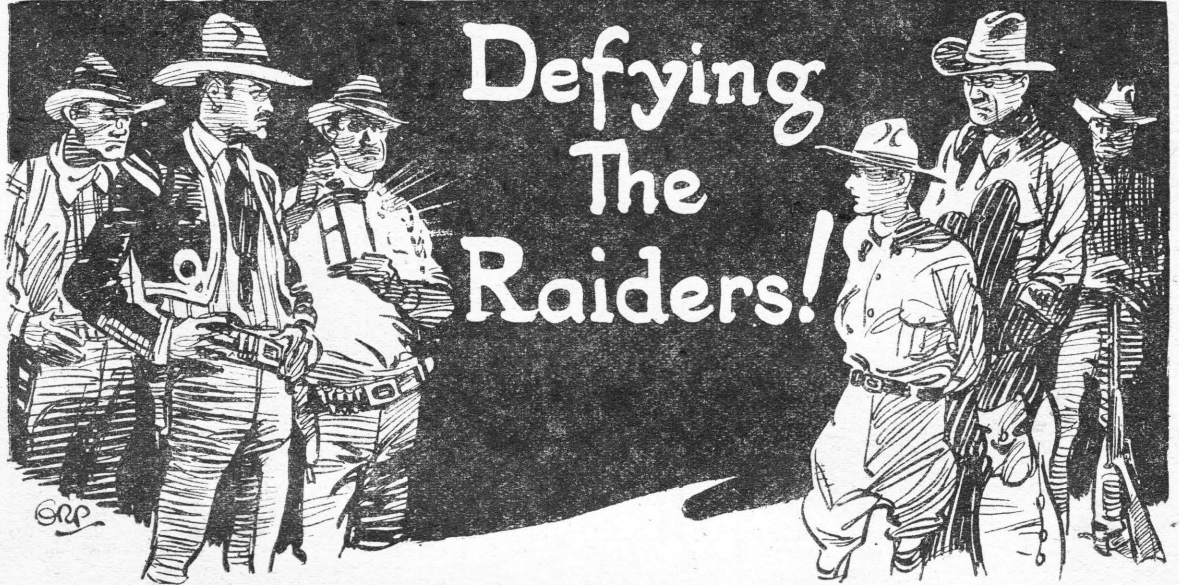


DEATH OR BETRAYAL? Beauclerc falls into the hands of the rustlers —but he is given a chance to save his life.

The price of his liberty is the betrayal of his friends to the ranch-raiders!



A Thrilling and Dramatic Long Complete story, dealing with the adventures of Frank Richards & Co., the schoolboys of the Canadian Backwoods!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Alarm!

THE beat of a horse's hoofs came through the thickening dusk of the Canadian evening. Vere Beauclerc rose to his feet and laid down the rifle he was cleaning. The remittance man's son was alone in the cabin by the creek.

He stepped to the door, and threw it open. Outside, the earliest stars were glimmering down upon the clearing and the deep pine-woods beyond. The "Cherub" of Cedar Creek School looked out into the dusk.

A horseman loomed up in the shadows. "Is it you, father?"

"I guess it's me!" a panting voice answered Beauclerc, as the horseman drew rein with a jingle outside the cabin door. "Isn't your popper at home, sonny?"

"Mr. Penrose?" exclaimed Beauclerc. "Correct."

"My father's gone to Thompson," said Beauclerc. "I thought it was he returning when I heard your horse. Anything wrong?"

"I guess so!" Mr. Penrose, the enterprising editor of the "Thompson Press," dismounted, and threw his reins over a post. "Sonny, give me a deep drink, or I guess the 'Thompson Press' will want a new editor!"

Vere Beauclerc smiled and stepped back into the cabin, and Mr. Penrose followed him in.

The portly gentleman sank down on a pine stool and fanned his warm brow with his Stetson hat.

"Gee-whiz!" he ejaculated breathlessly. "Nice doings in the Thompson Valley, and no mistake! Where's that juice?"

Mr. Penrose made a slight grimace as Vere placed a jug of water on the table before him. The editorial gentleman was accustomed to more powerful and stimulating liquids than that. He was, indeed, a pillar of support and a tower of strength to the Occidental Hotel at Thompson. But he was athirst, and he sipped the water. It was clear and cool, and refreshing; but his sip was not deep.

Supper was laid on a corner of the pine-table, ready for the remittance man when he came in. Mr. Penrose glanced at it.

Hospitality is an unwritten law which is never disregarded in the Canadian West. Beauclerc placed knife and fork before Mr. Penrose.

"Bile in!" he said. "I guess I will!"

