

Castlemon Harry

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho



Harry Castlemon

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho

«Public Domain»

Castlemon H.

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho / H. Castlemon — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

Harry Castlemon

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho

CHAPTER I

ALL ABOUT HORSES

Archie Winters found that he had been mistaken in the opinions he had formed concerning life in California. When he first arrived at his uncle's rancho, he had declared that the fun and excitement were all over, and that he and Frank were destined to drag out a weary, monotonous existence until the time came for them to return home. But Arthur Vane, with the assistance of Pierre Costello and his band, had made things exceedingly lively for him and Frank, and now they were both willing to acknowledge that they had had much more than they wanted of perilous adventure.

The time never hung heavily on their hands, for there was always something interesting going on. First, Dick Thomas returned from San Francisco, and he and Johnny Harris became constant visitors at Mr. Winters's rancho. Then came several unsuccessful hunts after a grizzly bear, which persisted in breaking into the cow-pen every night, and finally an incident happened that brought about a long string of adventures, and raised Frank and Archie higher than ever in the estimation of the settlers. On the morning on which we introduce them, they, together with Johnny and Dick, were gathered in a room in Mr. Winters's rancho – the same room in which Frank had had one of those memorable encounters with the highwayman – talking the matter over.

The boys were in a state of siege. Every opening, except the port-holes, through which a breath of air might find its way in to them, was closed, and the room was as hot as an oven. They were perspiring like butchers; but not one of them thought of throwing open a door or window. Frank was stretched out on the bed, drumming on his guitar; Archie was walking restlessly up and down the floor, thrashing his boots with his riding whip; Dick Thomas was looking up at the pictures on the walls; and Johnny Harris was standing with his face close to one of the port-holes, fanning himself vigorously with his hat. Silence reigned in the room, broken only by the crack of Archie's whip, and light footsteps outside the door, with which were occasionally mingled low angry growls, and the rattling of a chain. None of the boys had spoken during the last ten minutes; and that, to those who knew them, would have been sufficient evidence that they were thinking about something exciting.

"Frank," said Archie, at last, "why don't you stop that noise? I don't see how you can lie there and pound on that thing. One would think you were making merry over our misfortune."

Frank very good-naturedly laid down the obnoxious guitar, and placing his hands under his head, looked at Archie as if waiting to hear what he had to say next.

"I would do something desperate, if I only had half a chance," continued the latter, shaking his fist in the air, and flourishing his whip about so recklessly that Dick retreated into a corner, out of his reach. "If I had those villains here I'd – I'd" —

"O, take it easy," said Frank. "I don't see the use of making any fuss about it, for the mischief has been done, and we can't help it."

"Take it easy!" repeated Archie, in disgust, "how can I? It would provoke any body in the world, except you, and you never get provoked at any thing. I don't believe you are even sorry."

"Yes, I am. I feel as badly about it as you do. I would not have lost Roderick for five hundred dollars. He carried me many a mile, and I owned him so long that I had become greatly attached to him. He was the swiftest and best trained horse in the settlement."

“Except mine,” returned Archie, quickly. “Would your horse walk on his hind legs, or pick up your hat or whip for you? Mine would; and if Roderick was not once badly beaten by him in a fair race, no horse was ever beaten in the world.”

Frank and Archie, as we know, had been rivals from their earliest boyhood, and now they had enthusiastic opponents in Johnny and Dick. Each one insisted that he owned the best horse, the best dog, and the best gun; and that he could beat the others at riding, running, jumping, wrestling, and throwing the lasso. They all made loud boasts, claiming superiority in every boyish accomplishment, but that was done merely for sport; for each of them knew that, in some things, he was a long way behind the others. The honors were about equally divided, the extra ones falling to the lot of Frank Nelson. He was the strongest fellow, the swiftest runner, the best shot with a rifle or revolver, and wonderfully expert in wrestling. Johnny Harris had once ridden a wild mustang, which was so vicious and unruly that none of the other boys could be induced to mount him, and consequently he was the champion horseman. Archie was the best jumper, and, until within a few days, had owned a horse that was equal to any trick pony the boys had ever seen in a circus. Archie’s whole soul was wrapped up in that horse, for he was the only one that had ever beaten Roderick in a fair race. Dick Thomas was the happy possessor of a pack of splendid hounds, and could boast that he never missed his mark with the lasso. He had been a formidable rival for Archie in jumping, and for Frank in shooting and running; but had, at last, been compelled to give up the contest, and acknowledge himself beaten.

