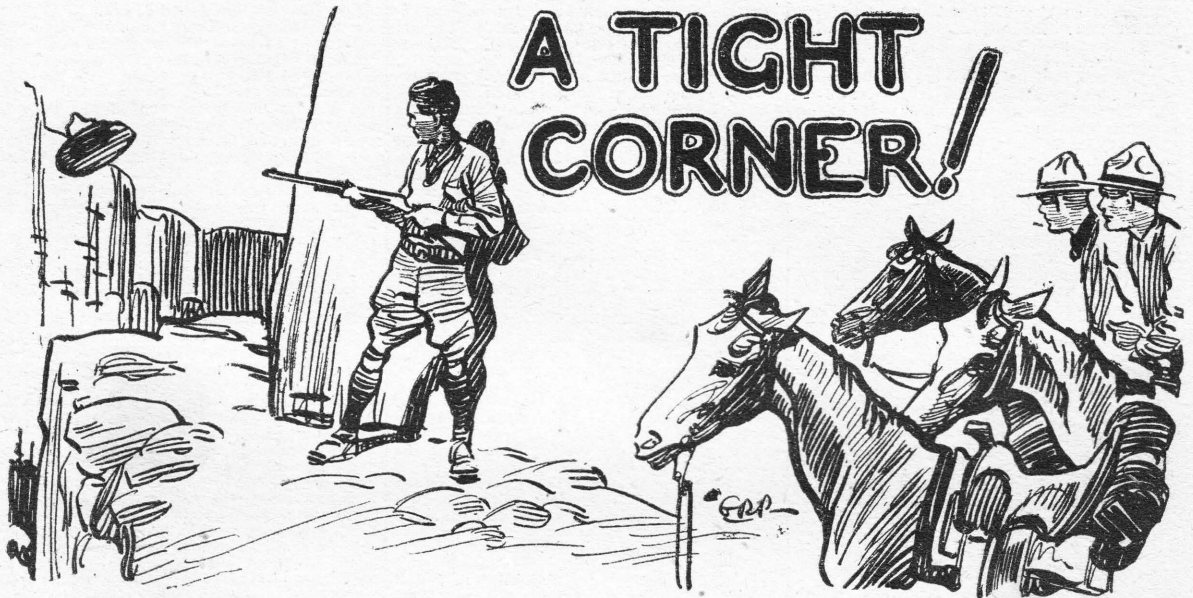


**RUSTLERS AND SCHOOLBOYS!** Into the mountains the chase after the rustlers proceeds, with the chums of the Lumber School well in the van of the pursuers. The adventures which befall them are thrilling and perilous!



Another Splendid, Long, Complete story, dealing with the schooldays, in the Backwoods school, of Frank Richards, the world-famous author!

**THE FIRST CHAPTER.  
The Horse-Hunters!**

"I GUESS we're after getting left!" said Bob Lawless, with a dissatisfied grunt.

There was a trampling of hoofs outside the Lawless Ranch in the morning sunlight.

The sheriff of Thompson was there, with nearly a score of ranchers and cowboys from up and down the Thompson Valley. Mr. Lawless, with a rifle under his arm and a bandolier over his shoulder, came out of the ranch-house to join them.

Bob Lawless stood looking from the doorway, with a frowning brow. His chums, Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc, were by his side.

Rancher Lawless mounted his horse, and then glanced back at his son in the doorway, with a slight smile on his bronzed face.

"We're off now, Bob!"

"Can't we come, dad?"

The rancher shook his head.

"This isn't going to be work for schoolboys, sonny," he answered. "Besides, you've got plenty to do, in helping Billy Cook round up the horses."

"We'd rathier—" began Frank Richards. But the rancher smiled, and shook his head again.

"I know you'd rather, Frank, and I'm sorry; but you'll be useful in the round-up. Good-bye!"

The sheriff and his men were already in motion, and Mr. Lawless cantered after them.

At a gallop, the horsemen pushed across the plain towards the Thompson River.

Bob Lawless gave an expressive grunt.

"Left!" he growled.

"Never mind. We're going to make ourselves useful," said Frank Richards, with a smile.

"I'd rather mosey along with the sheriff's men after the cattle-lifters!"

"Same here!" remarked Beauclerc. "But it can't be helped. I darsay the sheriff thinks schoolboys would only be in the way." Another grunt from Bob.

"Now then, sonnies!" shouted Billy Cook, the foreman of the ranch. "Are you ready to saddle-up?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I'm starting in two ticks."