"Something's happened?" asked Beauclerc. He knew that something very unusual must have happened to draw Mr. Penrose so

far from the bar-room of the Occidental in the evening.

His visitor nodded. But he was too busy to speak. He was evidently very hungry, as well as thirsty.

Beauclerc waited quietly, wondering what the news was. He supplied his visitor's wants, and for some minutes nothing was heard in the lonely log-cabin save the champing of Mr. Penrose's hungry jaws. The editorial gentleman sighed at last.

"Now I feel better," he declared. "Good!"

"Anything in the jug?" "Lots—of water."

"Ahem! I guess I've had enough, when I come to think of it. Popper's sworn off fire-water, eh?"

Beauclerc nodded. "Wise man!" said Mr. Penrose, though he seemed disappointed. "Very wise man! I guess I was expiring for a supper. Nothing since lunch. Grooogh! Tied to a tree and famishing! In the Thompson Valley of British Columbia. What do you think of that? I guess I'd better be moving on. I've got to get to Thompson, hot-foot, and give the alarm."

"But what on earth's happened?" exclaimed Beauclerc.

"The cattle-lifters have happened, sonny." "Oh!"

"They're up in this hyer valley," said Mr. Penrose. "A gang from over the border, of course—Western bad-men and some Mexican greasers—and in Canada, by gum! I guess they're clearing out the Lawless Ranch by this time, and maybe the sheriff will get down on them before they're through, if I warn him in time."

"The Lawless Ranch!" exclaimed Beauclerc.

"Yep." "But—but how—"

"They were watching the trail," explained Mr. Penrose, "stopping all galoots going south from Thompson and Cedar Creek, so that the ranch couldn't be warned. They got me; they got Chu Chung, the washerman, and Dry Billy Bowers; and they got Frank Richards and Bob Lawless, on their way home from school. Tied up to trees like turkeys, to leave them a clear field for their raid on the ranch, I guess."

Beauclerc's cheek paled.

"Frank—Bob—are they hurt? They left me at the fork in the trail as usual. I never guessed—"

"They got loose, and set us loose," said Mr. Penrose. "I'm for Thompson, to give the alarm; but I guess I was pegging out with hunger, and I saw your light and

dropped in for a bite or two." He rose, glanced at the jug, and shook his head. "I guess I'll travel. I'm in a hurry to get to the Occidental—I mean, to the sheriff."

"Where are Frank and Bob? If they got away from the rustlers, where are they?" asked Beauclerc.

"I guess they went on, to try to get through the rustlers and warn the ranch," said Mr. Penrose.

"Good heavens!" "I warned them to mosey on with me to Thompson, but they were too anxious to get home. But I guess they may pull through. Young Lawless is powerful sly."

"But if they went on, they must have gone right into the raiders, if the rascals are round the Lawless Ranch."

"I guess so."

Vere Beauclerc picked up his rifle hastily. Mr. Penrose was going out to his horse.

"What's your game, sonny?" he asked. "I guess you'd better keep clear."

"I'm going to look for my friends."

"Sonny, the whole gang of rustlers is out on the plain, south, and there's no galoot to stand up agin them there," said Mr. Penrose. "Most of the Lawless Ranch cowboys are away up the range. And, mind, they're a shooting gang. I've seen some of them, and when they stuck a gun under my chin, my hands went up like clockwork, you can bet your sweet life! You keep off the grass, sonny! You can't ante in this game!"

Beauclerc did not heed. He was fastening on his cartridge-pouch. Mr. Penrose mounted his horse.

"That's my advice," he said. "So-long, sonny!"

"Good-bye!"

The galloping horse disappeared in the shadows up the dusty trail. Mr. Penrose was riding hard towards Thompson to make up for lost time.

Beauclerc scribbled a hasty note for his father, and stuck it to the pine-table with a hunting-knife. Then he put out the lamp, stepped from the cabin, and closed the door.

The starlight glimmered round him. He bent his head to listen. The wind was blowing from the South-west, and on the wind came a faint, distant sound—faint, but a sound he knew. It was the sound of rifle-fire in the far distance.

His heart throbbed.

Firing—at the Lawless Ranch. The raiders were at their work—the desperate gang whose sudden appearance in the peaceful valley of the Thompson River had taken the settlers by surprise. His chums were there, and his only thought was to join them

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in the hour of peril. A minute more, and he was mounted on his black horse, riding away like the wind for the Lawless Ranch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Defence of the Ranch!

CRACK! Spatter, spatter! Bullets were raining on the thick pinewood of the ranch-house door.