Frank and Archie were in great trouble – they had lost their horses. The animals had gone the way a good many other chargers had gone during the last three weeks, for nearly every farmer in that neighborhood had to mourn the loss of some favorite nag, which had disappeared, and left no trace behind. Every one said that there was an organized band of horse-thieves around; but who they were, or what they did with their booty, could not be ascertained. Large rewards had been offered; the ranches had been patrolled of nights; the settlers had turned out to a man, and searched every nook and corner of the mountains they could get at; but, in spite of all their vigilance valuable horses were stolen every night, and no traces could be discovered of them or the robbers. The settlers seemed to have given up all hopes of ever bringing the guilty parties to justice; for now, when a horse was missing, there was nothing done, and but little said about it. There was no blowing of horns, and gathering of armed men, as had been the case a few days before. The farmers smiled, said that misery loved company, and seemed to think no more about the matter; but they were wide awake, and every man was watching his neighbor. Mr. Winters had been a heavy loser, and now Frank and Archie had come in for a share of the trouble. Roderick and King James (that was the name of the horse that had taken the place of Sleepy Sam in Archie’s affections) were gone, and of course the boys were highly indignant. One thing that made Archie so angry was the fact that no one, except Johnny and Dick, seemed to sympathize with him. Frank played lively tunes on his guitar, and advised him to “take it easy,” while Uncle James, when Archie reported his loss to him, poked him in the ribs with his finger, and said: “Aha! now you can have the pleasure of going afoot, like the rest of us.”

There was no danger that the boys would be obliged to go afoot. There were plenty of fine horses on the ranch, and Dick and old Bob, and half a dozen other Rancheros, were ready and willing to capture and break any nag they might select; but was there a Roderick or a King James among all these horses? The lost steeds were regarded by their young owners as perfect specimens of their species. They were so intelligent that they could be taught any thing that horses ever learned; so swift that nothing in the settlement could keep pace with them; so restless and fiery that they would never stand still long enough for their masters to be fairly seated in the saddle; and yet so docile that they could be managed, and driven any where, without a bridle. Were there any horses on the rancho that possessed all these good qualities? The boys were sure there were not.

We must stop here long enough to tell how Archie came by his horse, and why he gave him that odd name.

We have spoken of Captain Porter, an old fur-trader, who owned a rancho a few miles distant from the one belonging to Mr. Winters. He was a fleshy, jolly old gentleman, who always took a great deal of interest in every thing the boys did, and listened to the stories of their adventures with as much good nature as he exhibited in relating his own. Having lived on the frontier from his earliest boyhood, he had seen a world of excitement and adventure; and the easy way he had of recounting his exploits over his after-dinner pipe, proved an attraction too strong to be resisted by the boys, who scarcely allowed a day to pass without a visit to his rancho. They had a happy faculty of making friends wherever they went; and it was not long before the old fur-trader began to show that they held a prominent place in his estimation. He presented Frank with Marmion, the dog which had done him such good service in his encounters with Pierre Costello, and shortly afterward he treated Archie in a still more handsome manner.

One day the cousins rode over to dine with the captain, and while on the way, Archie, who could never be persuaded to acknowledge that Roderick was a swifter horse than Sleepy Sam, challenged Frank to a trial of speed. The race came off, and Archie, as usual, was badly beaten. When Frank dismounted at the captain's door, his cousin was not in sight.

"Where's the little one?" asked the fur-trader, who was seated on the porch, enjoying his long Indian pipe.

"He is coming," replied Frank. "Whenever he is on horseback he can't be easy unless he is racing with somebody," he added, to explain how he came to leave him so far behind.

"And do you always beat him?"

"Always. He grumbles and scolds about it at a great rate, but it doesn't seem to help the matter any. He has tried every horse on uncle's rancho, too; but has never been able to find one that can beat Roderick."

The captain settled back in his chair, and looked at the mustang as he was being led away by one of the Rancheros; and, when Archie came up, trying to smile, but looking rather crestfallen over his defeat, he winked at him, and nodded his head in a very significant manner. Neither of the boys knew what he meant; but Archie found out when dinner was over, for then the trader drew him aside, and held a whispered consultation with him. Frank regarded them both with suspicion, and when Archie looked at him, and wrinkled up his nose, and made other mysterious signs, he became satisfied that they were getting up some sort of a conspiracy. Nothing was said or done, however, that threw any light on the matter until they were ready to start for home; and then, when their horses were brought out, Frank saw that Sleepy Sam was not there. In his place was a small, clean-limbed animal, as black as midnight, which was pawing the ground, and jumping about as if impatient to be off. While Frank stood looking at him, and admiring his fine points, Archie seized the bridle, and sprang into the saddle.