"We'll be ready," said Bob.

"No school-to-day, anyhow," he added, as the chums of Cedar Creek started for their

horses. "That's something. But I reckon I'd like to get on the trail of Handsome Alf and his rustlers."

"Where are we going now?" asked Beauclerc.

"You see, we stampered the horses when the rustlers attacked the ranch the other night," explained Bob. "Some of them have been brought in, but there's thirty or forty head of horseflesh still loose on the plains somewhere between the river and the Wapiti Hills. The raiders would have bagged the critters if they hadn't been stampered; but it's going to be no end of a circus rounding them up again. I guess we shall be more useful here than at Cedar Creek school, if it comes to that; but I'd rather go after the raiders with the sheriff."

It did not take the chums of Cedar Creek long to saddle up.

They did not forget to sling their rifles when they mounted to join Billy Cook and the cowboys.

Matters had changed the usually peaceful Thompson Valley during the past week. The presence of a gang of rustlers from over the border had stirred the quiet valley from end to end.

Three ranches had been raided, and cattle driven off, and the Lawless Ranch had been attacked, though, in that case, the ranch-raiders had been defeated.

The whole section was up in arms now, and the cattle-lifters were being hunted far and wide.

Frank Richards & Co. were keen enough to join in the hunt, but the sheriff, for reasons best known to himself, did not want the help of schoolboys from Cedar Creek. But they were very useful in helping to round up the strayed horses and cattle. At that more pacific task, it was quite possible that they might fall in with some of the rustlers, and they looked to their firearms very carefully before starting.

Billy Cook rode westward through the thick grass, followed by a couple of cowboys and the three chums of the backwoods school.

There was a long day's work of hard riding before them, and it was not likely that all the strayed animals would be rounded up in one day.

The ranch-house disappeared from sight behind, and the smoke from the chimney was lost in the prairie haze.

On top of a knoll, five or six miles from the ranch-house, Billy Cook halted, and swept the surrounding plain with his keen eyes.

"I guess I spot some of the critters," he said. "They're scattered, of course. I guessed they would be. We separate here. You've got your ropes with you, sonnies?"

"Sure!" answered Bob.

"Off you go, then!"

Billy Cook waved his hand to the west, where the Wapiti Hills loomed up blue in the distance, and the chums of Cedar Creek rode down the knoll. Billy Cook and the cowboys separated, going north and south, Frank Richards & Co. rode on by themselves at an easy gallop.

Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc had their lassos in hand. Frank Richards was not yet expert with the "rope," though he had put in a good deal of practice. But lassoing a quiet old cow on the ranch for practice was quite different from roping in a half-wild horse on the plains.

Three horses could be seen in the distance ahead, grazing on the rich grass. They took no notice of the riders until the latter were close at hand; but as the galloping hoofs came closer they tossed up their manes and fled.

With a thudding of hoofs and a tossing of manes, they galloped off towards the hills, with the three schoolboys in hot pursuit.

"Now ride for it!" said Bob Lawless.

The three fugitives separated, dashing off in different directions, one, a powerful grey, keeping on towards the hills.

The schoolboys separated in turn, Frank Richards following the grey. The foothills were not far distant now, and he hoped to close in on the horse in one of the canyons, from which there would be no escape for the fugitive. In a few minutes his comrades were lost to his sight on the rolling prairies.

Frank Richards had his lasso ready now. If he could get near enough, he hoped to "rope in" the grey, though he had never attained his Canadian cousin's skill with the riata.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

The grey slowed down again, and seemed inclined to resume grazing, and Frank came closer and closer. He ventured at last on a cast of the rope; but at the same moment the grey tore off again, and the noose fell half a dozen yards short.

"Bother!" murmured Frank.

He coiled in the rope, and galloped in pursuit.

Under the hoofs now the grass was thin and sparse, and stones cropped out of the

soil. They were close to the foothills, and ahead of them a wide, shallow canyon opened in the hills, and it was for the canyon that the galloping grey was heading. It disappeared from Frank's sight among the rocks and stunted firs, but he could hear the echo of the fleeing hoof-beats from the distance.

He rode on cheerfully, feeling sure of his capture now. His face was streaming with perspiration now, and his horse was streaming. It was early "fall" in Canada, but the sun was still hot. The canyon was wide and shallow, and there was no shelter in it. The hoof-beats rang on hard rocks as Frank Richards rode into the hills. There was an acclivity under him, and the pace had to slacken. Among the big boulders farther up he was confident of cornering the grey, as the ground ascended and the canyon walls narrowed.

