dollars for him, I guess," he answered. "But there isn't. John Chin is doing a flourishing business, and his laundry isn't any more likely to be sold up than the Lawless Ranch."

"My hat! You awful young rogue!" exclaimed Frank indignantly.

Yen Chin jerked away his pigtail and backed off, grinning.

"Yah! Puller cillee ole Flanky's leg!" he jeered. "Flanky velly softes ole ass! Yah!"

And with that grateful remark Yen Chin scuttled away before Frank Richards' boot could reach him.

Bob laughed as he caught the expression on Frank's face.

"I guess you'd better shove your dollars in the bank, old scout," he said. "Somebody will have them off you before you're much older if you don't."

Frank coloured, and then laughed.

"Ass!" he replied. "Of—of course, if old John Chin really was being sold up—"

"No business of yours if he was!" grunted Bob. "You'll never be a rich man, Frank, if you make everybody's troubles your own, as you usually do."

"Well, I don't know that I specially want to be rich," said Frank, with a smile. "I know you think I'm too easy-going, Bob. But after all, I have a lot of luck that other fellows don't have. I've seen Mr. Isaacs, and he wants me to take up my stories for the 'Thompson Press' again. That's going to be ten dollars a week for me."

"Lot of good for you if you give it away as fast as you get it!" grunted Bob. "I reckon I'd better get Mr. Isaacs to pay it to me, and mind it for you till you grew up to years of discretion, if ever you do."

"Bow-wow!" said Frank cheerily. "But about Yen Chin—"

"Oh, bother Yen Chin!" said Bob.

"I've been thinking—"

"Time you began," agreed Bob.

"And what have you been thinking about?"

"I suppose that young rascal has been gambling again, and that's why he was trying to stick me for the dollars."

"Sure! He's been seen a dozen times sneaking in and out of the Chinese joint at the back of Main Street, where they play fan-tan."

Frank Richards wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

"He had been at that game before I went away," he said.

"He's generally at it, more or less,"

said Bob. "You'll never cure a Chinese of gambling. They've got it bred in the bone."

"He was hard up then, and trying to stick us for money," said Frank.

"I know."

"He is a thundering young rascal," said Frank musingly. "He hasn't got a white man's ideas of right and wrong; and when he wants money for gambling he's capable of pretty nearly anything, I think."

"What are you driving at?" asked Bob, with a curious look at his chum.

"There's somebody at Cedar Creek who steals," said Frank quietly. "There was somebody robbed Miss Meadows before I went away. The fellow's never been found."

"Phew!"

"I've gone all over the chaps in my mind," continued Frank. "I can't think of any white man here who'd steal. Hacke is rather a bully, but he's not a thief. Dunker Honk is a bit of a rogue, but not to that extent. I can't think of any fellow who'd touch money not his own, excepting—"

"Yen Chin!" breathed Bob.

"And we know he'd lost his money, gambling, at that time," said Frank. "He's been gambling since, and there have been two more thefts. Now he's been at fan-tan again, and he's trying to swindle me out of fifty dollars. Bob, old chap, doesn't it look—"

"Jerusalem! Kick me!" said Bob Lowless. "Kick me hard! Why didn't I see it all before?"

"You think—"

"I don't think—I know! Cherub, old man, kick me!" said Bob, as Vere Beauclerc came up.

"Certainly! But what for?" asked Beauclerc, laughing.

Frank Richards explained, and Beauclerc looked very grave.

"Looks like it," he agreed. "We ought to have thought of Yen Chin. But—but if it's so, Frank, how are we going to prove it? He won't own up."

"I hardly think that young rascal could tell the truth if he tried!"

"And he's never been known to try!" said Bob.

Frank Richards nodded.

"But he's hard up again," he said. "He wants money to play fan-tan; and, if what I think is correct, he doesn't care where or how he gets it. That means that it's time for another theft to take place."

"Oh!" ejaculated Bob.