"Hollo!" exclaimed his cousin, who now thought he understood the meaning of the mysterious winks and whisperings, "who owns that horse?"

"He belongs to the subscriber," replied Archie, highly elated.

"He is a fine-looking animal, but I don't know what you are going to do with him."

"Don't you? Well, jump into your saddle and I'll show you. He was presented to me by Captain Porter, on condition that I make him beat that ugly-looking mustang of yours; and I am going to do it."

"It isn't my style to allow a challenge like that to pass unnoticed," said Frank, as he mounted Roderick. "Hold on! Don't be in such a hurry. Come back here, and give me a fair chance."

The boys had a good deal of trouble in getting started, for Archie showed a disposition to "jockey." His expectations had been raised to the highest pitch by the captain's glowing description of the black's wonderful speed, but he knew what Roderick could do, and he did not intend to allow

his cousin to get the start of him by so much as an inch. In order to prevent that, he managed to keep a little in advance of Frank. But at last, after several false starts, they got off together, and the trader witnessed a race that was worth going miles to see. He entered heartily into the sport, clapping his hands, and shouting and laughing at the top of his voice; and when the rivals had passed out of sight of the rancho, he returned to his seat, his face all wrinkled up with smiles, and his fat sides shaking with suppressed mirth.

Archie had not overrated the powers of his horse. He took the lead at the start, and, what was more, increased it at every jump. For half a mile he went at an astonishing rate, carrying his rider faster than he had ever traveled before on horseback; but then the furious pace began to tell on him, and the mustang, which was good for a three-mile race at any time, gained rapidly. Archie, who had kept one eye over his shoulder all the while, noticed this, and knowing that Roderick's long wind would bring him out winner, if the race continued much farther, pulled up his horse and stopped.

"Now see here," exclaimed Frank, "this is not fair."

"What isn't?" asked his cousin, innocently.

"Why, to give up the race when I begin to gain on you. Come on; this question isn't decided yet."

"I think it is," replied Archie. "I am entirely satisfied. Didn't I keep ahead of you for half a mile?"

"Yes, but I want to explain."

"A fellow who is beaten always wants to make some excuses or explanations. I have beaten you fairly. I own the swiftest horse in the settlement, thanks to Captain Porter, and I have just thought of an appropriate name for him. The genuine Roderick, the rebel your horse is named after, had things all his own way for a while, but met his equal, at last, in King James, who whipped him in a fair fight. Your Roderick has found his match now, and I don't know any better name for the gallant little nag that has beaten him, than King James. That is what I shall call him."

Frank had boasted loudly of the mustang's victories over Sleepy Sam, and now Archie paid him back in his own coin. It was of no use for him to say that he would not acknowledge himself beaten – that Roderick was a "long-winded" horse, and that in a race of three miles he would leave the black one-third of the distance behind – for Archie would not listen; nor could he be induced to consent to another trial of speed. He was very proud of his victory, and loved every glossy hair of the little horse which had vanquished the hitherto invincible Roderick. But now he was gone. He was in the hands of some unknown thieves, who had entered the stable during the night, and made off with him and the mustang. The robbers must have known something about the merits of the two horses, for there were several other fine animals in the stable, but they were the only ones taken. The loss fell heavily on the boys, for they had expected to ride those horses to the head-waters of the Missouri during the coming autumn. Captain Porter was getting ready to start northward, on one of his annual trading expeditions, and Frank and Archie, and the two trappers, were to accompany him. It was the captain's intention to spend a few weeks in trapping on the Missouri and its tributary streams, and, when cold weather came, to go into winter-quarters in the mountains.

The cousins had nearly gone wild with delight when Uncle James decided that they might join the expedition, and had looked forward with impatience to the day set for the start. What splendid sport they would enjoy! What multitudes of beavers and otters they would trap; what havoc they would make among the buffaloes and antelopes; and what fine opportunities they would have to listen to the trappers' stories, when they were snug in their warm cabin in the mountains, with a fire blazing cheerfully on the hearth, while the fierce winter was piling up the snow-drifts without! Frank and Archie had often talked of these things; but now the journey across the plains, and the excitements attending a winter's sojourn in the mountains, had lost all charms for them. Indeed, during the last week, Archie had repeatedly declared that he would not stir a step. If he could not ride King James on the expedition he would not go; he would stay at home.