Outside, in the starlight, the ranch raiders were firing as fast as they could reload their rifles, and a hail of bullets spattered on the house, the porch, and the door.

Within, in darkness, stood Rancher Lawless, rifle in hand, his eyes gleaming under his knitted brows. Frank Richards and Bob Lawless were by his side, and the chums of Cedar Creek also grasped rifles.

The three were alone to defend the ranch-house. "Mrs. Lawless was in her room, and the only other occupants were the two Chinese servants, who had scuttled down into the cellar. Apparently their view was that they were paid for washing dishes, not for fighting rustlers from over the border.

But the ranch-house was strongly built, well made for defence; it had been built at a time when the wild Indian still roamed the banks of the Thompson River, and the defenders were confident of holding it against the attack of the raiders.

Frank Richards' heart was throbbing, but he was calm. And Bob Lawless was as cool as ice.

Outside, mingled with the cracking of the rifles and the buzz of savage voices, a groan could be heard at intervals. Two wounded men lay in the grass; twice the rancher's rifle had claimed a victim. The furious rifle-fire was rather the effect of rage than of any purpose; it brought little danger to the defenders.

"By gum!" whispered Bob Lawless. "By gum! This is a go, Franky!"

"Yes, rather!" breathed Frank. "You didn't tell me you had entertainments like this when I came to Canada, Bob!"

Bob chuckled.

"I guess this is a new stunt in this valley," he said. "Such a thing hasn't been heard of for a dog's age. It's a gang from over the border; I reckon they've made the States too hot to hold them for a bit, and so they're trying their hand on this side of the line. Wait till the sheriff happens along with his men! I guess they'll vamoose some!"

"But how long—" muttered Frank. "Mr. Penrose will take the news to Thompson as fast as he can go. The rascals don't know we set him loose, and they won't be prepared for help to reach us. They may be taken by surprise when the sheriff moseys along. I guess he'll lose no time. This is their second raid in the valley, and Mr. Henderson will be pesky keen to lay his hands on them."

Crack, crack, crack! Bullets spattered every moment on the door. But few came through the thick wood only one or two that found the gash made in the door by the axe.

The three within kept out of the line of fire. They waited for the ranch-raiders to come to closer quarters.

"They're wasting powder," said Mr. Lawless quietly. "I guess this is intended to rattle our nerves—"

"Which it won't do, popper!" said Bob.

"I guess not!"

"But they'll try to rush us sooner or later," said Frank Richards.

"Sure!"

"We'll give them something to remember us by!" said Bob Lawless.

"Remain here, you two," said the rancher. "Keep out of the line of fire at the door. Shoot if they come close to the door."

"Yes, dad!"

The rancher disappeared in the darkness. They heard him ascend the stairs, and then his footsteps in the room overhead. Then they heard the opening of a window-shutter above.

The rancher opened it only an inch or two. The muzzle of his rifle looked out of the narrow aperture, and he waited.

Flashes of fire came from the surrounding darkness. The raiders were keeping up a fusillade; but, as the rancher guessed, it was to cover the plan the captain had formed for effecting an entrance. A bullet spattered on the shutter of the window, but he did not move. Through the slit he watched the space before the ranch-house.

Four men, carrying among them a heavy log, came at a run towards the door. The rancher smiled grimly.

The heavy log was intended for use as a battering-ram, and if it had struck the door at full force there was little doubt that it would have smashed through.

But the rancher's rifle was ready above. The log and its bearers came on fast, and at a dozen-yards' distance the rancher fired twice with deadly aim.

Crack-ack! The two reports of the repeating-rifle sounded almost like one, and two yells of agony were blended into one as the reports rang out.

Two of the rustlers, at the fore end of the log, staggered and fell, and the log crashed to the earth.

Crack! The rancher fired again; but the other two were already running, and they vanished into the darkness in time. The log lay useless in the grass, with two wounded men crawling away groaning.

A yell of rage broke from the raiders, and a storm of bullets hailed on the ranch-house. The rancher closed the shutter grimly.

Crack, crack, crack!

Then silence.

Mr. Lawless rejoined his son and nephew in the hall of the ranch-house below.

"I guess they're stopped, popper!"

"For the present, yes!"

"Gone, perhaps!" said Frank Richards. "I can hear horses!"

Faintly from the night came the sound of galloping. Had the ranch-raiders abandoned the attack and gone?

They wondered. Silence, as the galloping of the hoofs died away. But, with their rifles in their hands, they remained on guard.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. In the Enemy's Hands!

HALT! A hand clutched at Vere Beauclerc's rein in the shadows, and a rifle-barrel glimmered.

The horse was dragged to a halt, rearing.