The hoof-beats ahead died into silence, and it seemed that the grey had stopped. But suddenly there came a crash of hoofs, and from the upper canyon the grey came thundering back at top speed. Something evidently had scared the fleeing animal ahead—perhaps a lynx creeping on the rocks, or a wolf peering from a thicket. Frank Richards was not an experienced cowboy, and the sudden charge back of the fugitive took him by surprise.

He made a hasty cast with his lasso and missed, and before he could draw in the rope again the grey had gone thundering past him, and vanished down the canyon on its way to the open plains.

"Bother!"

And Frank Richards wheeled his horse, to take up the pursuit again, riding back the way he had come.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Track of the Rustler!

**S**QUEAL!

A clatter of hoofs on the rocky floor of the canyon.

"Well done, Bob!"

It was Beaulerc's voice.

Frank Richards rode round a stack of boulders crowded with firs, and came in sight of his chums.

Vere Beaulerc was leading two captured horses, roped in, and the grey was struggling at the end of Bob Lawless' lasso.

Frank pulled in his horse.

"Hallo! You've got him?" he called out.

"I guess so!" grinned Bob. "Did you send him back for me?"

Frank laughed.

The angry grey was still struggling with the rope, but Bob soon subdued him. He was added to Beaulerc's "string."

"Got all three!" said Bob Lawless, with satisfaction. "We soon roped in our two, Frank, and came after you. I guess there's very likely some more of the critters in these hills. Did you see any sign of them farther up the canyon?"

Frank shook his head.

"You were following the critter up," said Bob. "How did he come back past you?"

"Something turned him back higher up," answered Frank. "He seemed scared, and came thundering back suddenly. And—and I missed him with the rope."

"I guess you've got a lot to learn about the rope yet, kid," said Bob, laughing. "I wonder what scared him back?"

"A lynx, perhaps," said Frank.

"I guess that's possible, but it ain't likely. I'd like to know why that critter turned back," said Bob, staring thoughtfully up the rocky canyon. "He came back straight to be caught, if you'd been a bit more handy with the rope. I guess I want to know what scared him back, when he had a free run into the hills."

"What does it matter?" asked Frank.

"I reckon it might matter a good deal," answered the rancher's son thoughtfully. "There may be some galoots in the hills who tried to rope him in, frinstance."

Frank Richards started.

"The rustlers, you mean?"

"Why not?" said Bob. "That gang is hidden somewhere, and these foothills are as lonely as any spot between here and the Fraser river. 'Tain't natural for a hoss to run right back to the galoot that's trying to rope him in. I guess we're looking a bit farther before we quit."

"You saw nothing, Frank?" asked Beaulerc.

"Nothing."

"Praps we'll see something if we look," said Bob. "Anyhow, there might be some of the strays up the canyon, so it won't be time

wasted. Tether your string, Cherub, and come on."

"Right-ho!"

The three captured horses were tethered in a thicket among the boulders, and then the chums of Cedar Creek rode on together. They had their rifles in their hands now instead of their lassoes, and their eyes were very keenly on the look-out. The bare possibility that some of Handsome Alf's gang might be in the hills was enough to make them cautious and vigilant.

The canyon wound into the hills, narrowing, and clumps of fir and larch shadowed the path of the horsemen. There was a tinkle of falling water, and Bob Lawless drew in his horse beside a tiny spring that bubbled up and leaped among the rocks. He dismounted, and examined the ground carefully by the spring.

"I guessed so," he said.

"What?"

"Hoofprints," said Bob. "Some galoot stopped to water his horse here, not so long ago, and I guess it was that galoot that frightened the grey back. Light down and look at these prints, Cherub."

Bob Lawless' tone was significant, and Beaulerc alighted at once, and examined the tracks in the soft earth by the spring. Then he uttered a sudden exclamation.

"It's my horse!"

"I reckoned I knew the track," said Bob. Beaulerc leaped to his feet, his face excited and his eyes gleaming.

"It's Demon!" he said. "You know the rustlers got him from me the night the ranch was raided. A fellow the others called Mexican Jo had him. And he's here. I'd know Demon's track anywhere, in a hundred others."

Frank Richards whistled.

"Then the rustlers—"

"One of them's here, at least," said Bob quietly. "Maybe a chap on his own, looking for strays; or maybe the whole gang is cached hereabouts. I guess we're going to know."

"Yes, rather!"

Bob rubbed his hands gleefully.