“I can’t see why the farmers don’t wake up and do something,” said Archie, who was so deeply engrossed with his troubles that he did not notice that he was flourishing his whip in unpleasant proximity to his cousin’s ears. “If they are willing to let their horses go without making any attempt to recover them, I am not. The thieves are hidden somewhere in the mountains – I am sure of that – and if I were a man I would not sleep soundly until I had found them.”

“It isn’t often that I wish any body harm,” said Frank, “but I hope Roderick will throw the man who stole him, head over heels, the first time he tries to mount him.”

“Look out, fellows!” exclaimed Johnny, suddenly.

A heavy tramping was heard in the hall, which grew louder as the footsteps approached the door. The sound had a strange effect upon the boys, for they all uttered exclamations, and began running about the room. Frank sprang up and perched himself upon the head-board of the bed; Dick seized a chair, and thrust it out in front of him, as if waiting to receive the attack of some enemy; while Johnny ran to one of the windows, and endeavored to open the shutters. But the heavy bar, with which they were fastened, fitted tightly in its place, and seeing that the door of the wardrobe was ajar, he squeezed through it, and shut himself in. Archie was the only one who stood his ground.

CHAPTER II ABOUT BEARS

Archie's actions indicated that he had made up his mind to fight something. He threw off his hat, pushed back his sleeves, and winding the lash of his whip around his hand, raised the butt, in readiness to strike.

"If you don't want a headache for the rest of the day, you had better look out for yourself," exclaimed Frank. "You made him very angry."

"Come in here!" cried Johnny, from the wardrobe. "There's room enough for another, with tight squeezing."

"I sha'n't run a step," replied Archie. "I am in no humor for nonsense this morning, and if Phil comes near me he will wish he hadn't."

The door opened at this moment, and in came Mr. Winters, Mr. Harris, and Mr. Thomas, all booted and spurred, and dusty with fast riding. The last named gentleman entered the room in a very undignified manner. The instant the door was opened, a half-grown bear slipped in between his feet, knocking them out from under him, and causing him to sit down on the animal's back very suddenly. To save himself from falling to the floor, Mr. Thomas seized the bear's long hair with both hands, and was brought into the room in triumph.

This bear was the Phil of which Archie had spoken, and the enemy that had been keeping him and his companions in a state of siege during the last half hour. Archie had done something Phil did not like; and he had loitered about in the hall, awaiting an opportunity to be revenged. Now that he had got into the room, he was fierce for a fight; and the boys, who had measured strength with him often enough to know that he was a very unpleasant fellow to have about when he was angry, thought it best to keep out of his way – all except Archie, who was in very bad humor, and would have held his ground against a dozen Phils. The bear, accepting his determined manner and threatening attitude as a challenge to combat, rushed straight at him, and in a moment more would have held him in a very loving embrace, had not Dick seized the chain that was fastened to Phil's collar, and brought him to a standstill.

"Put the rascal out of doors," said Mr. Winters. "The first thing you know, he will hurt some of you boys."

But Phil did not give any one a chance to put him out. He raised himself on his hind legs, tumbling off Mr. Thomas, who measured his length on the floor, and disregarding the blows which Archie showered upon him with his whip, sprang upon him and threw him down.

"Pull him off, fellows," shouted Archie, who knew that the punishment was coming now.

Frank jumped down from the head-board, Johnny came out of the closet, and both ran to assist Dick, who still clung manfully to the chain; but before they could reach him, Phil gave Archie a ringing slap on each side of his head, and made good his retreat from the room. The next that was seen of him, he was out in the court trying to start a fight with Marmion.

Phil was a rough play-fellow, but he was full of his tricks, always ready for a fight or a frolic, and he held a prominent place in the affections of the boys, who looked upon him as a great institution; but by every one else on the rancho he was regarded as an unmitigated nuisance. One great fault with Phil was, that he was too much like some young people. He always wanted his own way in every thing, and if he could not have it, he would grumble and go into the sulks. He would wander off by himself and pout for hours together, like a foolish boy who had been denied something his mother thought he ought not to have, sticking out his lips after the most approved fashion, and growling and scolding to himself at a wonderful rate. On these occasions it was not safe to venture near him.