Beauclerc had gripped his rifle; but a levelled muzzle was looking him in the face, and he did not raise the weapon.

His heart thumped.

He had ridden hard for the Lawless Ranch, in the hope of joining his chums there and helping in their defence. From the distance he could hear the crackling of rifle-fire. But he had not expected to come on the raiders till he was close to the ranch, as he could see that the attack was in progress. But he was still at a distance when the two shadowy figures started up and stopped him.

"Hands up!" growled a deep voice.

"Who are you?" exclaimed Beauclerc.

"What—"

"Hands up, I tell you!"

Beauclerc put up his hands. His face was white with anger, but there was no help for it.

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One of the rustlers jerked his rifle away. The other, a long-limbed ruffian in buckskin, came closer, and peered into his face.

"A pesky kid!" he growled. "What are you doing here on the prairie? You were going to the ranch?"

"Yes," muttered Beauclerc.

"You belonged there?" asked Buck Benson.

"No."

The man in buckskin peered at him again.

"Friends there?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Git off that critter, and come along with me."

"I—" began Beauclerc.

"Drag him off, Mexican Jo!"

"I will dismount," said Beauclerc wistfully.

"You'd better! I ain't used to wasting chinwag!" growled the rustler. "You look spry, sonny, or you'll find out what's in this hyer rifle, sharp!"

Beauclerc sprang from his horse, his lips set. He had come to help his chums, and he had fallen into the hands of their enemies. It was cruel luck, but his courage did not falter. He had not given up hope yet of joining his comrades and lending his aid in the defence of the ranch.

The firing in the distance had ceased now. Nothing could be heard on the dusky plains save the sigh of the wind in the high grass.

Buck Benson grasped the schoolboy's arm, and led him on towards the ranch. The Mexican remained with the horse. Beauclerc heard him cursing in Spanish as the black horse reared and plunged. Demon was a valuable prize for the raiders, but he was not an easy animal for anyone but his master to handle. Beauclerc did not think it likely that Mexican Jo would succeed in handling him.

"This way!" muttered Buck Benson.

A voice called from the darkness, and Buck called back. A minute more, and Beauclerc found himself in a circle of dark-bearded faces. A lantern gleamed on his face for a moment.

A man of lithe frame, dressed in deer-skin riding-breeches, with Mexican leather boots and gold spurs, a velvet jacket, and a tetsen hat, stood before him. He made almost a dandified figure among the roughly-clad rustlers.

His face, darkly sunburnt, was clean-shaven, save for a little black moustache. The features were handsome, the eyes bold, black, and piercing. Gold earrings glittered in his ears. The swarthy, handsome, half-Spanish face seemed strangely familiar to Beauclerc as he looked.

"Who is it, Buck?"

"A kid, cap'n. He was riding to the ranch when we stopped him," said the man in buckskin. "I reckon he may be useful."

"What do you mean?" muttered the captain.

From the savage looks and mutterings of the raiders, Beauclerc could guess that the attack on the ranch had not been, so far, a success.

"You ain't got into the ranch yet, captain—"

"Sure!"

"They're holding it agin us," muttered one of the raiders, with an oath. "I guess they had warning somehow, arter all!"

The captain gritted his teeth.

"They must have had warning," he said. "I cannot tell how. All the trails were guarded. Every passer was stopped and secured. If we were seen, no word can have been carried to the ranch. Yet they were on their guard."

Beauclerc's eyes glimmered.

The captain's muttered words were enough to tell him that one or both of his chums had succeeded in getting through the raiders, and warning the rancher in time of the coming attack.

The lantern moved, and the light fell on the dark, handsome face again, and the earrings glimmered. Beauclerc started.

He knew that the face was familiar. It was long since he had seen it, but it was familiar.

The lantern came closer. The black eyes of the ranch-raider peered into his face, examining him, and Beauclerc knew that he, too, was recognised. The man with the earrings knew him.

"I guess I've seen this kid before. Who are you, boy?" exclaimed the captain abruptly.

"He was going to the ranch, Captain Alf—"

"I've seen him before in the north-west."

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The captain gripped Beauclerc by the shoulder. "Were you not one of a party of schoolboys in the North-West in the summer—"

"Yes."
"I reckoned so. You know me?"
"You are Alf Carson, the man they called Handsome Alf, the Californian," said Beauclerc.

He knew the man now—the earrings had given him the clue—and now he recalled the handsome, reckless face. The gold-thief of the North-West, Handsome Alf, the Californian, was the captain of the ranch-raiders. It was long since the chums of Cedar Creek had seen him, but Vere Beauclerc had not forgotten him.