"I reckon this is a joke on popper," he said. "He's gone east with the sheriff's party, looking for the rustlers, and here we are getting on their trail. I reckon we'll have surprising news for popper when we get home. Never mind looking for horses now. I guess we're going to look for rustlers. Keep your guns handy."

"You bet!"

"Can you pick up Demon's trail from here?" asked Frank. "The man's gone, whoever he is."

"I guess I'm going to try."

Bob Lawless examined the ground with a skilled eye, his chums watching him breathlessly.

Their hearts were beating with excitement now.

The trail of the stolen horse was a clue that could not be mistaken, and they knew that they were not far from at least one member of Handsome Alf's gang of rustlers.

## Look Out for This Cover This Week!



On the hard, rocky soil no trail could be picked up; but Bob Lawless made his calculations from the direction of the hoof-prints in the soft soil close to the spring.

On his hands and knees he examined the soil, and a dozen yards from the spring he rose to his feet with a satisfied look.

"This way," he said.

"You've got it?" asked Frank.

"Sure enough. There's damp mud on the rock here. I guess the man was giving his horse a drink when the grey came galloping up, and I reckon he would sling his lasso at him. The grey dodged back. Why didn't the man follow on and rope him? Because he knew the grey was being run after, and so he lit out, and he went this way."

"And may be watching for us now," said Beaulerc.

"I guess so," said Bob coolly. "But that won't stop this outfit. Keep your guns handy, and come on."

The three riders pushed on, Bob in the lead.

A broken bush was a further guide, where a ledge on the canyon wall rose above the level of the soil.

The horseman, whoever he was, had ridden upon the ledge, which was not more than four feet wide, and nearly level.

The ledge rose higher and higher, with an abrupt slant, following the windings of the wall of rock, and the three chums rode in file. There was not room for three, or two, to ride abreast.

In a quarter of an hour they were looking down a precipitous cliff on their left, where the rocky ledge dropped to a depth of a hundred feet to the bottom of the canyon.

It was a perilous path to follow, but it had the advantage that there was no mistaking the trail. The man mounted on Demon could not have left it, once started upon it, without jumping his horse down the canyon, which was instant death.

Bob Lawless threw up his hand as a sign for his comrades behind to stop, and they pulled in their horses.

Ahead, the rocky wall of the canyon made an abrupt turn, the level ledge following it, so that all the chums could see of it was where it ended in sheer cliff.

"What's on, Bob?" called out Frank Richards.

Bob glanced back and grinned.

"I guess I'm not going it blind," he answered. "That galoot knows there is somebody after him, and he's not far ahead of it. That's just the place where he would stop to burn powder, I reckon."

Bob slipped from his horse.

The sure-footed animal stood still on the narrow ledge, while Bob moved on cautiously towards the turn.

He did not pass the corner of the bulging rock.

Instead if doing so he jammed his Stetson hat on the muzzle of his rifle, and projected it beyond the bend.

Crack!

From round the cliff came the sharp ring of a rifle, and a bullet smashed through the hat, and whistled away across the canyon.

Bob laughed softly.

The rifle-shot had told him what he wanted to know. Round the bend of the cliff the rustler had stopped, to face those who were trailing him and shoot them down as they showed themselves. Bob's simple ruse had drawn his fire and betrayed him.

"He's there!" said Bob Lawless tersely.

Frank and Beaulerc slipped from their horses and joined Bob. The three chums stopped on the hither side of the cliff where it turned. Out of their sight, but not a dozen yards away, a desperate man lurked with ready rifle, and the chums of Cedar Creek had to stop.

## THE THIRD CHAPTER.

### Cornered!

**S**ENORES!"

It was a mocking voice round the sharp bend of the cliff, so near that it startled the schoolboys.

"I've heard that voice before!" said Beaulerc, in a whisper. "It's Mexican Jo, the man who stole my black horse!"

"Senores!"

"Hallo!" called back Bob.

"Why do you stop?" chuckled the Mexican. "Come on! I am ready for you, senores! One of you I have killed already!"

Bob chuckled.

"You've killed nothing but my Stetson so far, greaser!" he replied.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A Spanish oath rang out.

"Ah! You were tricking me, then?"

"Sure!" chuckled Bob. "I reckoned if



you were there you'd blaze away at a hat on a rifle-muzzle, and you did! Catch on?" "Carambo!"

There was a minute's silence. The Cedar Creek chums held their rifles ready, in case the Mexican should make a rush; but it was evidently not the rustler's intention to take the risk of showing himself. He held an impregnable position against attack, and he did not mean to leave it.