Phil was an expert wrestler and boxer, and as long as he could get the better of his antagonist he would keep in excellent humor. He would not growl or scratch him with his claws, and would always wait till he got a fair hold before he made any attempt to throw him down. But when he met his match, as he always did whenever he interfered with Frank, there would be trouble directly. When Phil found that he could not throw him, he would growl and get mad; and then there was always a fight or a foot-race. The boys generally thought it best to run when he was thoroughly aroused, for he was considerably larger than a Newfoundland dog, his teeth and claws were sharp, his paws heavy, and he used them in good earnest.

Phil was as treacherous as an Indian. Whenever a stranger visited the rancho, he would run to meet him, rub himself against his legs, turn summersaults for his amusement, and try, by every means in his power, to show that he was glad to see him; and all this while he would be watching for an opportunity to play a trick upon him. He would sneak around behind him, and if the visitor did not keep his eyes open, the first thing he knew his heels would fly up, and he would sit down upon the ground in a great hurry.

Another bad trait in Phil's character was, that he never forgot an injury. He always avenged a wrong done him, and if he could not get at the guilty party, he would take satisfaction on some one else. Many a time, when Frank turned him loose in the morning, was he obliged to stand punishment for something Archie had done to him the night before. Phil, catching him off his guard, would trip him up, box his ears, and run off to escape the consequences; and the next time Frank met him he would be as friendly as ever, unless some one had been teasing him in the meantime. He seemed to cherish unbounded affection for Frank (that is, when he was in good humor), but he disliked Archie as much as Marmion did; and he had good cause to be angry at him on this particular morning. Archie had been unreasonably cross and ugly ever since his horse was stolen; and when the bear came up and greeted him in a friendly manner, by putting his paw on his shoulder, Archie, by taking some unfair advantage of him, succeeded in throwing him down, and cramming a handful of grass into his mouth; and that was an indignity that Phil would not submit to. He flew into a terrible rage, and the boys, knowing that something unpleasant would happen if Phil succeeded in getting his paws on any of them, ran into their room, and fastened all the doors and windows. The bear followed, and after trying in vain to effect an entrance through one of the port-holes, took his stand in the hall, and waited for them to come out. When Mr. Winters and his companions entered the room, he went in with them, and squared accounts with Archie, by boxing his ears so soundly that he had a headache all the rest of the day.

Uncle James and Mr. Harris laughed at Mr. Thomas, and the boys smiled behind their handkerchiefs. Mr. Thomas made some very uncomplimentary remarks about bears in general, and Phil in particular, and helping himself to a chair, resumed the conversation which this little incident had interrupted.

"It will be of no use, Mr. Winters," said he, "for it has been tried already. He has been chased with dogs, caught in traps, and shot at numberless times; but he is to-day as lively and full of mischief as he was a year ago. He is bound to die a natural death."

Mr. Thomas was speaking of the bear which had so often robbed Uncle James's cow-pen, and after the boys had listened for a few minutes to the conversation that followed, they learned that this pest had visited the rancho again during the previous night, and walked off with a fine calf, for which Mr. Winters had refused a hundred dollars a few days before. More than that, he had got into a trap which had been made especially for him, but had succeeded in working his way out. This same trap had caught and held two good-sized bears, which had tried their best to escape, but it was not strong enough to confine him. He had tumbled the logs about in every direction, and made off with the bait with which the trap was set.

This bear was a well-known character in that section of the country – as well known as Mr. Winters himself. He was called "Old Davy;" and this name had been given to him to distinguish

him from a few other old settlers of the same species; but these had been killed off, one after another, and now Old Davy was left alone. Those who had seen him, described him as a monster animal, fully as large as two ordinary bears. He could be recognized by a large bald spot on his forehead, which was, doubtless, the scar of a wound received during some of his numerous battles, and his track could be distinguished from those of other bears by the peculiar shape of the print left by one of his hind feet. A portion of the foot had either been shot away, or lost during a conflict with dogs, and the track made by this wounded member, showed only the claws and the ball of the foot. But this did not interfere with Old Davy's traveling, or his fighting, either. He could wander over a good portion of the county in a night, and had, more than once, demonstrated his ability to whip all the dogs that could get around him. Between him and the horse-thieves, the farmers had lost many a dollar.

When Old Davy and his exploits had been thoroughly discussed, Mr. Winters told his nephews why he had come in there. He was on the point of starting for San Diego, to be gone three or four days; and he wanted the boys to manage affairs during his absence. "There is not much to be done," said he, with a laugh, "but if you can manage to shoot Old Davy and catch those horse-thieves while I am gone, I should be delighted."