And Handsome Alf had not forgotten. His dark eyes glittered at the schoolboy.
"Your name?"
"Beauclerc."

"And the other two, your comrades"—
Handsome Alf seemed to understand suddenly—"they are at the ranch?"
"I believe so."

"I remember now. One of them was named Lawless," said the Californian, with a nod. "I had forgotten. I guess he belongs to this Lawless Ranch. Strange that we should meet again. I was your enemy then. You helped to rob me of a fortune—"

"We helped to prevent you from robbing another of a fortune," said Beauclerc quietly.

"Be that as it may—"
The Californian dropped his hand upon a knife in his belt.

"Hold on, cap'n!" It was Buck Benson, and he laid his hand on the Californian's arm. "I told you the kid would be useful."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the Californian impatiently.

Benson made a gesture towards the ranch in the dark distance.
"They're holding you off, cap'n!"
"Yes, yes?"

"This kid was going there. He says he has friends there."
"I know it now I know him."

"All the better, then. They will open the door to him," said the man in buckskin. "Let them believe we're gone, and the kid knocks at the door and asks for admittance. We'll be on hand ready to rush—"

There was a murmur of approval from the circle of ruffians. Handsome Alf shut off the lantern-light.

"Good!" he said. "I guess you're right, Buck." His hand dropped on Vere Beauclerc's shoulder again. "You understand, boy?"

Beauclerc breathed hard.
"I understand," he answered.
"You are to go to the ranch, make them

believe that the coast is clear, and that we are gone. You savvy?"

"Yes."
"Then they will open to you—"
"No doubt!" said Beauclerc.
"Your life shall be spared for this service," said the man with the earrings. "You will do as I ask?"

Beauclerc drew a deep breath.
"You shall cut me in pieces first!" he answered quietly.

A growl of rage came from the ranch-raiders, and they pressed closer round the fearless boy. A bared knife glimmered in the gloom.

Handsome Alf rapped out an oath.
"You will be cut to pieces, as you say, if you refuse!" he said, between his teeth. "Your life is on it!"

"Shoot, then!" said Beauclerc. "Do you think I will betray my friends into your hands, you scoundrel? Shoot!"

The muzzle of a rifle was pressed to his breast. He made a movement, and instantly his arms were pinned to his sides in the rough grasp of the ranch-raiders.

"When I give the word, pull the trigger, Buck!"

"You bet, cap'n!"

"Now, will you do as I ask?"

"No."
Beauclerc's voice was low, but it was clear, and he did not falter as the metal rim was pressed harder on his breast. The bitterness of death was in his heart, but his courage was high, and he did not trouble.

"For the last time?" muttered the Californian hoarsely.

"Never!"

Beauclerc felt a movement of the rifle as Buck Benson's finger moved on the trigger. He looked for instant death. But the Californian, his voice husky with rage, spoke again:

"He shall serve us yet! Bring him along!"

"Cap'n—"

"Bring him along! There's no time to lose. The firing must have been heard. They'll have the news at Silver Creek—ere long at Thompson. This boy shall help us take the ranch-house, or die! Bring him along! I have a plan in my mind! Get a move on, there!"

The Californian strode away in the high grass. Vere Beauclerc, in the grasp of the raiders, was dragged on towards the ranch.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Between Life and Death!

SILENCE!
Frank Richards, within the shot-spattered door of the ranch-house, strained his ears to listen.

Only the sigh of the wind came from the plain without.

in the foothills the schoolboys come face to face with them again. This time the fight is in the open. It is a case of schoolboys versus rustlers!

"THE RAGGING OF MOSSOO!"

By Owen Conquest.

Our Rookwood story for next week is full of stirring situations. Cyril Peele, the cad of the Fourth Form, is struck with a great scheme of ragging Mosssoo, the little French master. Ragging a master is a thing which Jimmy Silver & Co. are down on, especially if the master is Monsieur Mosssoo. But Peele is not worried by any scruples in this direction. He has come up against Mosssoo, and the consequence is the latter receives the malicious attentions of the cad.

"TO SAVE HIS BROTHER!"

By Martin Clifford.

This is a long dramatic story of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's, and a grand "carry-on" of the reformation of Levison series. The loyal little brother of the black sheep of the Fourth is placed in an unenviable situation. His brother is slipping back into the old dark ways, refusing the helping hands of his friends. What can Frank Levison do to save his brother? The problem comes up, but the solution is a great sacrifice. Will Frank make it?

"LODER'S LITTLE LESSON!"

By Frank Richards.