"We can't go on!" muttered Frank. "He could pot us like pigeons if we showed our noses round the corner, long before we could draw a bead on him!"

Bob Lawless nodded. "You can come out and surrender, greaser, if you like!" the rancher's son called out.

A mocking laugh was the only reply. "I guess we'll wait for you, then." "You will not wait long, senores," answered the unseen Mexican. "In fifteen minutes the crows will be feeding on what is left of you. My comrades will have heard the shot."

Bob set his lips, and cast an anxious glance down from the ledge into the open canyon, which yawned like a gulf to the left of the schoolboys. As he looked there came the sound of a rifle-shot from the depths below. A bullet splattered on the rock within a foot of his head.

The report was followed by another laugh from the unseen Mexican.

"Vaya, senor! You see?" "Cover!" muttered Bob.

The three schoolboys threw themselves down on the ledge, as close to the rise of the cliff as they could.

Hidden among the rocks and pines of the canyon below were the rustlers, and five or six shots followed the first. But the jutting of the ledge hid the schoolboys from the fire from below now, and the bullets passed over them harmlessly.

"I guess we've run into a hornet's nest!" muttered Bob Lawless grimly. "We're fixed on this pesky ledge now, and if we get on our feet they'll sure get us."

Frank Richards whistled softly. "In following on the trail of the horse-thief they had taken little heed of the fact that his comrades might be at hand, and apparently a good number of the rustler gang were in the canyon below."

Evidently the retreat of Handsome Alf was in the rocky recesses of the Wapiti foot-hills, and the Cedar Creek chums had tracked the outlaws, guided partly by chance, very closely to their lair.

They had news for the sheriff of Thompson now, if they were extricated alive from their present position. But that was growing a very doubtful point.

Bob Lawless moved his head, and looked back along the slanting ledge. It wound back along the cliff behind them, irregularly, for a great distance, sloping down. In the distance he caught sight of a Stetson hat among the boulders and bushes.

"I reckoned so," muttered Bob.

"What is it, Bob?" "There's a gang of rustlers in the canyon, and they're going to follow us along the ledge."

"Then it will be a fight," said Beauclerc. "I guess so—as three against a dozen rustlers," muttered Bob. "With a big cliff on one side of us and a hundred-foot drop on the other! Gee! I guess we're in for trouble this time!"

"If we round the bend we could hold them off, same as the greaser is doing us." "But we ain't round the bend, Cherub, and we can't get round without being spotted by the Mexican."

"Don't be in a hurry; old chap," said Beauclerc quietly. "That Mexican's got my black horse, Demon, with him."

"What about it?" "Demon knows my voice, and if I call to him—"

Bob's eyes gleamed. "By gum! It's a chance, Cherub. If Demon cuts up rusty, and gives the greaser trouble, we may rush him while he's busy with the horse."

"That's the idea!"

"Try it on!" said Frank. "In ten minutes those rotters below will be coming along the ledge close on us. It looks to me like our only chance."

"It is that, I guess," said Bob. "Go it, Cherub!"

Beauclerc called softly to his horse, a "oo-oo-oo" in a caressing tone, that Demon knew well and always answered,

A whinny sounded from behind the bend of the canyon wall.

The black horse knew his master's voice, and responded at once. Vere Beauclerc called again.

There was a trampling of hoofs on rock and a loud oath in Spanish, and the sounds of a startled man trying to soothe and control a horse. A loud and angry squeal followed, and a louder dashing of hoofs, and shrill curses from the Mexican, and then a yell of agony.

"Come on!" panted Beauclerc. Beauclerc ran on swiftly ahead and passed round the bend of the canyon, his chums close at his heels.

A startling scene fell on their gaze. Demon, the black horse, was tethered to a point of rocks by the reins, and he was struggling to tear himself loose.

The Mexican was reeling against the cliff,

sight of three or four Stetson hats in the distance as he did so.