The boys told themselves that they had not the slightest intention of going within a mile of Old Davy. If men like Dick Lewis and Bob Kelly, who had hunted grizzly bears all their lives, could not kill him, they certainly had no business with him. And as for the horse-thieves, they were, doubtless, a band of desperadoes, who used their revolvers or bowie-knives upon any one who came in their way, and the boys were quite sure that they would let them alone also. But, after all, they had a good deal to do with the horse-thieves, and with Old Davy also. Some exciting events happened in the settlement during the next few hours, and when Uncle James returned from San Diego, he was more astonished than he was when he listened to Frank's story of his first encounter with Pierre Costello.

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE STORY

“**Now,**” said Archie, when he had seen Uncle James ride off toward San Diego, “what’s to be done? It’s dreadful slow hanging around the house all the while, and I propose that we visit that bear trap. We might repair it, you know, and perhaps we can make it strong enough to hold Old Davy the next time he gets into it.”

As no objections were raised to this proposition, the boys strolled slowly toward the stable, where Mr. Winters now kept all his fine riding stock, it being unsafe to allow the animals to run at large. There was no danger that the robbers would get any more horses out of that stable, for Dick Lewis and old Bob Kelly had taken up their quarters there. Archie thought it would have been a good thing for him and Frank, if this precaution had been adopted a few days before.

The stable was full of horses, but Frank and Archie could not find any to suit them. While Johnny and Dick were saddling their nags, the cousins, with their bridles in their hands, walked slowly up and down the floor, critically examining the twenty sleek, well-kept animals which were standing quietly in their respective stalls; but they measured every thing by Roderick and King James now, and none of their uncle’s horses were good enough for them.

“I believe I won’t go, fellows,” said Archie, at length. “I have a good mind to say that I will never leave the rancho again, until I get my horse back. Will you agree to that, Frank, if I will?”

“No, sir!” replied his cousin, quickly. “I can’t see the use of hurting my nose to spite my face. I am going on that expedition with Captain Porter this winter, if I have to ride a mule.”

“Well, it beats me that there is no one here who can catch those robbers,” said Archie, bitterly. “Dick Lewis, I have lost all faith in you.”

The trapper was seated on a bench beside the door, busy at work on a new hunting shirt, which, like all the rest of his garments, was gaudily ornamented with beads and bright-colored pieces of cloth. He smiled good-naturedly at Archie, but made no reply.

“I built my hopes high upon you,” continued the latter. “You have spent your life on the frontier; fought all through the Mexican war; have shot dozens of grizzly bears and Indians; been in numberless scrapes with all sorts of desperate characters, and yet you allow Old Davy to invade the rancho every night, and walk off with some of uncle’s best stock, and permit a band of horse-thieves to settle down here in our very midst, and carry on their trade without a word of protest. What do you mean by it?”

“We have done all we could, little ’un – me an’ old Bob have,” replied the trapper. “But don’t you know that thar are things movin’ around us all the while, that no livin’ man can’t foller, ’cause they don’t leave no trail?”

“Of course there are,” said Johnny. “Birds, for instance.”

“But the birds didn’t steal my horse,” exclaimed Archie.

“I aint sayin’ they did,” returned Dick. “I know well enough that your hosses were stole by men, ’cause I seed the prints of their feet in front of this yere very door. I know which way they went, too, fur me an’ old Bob tracked em.”

“You did?” cried Frank. “Then why didn’t you follow them up, and catch them?”

“’Cause we couldn’t; that’s the reason. It’s a leetle the queerest thing I ever hearn tell on.”

“What is?” asked all the boys in a breath. They began to get interested and excited now, for the trapper’s mysterious manner indicated that he had some great secret to communicate.

“I haint sartin that I had oughter say any thing about it,” replied Dick. “It’s something I can’t begin to see through, an’ that’s the reason I haint told your uncle of it. You ’member when Mr. Winters lost them two hosses of his’n, don’t you? Wal, the next mornin’ me an’ ole Bob tracked ’em

nigh onto five miles, an' finally lost their trail about a hundred yards from the creek that flows on this side of Don Carlos' rancho. Thar war the prints of their hoofs in the soft 'arth, as plain as bar's ears, an' thar the trail ended. Now, where did them two hosses go to? That's what I want to know."

"Perhaps they turned up or down the creek to find a ford," said Frank.

"They couldn't have done that without leavin' a trail, could they? It was a good hundred yards to the creek, as I told you, an' me an' Bob sarched every inch of the ground, but couldn't find the print of a single hoof."