Loder, the bully of the Sixth, Greyfriars, has been asking for trouble, and he gets it. He has always found it a pleasure to vent his feelings upon his old enemies, Harry Wharton & Co. of the Remove. But he receives a surprise when the Removites turn

Were the ranch-raiders gone?
It seemed so; but the vigilance of the defenders did not relax for a moment. There was no sleep for the chums of Cedar Creek that night. Through the hours of darkness it was necessary to keep watch and ward, until the dawn came flushing over the distant Rockies, or until help arrived from the sheriff of Thompson.

They knew that Mr. Penrose must have reached Thompson Town by this time, unless some mischance had befallen him; and the rancher had hopes that the cowboy he had sent galloping for Silver Creek had got through. Help must come, probably from more than one direction. If the ranch-raiders had remained, the danger would then be theirs. But they were still lurking in the silent darkness of the prairie?

"Hark!" exclaimed Bob suddenly.
Tap!

It was a light knock at the door.
"Who knocks?" called out the deep voice of the rancher, as he thrust his rifle forward.

"It is I—Vere Beauclerc."
Frank Richards gave a cry.

"Beau! You!"
"The Cherub!" exclaimed Bob Lawless, in astonishment and delight. "It's all right, popper; the coast is clear now!"

Mr. Lawless stepped forward to remove the bars of the gashed door. If Vere Beauclerc was without, free and unthreatened, as it seemed, the danger was over. But through the axe-gash in the door came a hurried whisper:

"Be on your guard! Danger!"
"What?"

"The raiders are here!"
"Beauclerc!"

"I have but a minute to speak; be on your guard." Beauclerc's voice was quiet and calm. "I am a prisoner. I am sent forward to trick you into opening the door. They are a dozen yards back, in the grass, with their rifles ready for a volley."

"My boy!" gasped the rancher.
"Their rifles covet me," said Beauclerc quietly. "I have refused to do their bidding. But Handsome Alf—the captain—"

"Alf Carson—the man we met in the North-West!" muttered Bob.

"The same—the man with the earrings. He is reckoning that I shall save my life by betraying you! Do not open the door, on your lives! They are ready for a rush; they are ready to shoot!"

"My brave lad!" muttered Mr. Lawless huskily. "You shall be saved, if it costs us our lives! I will open the door. You shall—"

"I cannot—"
"You shall dodge in, Cherub, while we keep them off," whispered Bob.

(Continued on next page.)

upon him. It is another case of the worms turning. You will enjoy this rollicking long school tale.

"THE TREASURE OF BLACK MOON ISLAND!"

By Francis Warwick.

Our thrilling new romance of the Spanish Main has certainly made a great sensation. Everybody is talking about it. But they are doing more than that. They are reading it every week, and simply clamouring for the next instalments. In next week's long instalment a peculiar situation arises when young Jack Hampton falls into the hands of the three pirate captains. His friends have retreated from the hordes of yelling buccaners, and Jack is left alone in the hands of his enemies.

"BILLY BUNTER'S WEEKLY."

The fat and fatuous editor of our humorous Supplement is full of enterprise. He is struck with the idea of giving the masters of Greyfriars a chance to shine in his wonderful "Weekly." That is how he puts the matter. What the masters think is quite another thing. At all events, they rally round next week, and supply some very interesting contributions in the "Special Masters' Number" of the "Weekly."

OUR WEEKLY COMPETITION AND CROSS WORD PUZZLE.

There is just room to mention the last two fascinating features of the "Popular." There will be another Five Pounds and twenty consolation prizes to be won in a very simple competition, and also No. 6 of our splendid Cross Word puzzles.

YOUR EDITOR.

A WORD ABOUT NEXT WEEK'S PROGRAMME!

I SHALL not be able to dwell in any great extent upon the wonderful programme of stories in preparation for you next week. But one thing I must say, and it is this: I wish to thank all those readers of the old "Popular" who have been sending me such wonderful letters of appreciation. They have come in from all over the world, and their messages are all very encouraging.

Next week's programme will be as great as ever. Four long school tales, a romantic serial, Cross Word puzzle, simple competition, and a grand Supplement.

"A TIGHT CORNER!"

That is the title of next Tuesday's grand long complete story of Frank Richards & Co. of the Lumber School. The Cedar Creek chums are in for a pretty thick time with the ruthless rustlers who have so daringly invaded the Thompson Valley. Through their great pluck Frank Richards & Co. have driven the raiders from their objective, but

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DEFYING THE RAIDERS.

(Continued from previous page.)

"It's impossible! The end of a lasso is bound round my waist, and my hands are tied down. The other end of the lasso is tied to a horse. A touch on the horse, and I am dragged away, long before you could get near me to help me."