Beauclerc whistled.

"And if another theft takes place," said Frank Richards grimly, "the thief is going to be discovered this time—the right man, too! It seems to me, you fellows, that I can see light at last!"

CHAPTER 42

Catching a Rascal!

"**L**AVING it in your desk, Frank?" "Isn't it safe there?" "Oh, all right!"

The almond eyes of Yen Chin, the Chinese, glittered for a moment, but he did not turn his head towards the chums of Cedar Creek.

Afternoon lessons were over, and the school had cleared off, but Frank Richards & Co. lingered in chat in the big school-room in a group near the pinewood desks.

Yen Chin was hanging about the doorway. Although he did not look at the chums, they knew very well that the heathen was listening. In fact, he was evidently waiting in the doorway for Frank Richards, to make another attempt to screw something out of him in the way of cash. Fan-tan at the "joint" behind Main Street had cleared out the luckless Celestial, and he was in a desperate mood. There was no limit to the trickery he would have been guilty of to raise the wherewithal for another visit to the fan-tan joint to try his luck again.

Frank Richards & Co. did not look

at him; they seemed unconscious of his presence.

But they knew that the young rascal was listening to every word.

Frank placed a couple of bills in his desk—bills for one hundred dollars each.

He slammed down the lid carefully.

"Going to lock it?" asked Beauclerc.

"I've not got a key."

"Well, come on, then!"

The Co. walked out of the school-room, passing Yen Chin without looking at him.

The Chinese followed them into the playground. He caught Frank Richards by the sleeve.

"Nicey old Flanky——"

Frank shook off his hand.

"Let me alone, you young rascal!" he snapped.

"You lendee me fifteen dollee——"

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"Pool ole John Chin sellee up——"

Frank Richards made a motion with his boot.

"Clear," he said, "or——"

Yen Chin scuttled away.

The chums walked away towards Mr. Slimmey's cabin. They were going to split logs for Mr. Slimmey before riding home—as they did sometimes. On the present occasion, however, they had another reason for remaining at Cedar Creek after school hours, and splitting logs was rather a "blind" than anything else.

Yen Chin followed them at a distance, and watched them for some minutes while they were at work on the logs.

Then he walked away to the school-house.

Bob Lawless watched him out of sight, and then glanced at his chums.

"I guess he's biting!" he remarked.

"I fancy so," said Frank. "Anyhow, what's he hanging round the school for now, instead of going home?"

"Plain enough!" said Beauclerc. "He knows that the bank-bills are in the desk, and he means——"

"Sure!" said Bob.

The rancher's son left the wood-pile, and crept along the cabin, which shut off Yen Chin from view. He peered cautiously round the building, and caught sight of the Chinese again, just entering the lumber schoolhouse. In the school-room the heathen lad had no business whatever at that hour.

Bob hurriedly rejoined his chums.

"He's gone in!" he said.

"That settles it!" said Frank, throwing down his mallet. "Let's get going."

"You bet!"

The three chums scudded across the playground towards the lumber school-house, taking care, however, to keep out of sight of the windows.

They entered the house quietly.

In a few moments Frank was tapping at the door of Miss Meadows' sitting-room.

"Come in!"

Frank entered the sitting-room, and Miss Meadows, who was engaged in household accounts and deep in figures, glanced at him in some surprise.

"You are not gone home yet, Richards?"

"No, Miss Meadows," said Frank. "I—I want you to come with me, please!"

"What?"

"I think we have found out the thief of Cedar Creek, ma'am!" said Frank hurriedly.

Miss Meadows started to her feet.

"Richards!"

"I've put two hundred-dollar bills in my desk in the school-room, ma'am," said Frank. "Both of them have been signed on the back by my uncle, Mr. Lawless, so there can be no mistake about identifying them."

"And you think——"

"The fellow we suspect has just gone into the school-room," said Bob Lawless.

"Bless my soul!"