"The robbers may have doubled on their trail, for the purpose of throwing you off the scent," suggested Johnny.

"I don't reckon that men who have hunted wild Injuns an' varmints as long as me an' Bob have, could be fooled by sich a trick as that ar'," replied the trapper. "I have since found out all about it, youngsters. Them hosses didn't make no more trail; that's the reason we couldn't foller 'em."

"Then, of course, they didn't go any farther," said Dick Thomas.

"Yes, they did. They went acrost that creek, an' into Don Carlos' rancho, an' never touched the ground, nor the water either."

"Into Don Carlos' rancho!" repeated Archie in great astonishment.

"And never touched the ground!" echoed Johnny. "Were they carried over?"

"Sartinly not. They walked."

"How could two solid flesh-and-blood horses walk a hundred yards without stepping on the ground?" asked Frank.

"They could step on something else, couldn't they? *They walked on clouds!*"

As the trapper said this, he settled back on the bench, and looked at the boys, to observe the effect this astounding announcement would have upon them. He expected them to be greatly amazed, and they certainly were. Any four boys in the world would have been amazed to hear such a declaration fall from the lips of a man whom they knew to be strictly truthful, and who, moreover, was not jesting, but speaking in sober earnest. They looked at the trapper a moment, and then at one another, and finally Johnny and Dick Thomas burst into a loud laugh; while the cousins, who were better acquainted with their old friend, thrust their hands deep into their pockets with an air which said plainly that they did not understand the matter at all, and waited patiently for him to explain.

"You may believe it or not," said Dick, "but it's a fact, 'cause ole Bob seed it with his own eyes. He watched the hul thing from beginning to end, and it well-nigh skeered him to death."

"What did he see?" asked Frank, growing more and more bewildered. "I didn't suppose that Bob was afraid of any living thing."

"Nor he aint, nuther," returned the trapper, quickly. "But show him something that can't be hurt by a rifle-ball, an' he'll take to his heels as quick as any body. As I was sayin', the trail of them two hosses ended thar on the bank of that creek, an' we couldn't find it ag'in. Me an' ole Bob puzzled our heads over it fur a long time, an' we finally made up our minds that that ar' old Spaniard, Don Carlos, could tell us all about the matter if he was a mind to, an' Bob said that we would go back the next night, an' watch his rancho. Wal, when the next night come, we couldn't both go, 'cause your uncle said he wanted one of us to keep an eye on the stables: so I stayed at home, an' ole Bob went alone. He was gone about three hours, an' when he come back I seed a sight I never seed afore, an' one I never expect to see ag'in. Ole Bob's face was as white as a Sunday shirt, an' he was shakin' all over like a man with the ager."

"What had he seen?" repeated Frank, who was impatient to get at the bottom of the mystery.

"Easy, easy, youngster, I'm comin' to that," replied Dick. "Now, I've knowed ole Bob ever since I was knee-high to a duck, an' I've been with him in more 'n a hundred fights with Injuns, an' Greasers, an' varmints – sometimes, too, when we jest did get away with our ha'r, an' that was all – but I never seed him skeered afore. It made me feel kinder funny, I tell you, 'cause I knowed that thar had been something onnatural goin' on; an' I aint ashamed to say that I looked all around

this yere stable, to make sure that me an' him were alone. The ole feller didn't say any thing, till he had filled his pipe an' smoked it about half out; an' then he told me what he had seed. 'Dick,' says he, 'thar's been awful things agoin' on about that ar' old Greaser's rancho, an' if I hadn't seed it all with my own two eyes, I shouldn't believe it. I went down thar where we lost the trail last night, an' arter hidin' my hoss in the bushes, tuk up a position from which I could watch both sides of the creek. I knowed that Don Carlos had gone to bed, 'cause thar was no light about the rancho, an' the doors an' winder-shutters were all closed. I hadn't been thar in the bushes long, afore I heered the trampin' of hosses; but it stopped all of a sudden, an' fur the next five minutes I lay thar on the ground listenin', an' peepin' through the trees, tryin' to get a sight at the fellers. But I couldn't see 'em, an' finally I begun to crawl up closer.