"Good heavens!"

"Keep the door fast," said Beauclerc steadily. "Save your lives; you cannot save mine."

Mr. Lawless struck his breast with his clenched fist. He did not touch the bars of the door. He knew now that help for Beauclerc was impossible. It needed but the flick of a whip on the horse, distant in the darkness, and the boy would be dragged away rolling at the end of the taut lasso. The rancher gritted his teeth with helpless rage.

"Oh, they shall pay for this!" he muttered. "They shall pay for this with their lives!"

"Good-bye, Frank and Bob! Keep on your guard, and do not open the door on any pretext," said Beauclerc steadily. "They believe that I shall weaken, but I came only to warn you, and to say a last word before the end, dear old fellows. Good-bye!"

"Beau!" panted Frank.

Vere Beauclerc turned from the door. There was a pull on the rope; the ranch-raiders were growing impatient.

Beauclerc's voice rang out sharp and clear. "Handsome Alf, you may shoot now! I have warned my friends against your trickery!"

"Cherub!" groaned Bob Lawless.

There was a shout of rage from the darkness. The rancher made a spring for the door; he grasped the bars. At any cost—

But there was no time.

The rope that secured Beauclerc tautened as Handsome Alf struck the horse. The schoolboy was plucked away from the door, and he rolled over and over helplessly as he was dragged away.

In a few seconds he was among the ranch-raiders, crouching in the dark grass at a distance. Handsome Alf grasped him savagely, and his knife slashed through the rope that held Beauclerc to the plunging horse.

"You have failed me!" he hissed, almost choking with rage. "You have warned them! You—you have dared—"

Beauclerc panted.

"Yes, scoundrel, I have warned them," he said. "Try any tricks that you like now, and you will not find them off their guard!"

"A thousand curses—"

Beauclerc staggered dazedly to his feet. His hands were bound down to his sides; he was helpless. The knife of the Californian glittered before his eyes.

"Die, then!" muttered Carson.

"Hold on, cap'n—"

"Stand back, Buck, you fool! Let him die for his obstinacy!" said Handsome Alf, hoarse with rage.

The man in buckskin gripped his arm.

"I guess he's useful yet," he said. "They're his friends yonder. I guess his life's worth suthin' to them. Tell them—"

The Californian's eyes gleamed.

"Dios! You are right!"

He made a stride towards the ranch-house. Keeping at a safe distance, however, in the shadows, he shouted:

"Rancher Lawless! The boy is in our hands! You know it!"

"I know it, you dog!" came back the rancher's voice, quivering with rage.

"Do you value his life?" shouted the Californian mockingly. "Well, I swear to you that if the ranch is not in our hands in five minutes—no more—the boy falls with a bullet in his brain!"

"Villain!"

"You have my word on it!" shouted the Californian savagely. "The rifle is to his breast. In five minutes—no more—if the door is not open, if you do not step out with your hands up, he falls dead at my feet! Take your choice!"

"Do not—do not—" shouted Beauclerc.

"Silence!"

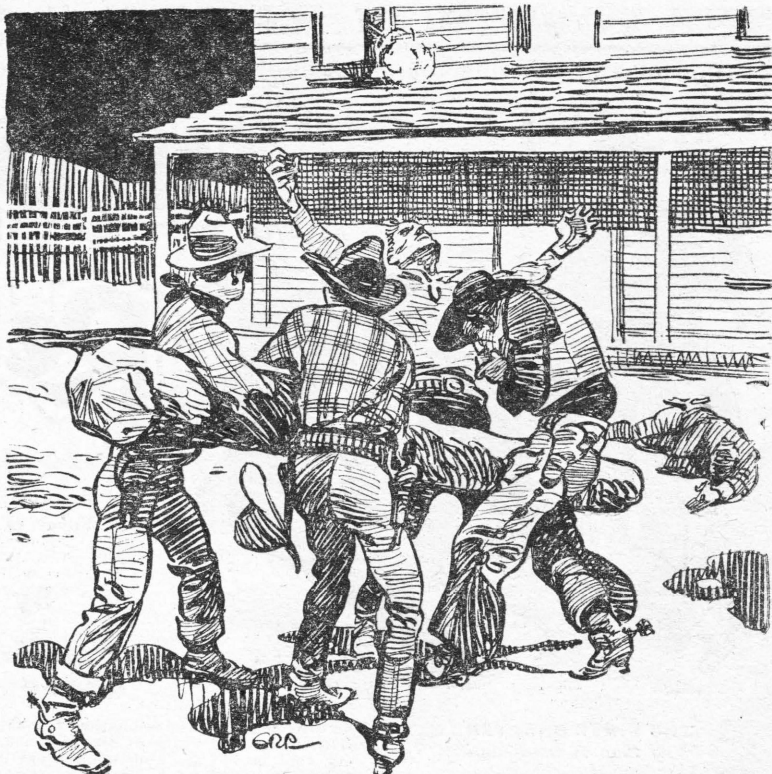
Buck Benson's rough hand gripped over the schoolboy's mouth.