"He's going through my desk now," said Frank. "I had a peep at him as I came by the school-room door. You can see him for yourself, Miss Meadows, if you look."

The Canadian schoolmistress hesitated.

"Really, Richards——"

"Come!" exclaimed Frank. "Miss Meadows, it's due to me that you should find out the thief, if possible. He's at work now in the school-room, and if you stop him as he comes out he will have the notes about him. If I am mistaken, you can punish me as much as you like. But you're bound to put it to the test."

Miss Meadows nodded.

"Very good!" she said.

"Quick!" breathed Bob.

The schoolmistress followed the boys into the passage. They stopped by the door of the school-room, and only in time, for a minute, or less, later it opened softly, and Yen Chin came out.

With all his coolness and nerve, the little heathen was taken aback at the sight of Frank Richards & Co. and Miss Meadows in the passage, and he gave a violent start.

But he recovered himself in a moment.

"You comee home now, Flanky?" he said, "Me waitee for you."

"What have you been doing in the school-room, Yen Chin?" asked Miss Meadows sternly.

"Me waitee for ole Flanky!"

"Have you been to Richards' desk?"

Again the heathen started.

"No, Misses Medee!"

"Very good. Remain where you are, Yen Chin. Richards, go to your desk and ascertain whether the bills are still there."

"Yes, Miss Meadows."

Yen Chin breathed hard. He made a motion as if to scuttle down the passage, but Bob Lawless took hold of his pigtail.

"No, you don't!" said the rancher's son grimly.

"Step into the school-room again, Yen Chin, and remain there!" said Miss Meadows sternly. "Beauclerc, kindly fetch Mr. Slimmey here."

"Certainly, ma'am!"

Beauclerc hurried away, and Yen Chin cast an apprehensive look round him. He began to realise that he was in the toils—that his own rascality had been turned against him too once. Frank Richards looked up from his desk.

"Well, Richards?" called out Miss Meadows.

"The notes are gone, ma'am!"

"Me no takee!" gasped Yen Chin, in great alarm. "Me no goey neel ole desk. Yen Chin velly good boy!"

"We shall see," said Miss Meadows quietly. "Ah, here is Mr. Slimmey! Yen Chin, keep your hands out of your pockets—see that he does. Lawless! Mr. Slimmey, will you oblige me by searching this boy, who is suspected

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of having taken two hundred-dollar bills from Richards' desk?"

"No takee!" yelled Yen Chin.

He made a dart to escape; but Bob Lawless had an iron grip on his pigtail. Yen Chin was brought to a sudden halt. And with the rancher's son still gripping his queue, the hapless rascal of Cedar Creek stood wriggling and squirming while Mr. Slimmey went thoroughly and scientifically through his pockets.

CHAPTER 21.

A Righted Wrongt

"THERE'S one!"

Bob Lawless uttered that exclamation as Mr. Slimmey drew a hundred-dollar bill from Yen Chin's loose garments, and held it up.

Miss Meadows glanced at it.

It was endorsed on the back by Mr. Lawless, and there was no mistaking the rancher's signature.

"Where did you obtain this bill, Yen Chin?"

Yen Chin groaned dismally.

"You utterly unscrupulous boy!" exclaimed Miss Meadows, greatly shocked. "You have stolen this from Richards' desk. Where is the other? You have taken two."

"No takee."

"I am sorry to trouble you, Mr. Slimmey, but will you——"

"Certainly!"

Mr. Slimmey searched the Chinese again, more thoroughly than before. But the second hundred-dollar bill did not come to light.

"You are sure that two are missing, Richards?" asked Miss Meadows.

"Quite sure, ma'am."

"He appears to have taken only one, however."

"Look in the other desks, ma'am! You remember when two notes were taken before, one was found in Frank's pocket. That little villain only kept one of them. Perhaps he's played the same trick again."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Meadows.

"By gum!" muttered Frank. "The awful young rascal! He may have stuck the other note in another fellow's desk, to be found there, if there was a search."