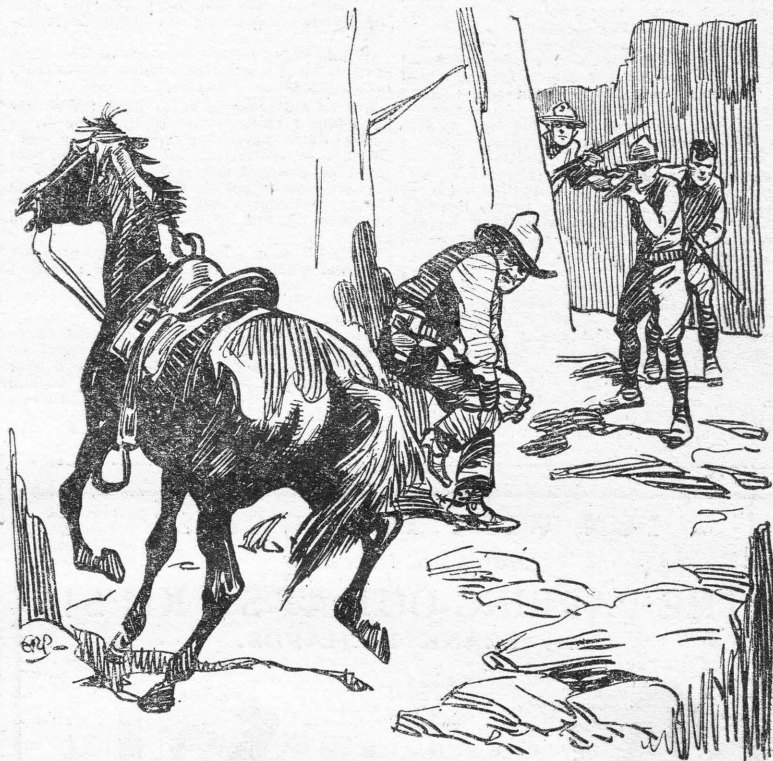
"They're coming, Bob!" "Let them come!" grinned Bob Lawless. "I reckon we could hold an army off at that corner. We'll get rid of the greaser first, I reckon. It would serve the pesky horse-thief right to sling him over into the canyon—"

"No, no!" Bob chuckled.

"All O.K., Franky; I'm not going to do it!" He gave the Mexican a jab with his rifle-muzzle. "Get out of this, greaser, while you're safe; and tell your pardners we're ready for them here, and will be glad to see them!"

The Mexican groaned again, and gave the rancher's son a glare of deadly hate.

Another jab from the rifle moved him, and he limped away round the cliff and disappeared.



**DEMON IN CAPTIVITY!** A startling scene fell on their gaze. Demon, the black horse, was tethered to a point of rocks by the reins, and he was struggling to tear himself loose. The Mexican was reeling against the cliff, clasping his leg with both hands. (See Chapter 3.)

his swarthy face pale with pain, clasping his leg with both hands, where the angry horse had kicked him.

He was almost doubled up with pain, and hardly moved as the three schoolboys came running round the bend.

Beauclerc ran to his horse at once; Bob Lawless covered the Mexican with his rifle. "Hands up!" he rapped out.

A groan was the only answer. The Mexican's leg was badly hurt by the kick he had received by the stolen horse, and he clasped it and groaned, heedless of the leveled rifle.

Bob Lawless grinned. "I guess he's our mutton!" he said. "Take away his popgun and his sticker, Frank. I'll strew his silly brains along the rock if he resists."

The Mexican did not resist as Frank Richards disarmed him. Frank grabbed his rifle and revolver, and the long, sharp Mexican cuchillo from his belt. Mexican Jo only groaned.

Beauclerc was soothing his horse, which was quiet now and rubbing its muzzle affectionately under his arm. "Get the critters round, Frank, while I keep an eye on that skunk," said Bob Lawless.

Frank ran back and led the three horses round the bend of the ledge. He caught

"Now for the circus!" said Bob Lawless. And with their rifles before them, covering the ledge where it came round the bend of the canyon wall, the chums of Cedar Creek waited for the attack, which was not long in coming.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. In the Shadow of Death!

**A** HEAVY tramping of boots resounded on the rocky path, and stopped just out of sight behind the cliff.

Fingers on triggers, the Cedar Creek chums waited.

It was for life or death now, for they knew they had no mercy to expect from Handsome Alf and his gang. They meant to pull the trigger the moment an enemy showed himself.

"Come on!" called out Bob Lawless recklessly. "Is that you, Handsome Alf? We're waiting for you!"

An oath rang out. "You're cornered, you pesky little cuss!" came the voice of the Californian. "I reckon you'd better put up your hands and surrender."

"Not this time," answered Bob. "I'm waiting to see your face, Handsome Alf. I've got a bullet ready."

"If you fire a shot we won't leave one of you alive!"

"Come on, and see!"

There was a pause.

The schoolboys could hear an excited discussion going on among the ranch-raiders, though they could not catch the words. It appeared pretty certain that none of the gang was anxious to charge round the corner of the cliff, with the abyss to fall into if a bullet struck him.