There was no answer from the ranch-house. But within there was horror and dismay.

"Father!" muttered Bob.

The rancher did not speak.

His brain was in a whirl. He knew that the ranch-raider was in deadly earnest—that



KEEPING THE RUSTLERS AT BAY! The log and its bearers came on fast, and at a dozen yards distance Mr. Lawless fired twice from the window. Cra-a-ack! Two rustlers, at the fore end of the log, staggered and fell, and the log crashed to the earth. (See Chapter 2.)

the defeated thief of the prairie would carry out his savage threat.

The attack on the ranch had been baffled, the raiders dared not linger. Already they knew that foes might be near; how near they did not guess, but their danger was great. Handsome Alf was playing his last card, and if he failed, Vere Beauclerc's life was the forfeit.

The rancher gave a groan.

"We cannot leave him to die in their hands! Yet, if we surrender, will they spare his life? Heaven guide us now!"

Silence from the prairie.

The ranch-raiders were waiting; the minutes were passing all too swiftly.

Vere Beauclerc, in the grasp of the man in buckskin, stood in enforced silence.

Handsome Alf, with a grin on his evil, swarthy face, lighted a cigarette. He felt that he held the whip-hand now—that the rancher was driven at last to the end of his tether. But if he failed, he was savagely determined that when the ranch-raiders rode away, baffled and disappointed, Vere Beauclerc should remain behind, with a bullet in his heart, to greet his friends with lifeless, upturned face when they issued from the ranch. The minutes passed.

Beauclerc, in the grasp of the rustler, started. In the imminence of death his senses seemed strangely keen. Dully, from the distance, came a heavy sound, and he knew that it was galloping—the galloping of horses. His heart throbbed.

Galloping! Galloping!

Softly on the thick grass the hoofs were beating, but he heard them. A minute later the raiders heard them, too. Buck Benson stared round into the gloom in sudden alarm.

"I guess—"

The Californian spun round, gritting his teeth, and his eyes blazed into the shadows. Even in a few moments the full beat of the hoof's had grown louder, nearer.

"It's none of our gang!" muttered Buck Benson. "There's too many. They're from Thompson! By gum, we're cut off! The horses—the horses!"

The raiders' horses were staked out at a little distance. With one accord the rustlers dashed away towards their horses.

Beauclerc was forgotten.

Horsemen were galloping towards the ranch

through the night. It was help at last for the besieged. And if the raiders were cut off from escape—The bare thought seemed to lend them wings. They raced through the thick grass, and dragged frantically at their horses on the trail-ropes. Handsome Alf ran with the rest; but he turned back, knife in hand, remembering Beauclerc.

Beauclerc's hands were bound, but his feet were free. The moment Buck Benson's grasp was gone, he ran towards the ranch.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help is coming—help!"

Handsome Alf made a rush after him, and paused. He heard the bars falling from the ranch-house door. The thunder of hoofs had been heard there now, and Beauclerc's shout told the rest. The Californian ground his teeth with rage; he dared not waste a second. With a curse, he rushed into the darkness after his comrades.

Gallop! Gallop!

Voices shouted in the darkness. A rifle rang out; there was a flash of fire. The raiders, throwing themselves anyhow on their horses, galloped away madly in the darkness to the south, as the horsemen came sweeping down from the Thompson trail. Four wounded men, groaning in the grass, remained to fall prisoners into the hands of the sheriff of Thompson and his men; the rest were wildly fleeing into the night.

The door of the ranch-house flew open. Frank and Bob dashed towards their chum.

"Beau, old man—"

In the dim starlight, the sheriff of Thompson rode up.

"Mr. Lawless shouted to him, and the horsemen swept on to the south in hot pursuit of the ranch-raiders. Handsome Alf and his gang rode hard that night.

Vere Beauclerc remained that night at the ranch, a message being sent to his father at the cabin on the creek. On the morrow there was no school for Frank Richards & Co., for the whole section was roused now, and the chums of Cedar Creek were riding with the cattlemen in the hunt for the ranch-raiders.

THE END.

(Another thrilling long tale of Frank Richards & Co. of Cedar Creek next week, entitled: "A Tight Corner!")