"I will search all the desks very carefully," said Mr. Slimmey.

"Yen Chin velly good boy," mumbled the little Celestial. "Me felice Missey Meddes whole loof."

"If you wish to confess, Yen Chin, I will be as lenient as possible with you, as I am aware that you do not understand these matters like a Christian," said Miss Meadows. "Where is the other note?"

"In Cheinb's desk!" murmured Yen Chin.

"In my desk!" shouted Beauchere.

"Me felice whole loof."

"You—you—you were going to try to put it on me this time, same as you did on Frank the first time!" gasped Beauchere.

"Yen Chin solly!" murmured the heathen. "Awful lil' lascal, me know. Very muchee solly. Nevee do so no more. Plomise."

Mr. Slimmey examined Beauchere's desk and, after a little search, found the missing note hidden among the papers therein.

The horror and indignation in the faces about him did not seem to affect Yen Chin very much. He took the peculiar Oriental view of such matters, and his repentance, such as it was, was founded entirely upon the painful prospect of punishment.

"I scarcely know how to deal with this wretched boy," said Miss Meadows, after a pause. "Yen Chin, you have robbed one of your school-fellows, and held a cunning scheme to throw suspicion upon another."

"Poor lil' Chinee velly solly!"

"I can no longer doubt that you are guilty of all the thefts that have taken place in the school."

"Yen Chin velly bad boy!" murmured the heathen.

"You were guilty of the first theft, in taking a hundred and ten dollars from my room, and you placed the ten-dollar note in Richards' pocket!" Miss Meadows exclaimed.

"Me velly sorry!"

"Do you realise the harm you have done, you utterly wicked boy?" exclaimed the distressed schoolmistress. "You caused Richards to leave the school in disgrace—Richards, who has always been kind to you!"

"Me velly bad ole heart!" said Yen Chin. "Me likee ole Flanky velly muchy. If Flanky lendee money, Yen Chin no takee. No lendee, takee. What you likee? Me velly sorry, and never playee fan-tan no mole."

"The wretched boy has been gambling; it seems," said Mr. Slimmey. Miss Meadows drew a deep breath.

"You may go home now, Yen Chin," she said at last. "I shall see your father to-morrow, and consult with him what is to be done."

Yen Chin gave a dismal howl.

"No teller John Chin! John Chin skinee me!"

"You should have thought of that earlier," said Miss Meadows. "You may go now."

The hapless heathen sneaked away with a woebegone look. Miss Meadows turned to Frank Richards.

"Richards, I am greatly shocked at this discovery, but I am more glad than I can say that the truth has been brought to light. By to-morrow all Cedar Creek will know that you have been completely cleared, and I am

sorry, my dear boy, that I ever doubted you."

"And I can only say the same," said Mr. Slimmey, heartily, shaking hands with Frank Richards.

"Hurrah!" yelled Bob Lawless.

"Thank you, Miss Meadows! Thank you, Mr. Slimmey!" gasped Frank, with a catch in his voice. "I—I'm awfully glad!"

"The truth will be known to everyone to-morrow," said Miss Meadows. "I will give you a note to take to your uncle, Richards. I am thankful that justice has been done at last."

In a merry mood, Frank Richards & Co. mounted their horses to ride home in the summer dusk. On the trail, near the gates of Cedar Creek, they found Yen Chin lingering, and he called to them.

"Pool ole John Chin settee up, if not payee fifteen doller."

"My only hat!" ejaculated Frank Richards.

"You lendee?" asked Yen Chin hopefully.

"I'll lend you my riding-whip!" exclaimed Frank wrathfully.

And he did, with vigour, and the hapless heathen fled, yelling dismally.

Frank Richards & Co. rode on to the ranch, where the news they brought was received with great delight and satisfaction. And the next morning, when the chums of Cedar Creek arrived at the backwoods school, there was a great reception for the suspected school-boy who had been righted at last!



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