Braver men than the gang of Californian rustlers might have hesitated there.

But there was a sudden rush of feet at last, and a reckless desperado came rushing round the bend of the cliff.

Crack-ack-ack!

The three chums fired together.

So close was the rush that the ruffian was almost upon them when the bullets struck him, and he was blazing away with his revolver blindly as he fell.

But his bullets went wide as he staggered back under the fire, and reeled on the verge of the rocky ledge.

The schoolboys hardly looked at him.

Their rifles were ready for another foe; but another foe did not come. On the edge of the rocky shelf the desperado reeled helplessly, and sank over.

A terrible cry rang from his lips as he hurtled downwards from the ledge.

Frank Richards' face was white.

It was to save their own lives that the chums of Cedar Creek had pulled trigger; but the tragedy chilled them to the heart.

Down below, in the canyon, they heard a tearing and rending, as the falling man crashed through a clump of firs growing on the canyon-side.

Then fainter, almost inaudible, came a dull thud on the rocks far below.

Then silence.

The silence was broken by a furious yell from the ranch-raiders on the ledge, but they did not advance. They kept well back beyond the bulge of the cliff, out of fire. The fate of the reckless ruffian who had chanced it was a warning to the rest.

Bob Lawless set his lips hard.

"He asked for it!" he muttered.

"It was him or us," said Beauclerc quietly. "Our lives hang on a thread as it is."

"You shall die for that!" yelled Handsome Alf.

"Come on, then; we're waiting for you!" retorted Bob.

A curse was the only response.

But the rustlers did not come on. It was certain death to pass the bend of the cliff in the face of three levelled rifles, and they knew it.

"They're stopped," whispered Bob Lawless. "We could hold this corner against a hundred men, sure. But I reckon this ain't a healthy place to hang up our hats in, all the same, and I'm going to look for a way out. Keep your eyes peeled, and burn powder if you see so much as an eyelash."

"You bet!" said Frank.

Leaving his comrades on guard, Bob Lawless strode away along the ledge to reconnoitre.

He had hopes that it might lead into some open ravine, where the chums could trust for safety to their horses.

But only a score of yards from the corner he stopped, setting his teeth. The ledge ended there—narrowing away to the cliff, till it was so narrow that a mountain-goat could have found no footing.

There was no outlet, save by the way the chums of Cedar Creek had come—the way that was blocked by Handsome Alf and his gang.

"Well?" said Frank Richards, glancing up from where he lay behind his extended rifle.

"We're at a dead end," said Bob. "The ledge ends yonder, in a drop. I reckoned that the Mexican was going somewhere when he came this way; but I guess he came along here just to lead us into a trap after him. He did it, too; it was Demon that saved us. We're cornered, kids; there's no outlet." Frank whistled.

"And they'll know it, I guess," continued Bob. "We can hold the bend against them till doomsday; but they can hold it against us, too. We can't go back. We're stuck."

Beauclerc gave a glance upward at the cliff towering over them. It rose almost perpendicular, split here and there with fissures and ridges, with little clumps of saffras and moss. Bob followed his glance and shook his head.

"If you're thinking of climbing, Cherub, I reckon it's N.G.!" he said. "We couldn't climb that cliff to save our lives."

"I suppose not," agreed the Cherub. "But there's the other way." He waved his hand towards the yawning gulf beside the ledge. "It's a hundred feet down or more, but the trail-ropes joined up would see us through."

Bob nodded slowly.

"I guess we might chance it, after dark!" he muttered. "Not in the daylight; they'd see us and pick us off with their rifles. They're not all on the ledge yonder; there's some of them down below in the canyon, I reckon, and they'd spot us at once."

"After dark, then."

"I guess it's the only way," said Bob. "We should have to leave the horses. But we'll get them back sooner or later—when the sheriff gets hold of Handsome Alf and puts a rope round his neck, confound him! We've got to stick it here till dark."

"They can't get at us, anyhow."

"Sure not."

It was well past noon now, and the sunshine fell hot into the rocky canyon and upon the ledge where the schoolboys lay.

They ate a hurried lunch from the supply in their saddle-bags, while they watched and waited.

There was no sign of an attack from the rustlers; but they knew that the enemy were not gone. Sounds of boots scraping on the rocks came to their ears, and an occasional murmur of voices. Once they distinguished the tones of Mexican Jo, swearing in Spanish. Some of the rustlers, at least, were camping there on the ledge, just round the bend, to cut off their escape.

Knowing the ground, Handsome Alf was certain to be aware of the fact that there was no escape for the besieged schoolboys onward.

It was weary waiting on the sunlit ledge, with the danger of a rush at every moment, but the chums bore it stoically. The prospect of escape after dark cheered them, by sliding down the joined trail-ropes into the canyon below. Bob Lawless joined up the ropes, end to end, in readiness for the venture, when the time should come.

"I guess, if we get out of this alive the sheriff will be glad to see us," he said. "It's clear we've run pretty close to Handsome Alf's stamping-ground; I reckon the lifted cattle are hidden in these foot-hills, not far away from us. That's why the hound is so keen to make sure that we don't get away and tell tales. But we'll get a cinch on him yet!"

Clunk!

Bob started, as a stone fell from the cliff above, and tinkled on the rocky ledge beside him.

He glanced up, startled.

The next moment he gave a yell of warning.

"Quick—close to the cliff—quick!"

He grasped his comrades and dragged them.

"What?" panted Frank.

His glance shot upward, and his very heart sickened as he saw a huge boulder whirling down towards the ledge from the cliff-top. No man was to be seen on the cliff, but he knew that it was the work of Handsome Alf. The Californian had not been wasting his time. While some of the rustlers watched the bend, the others had climbed over the hillside to the top of the cliff overlooking the ledge where the chums of Cedar Creek lay.

The stone that had startled Bob had been knocked away as the big boulder was rolled over the cliff.

Down came the huge mass of rock—weighing a ton or more—whizzing downward through the sunlit air.

Fortunately, it fell a little away from the cliff, and barely struck the ledge as it passed, and then went thundering down the canyon side, smashing into the fir-trees below.

But where it struck it tore away a mass from the ledge, and scattered a hundred splinters of rock.

There was a shrill neighing and squealing from the frightened horses.

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"Good heavens!" panted Frank Richards, white to the lips. "Good heavens!" "That's only the first!" muttered Bob. "Look!"

Another boulder rolled down the cliff. This time it whizzed closer, and fell on the ledge. There was a terrible cry from one of the horses as it was struck by the fearful missile, and hurled over the edge. Boulder and horse together went whirling down the abyss.

Crack, crack! Bob Lawless, though his face was white, was not off his guard, and he fired twice as a swarthy face came peering round the bend. And Mexican Jo sprang back with a howl of pain, his dark nose gashed by a bullet. "Here comes another!" breathed Frank, his eyes upward.

Beauclerc sprang to his black horse, and dragged the animal close to the cliff. The intelligent animal crouched quietly there, as if he understood his danger. The other two horses, frightened and excited, were tearing furiously at their fetters, lashing with their hoofs, fortunately out of reach of the school-boys.

Another boulder dropped on the ledge, smashing into a thousand rocky splinters. The tethers parted as the horses plunged madly in terror, and they raced up the ledge; and loud, shrill squeals told that the hapless animals had plunged over the verge into the canyon. Vere Beauclerc held Demon tightly by the bridle, but the black horse did not move.

Frank Richards drew a panting breath. The terrible fate of the horses thrilled him with horror; and there was no telling how soon it might be their own. He scanned the cliff-face with his eye, and signed to his comrades, and they moved along to where the rocks bulged a little over their heads, sheltering them. Another boulder came whizzing down from the cliff-top.

Splinters of rock flew on all sides; but the chums of Cedar Creek, crouching close to the cliff, escaped the falling rocks. And meanwhile they had to watch for an attack; twice a hat was projected round the bend, and Bob Lawless sent a bullet through it.

Crash, crash, crash! Boulder after boulder hurtled down, and

rocky splinters rained on the schoolboys as they fell and smashed, though some of them missed the ledge entirely. But the fearful attack slackened at last, though it was not till dusk was falling that the last boulder came whizzing down from above.

Frank Richards wiped the perspiration from his brow.

His face glimmered white as chalk in the gathering gloom of night.

"I guess we've got to get out of this!" muttered Bob, licking his dry lips. "I reckon I couldn't stand much more of that! It'll be dark soon, and then—"

There was silence in the darkening canyon, save for an occasional sound from the unseen rustlers, on the watch round the bend. Frank Richards & Co., with throbbing hearts, waited for the last ray of light to disappear before they made their desperate venture to escape.

THE END.

(The chums are in a perilous situation, trapped on a ledge, high in the mountains! What will happen now? Read "TRAPPED!" next week's grand long story of Frank Richards & Co. of Cedar Creek School.)

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