"Now, the last time I looked at the rancho, it was dark an' still, an' thar wasn't a sign of a human bein' about it; an' durin' the two minutes I was crawlin' t'wards them hossmen, thar wasn't even the rustlin' of a leaf to tell me that thar was any thing goin' on. But sich fellers as them that live in that rancho don't make no noise about their work. They had done a good deal in them two minutes; an' when I looked acrost the creek ag'in, I knowed how it come that we had lost the trail of them hosses. I seed enough to skeer me wuss nor I was ever skeered afore, an' if I could have got up from the ground, I should have made tracks from thar sudden: but, Dick, I couldn't move – something held me fast.

"I told you that the last time I looked t'wards the rancho it was all dark, didn't I? Wal, it wasn't so now. The walls of the buildin', an' the bank of the creek, were lighted up by streaks of fire; an' where they come from I couldn't tell. Howsomever, I didn't think much about that, fur I seed somethin' else that made my ole 'coon-skin cap raise up on my head. It was a *bridge of clouds*, which ran from the wall of the buildin' down to the water's edge. Mebbe you won't believe that, Dick, but I seed it with my own eyes. Them streaks of fire, that come from the rancho, lighted up every thing fur a hundred yards around; an' I could see the clouds a rollin' an' tumblin' like the smoke from the mouth of a cannon. More 'n that, thar was a small flatboat in the creek, which I hadn't seed thar afore, an' on it were four hosses an' three men. Two of the hosses were Roderick and King Jeems. Each one had a feller on his back, an' each feller was holdin' another hoss by the bridle.

"By the time I had noted these things the boat begun to move, an' then I seed something else that skeered me. That ar' boat, Dick, was rowed acrost that creek without hands. It's a fact, 'cause I seed it. I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I wasn't dreamin', but thar wasn't no mistake about it. Them two fellers sot thar on their hosses, without layin' a finger on an oar or paddle, the other stood in the stern, with his hands in his pockets, an' yet the boat carried them acrost. It wasn't no time in reachin' the other bank, an' when it stopped, the hossmen rode out on this bridge of clouds, which seemed to have been put thar on purpose fur them, and went t'wards the house. I kept clost watch of them, to see which way they turned, but they didn't turn at all. They kept straight ahead, an' went into the rancho. I rubbed my eyes ag'in, an' when I opened 'em the boat wasn't thar, the bridge of clouds had disappeared, the fire had gone out, an' the rancho was as dark an' silent as though thar had never been nobody about it. I tell you, Dick, I was skeered when I seed that; but I've got a leetle courage, I reckon, an' I made up my mind that I would find out the meanin' of them strange doin's, or die a tryin'. I had seed them two fellers go into the rancho, an' I wanted to know how they got in, an' what they were goin' to do thar. I didn't stop to think the matter over, 'cause I knowed I should back out if I did; but jumpin' to my feet, I ran down the bank of the creek to the water, an' struck out for the other shore. I wasn't long in gettin' acrost, an' presently I found myself standin' clost to the wall where I had seed the fire shinin', an' where them two hossmen had gone in. Was I really awake? Had I seed any body about thar at all? Dick, thar wasn't a door or winder on that side of the buildin'! The wall was as solid as the ground – not a single crack or crevice in it. How could them two fellers have gone through a stone wall five foot thick? I axed myself that question,

an' then I fetched a little whistle, an' turned an' run fur my life. I swum that creek quicker'n it was ever swum afore, I reckon; an' when I reached my hoss, I put spurs to him, an' come home a flyin'. I kept lookin' back all the while, to see if thar wasn't somethin' follerin' me, an' I didn't draw an easy breath until I come within sight of this rancho. I've seed an' heered of a heap of queer things durin' the sixty years I've been knocked about on the prairy, but this yere is a leetle ahead of 'em all.' That's the way old Bob told me his story, youngsters," said Dick, in conclusion. "You may laugh at it if you want to, but I won't, 'cause I know that every word of it is the truth."

For a few moments after the trapper ceased speaking, the boys stood looking at him and at one another in blank amazement. His story reminded them of the tales of enchantment they had read in the Arabian Nights. As strange as it may seem, however, they were not so much astonished at the recital of the singular events that had happened at the old Spaniard's rancho, as they were to know that Roderick and King James had been seen to go in there. Frank turned the matter over in his mind, and told himself that he had heard something that would, sooner or later, lead to the breaking up of the robber-band. Like the others, he could not explain the "bridge of clouds," nor could he understand how a boat could be ferried across a wide creek without hands, or how a solid stone wall, five feet thick, could open to admit the horsemen; but still he knew that if these things had really happened, they were the results of human agency, and that there was nothing supernatural about them. He did not believe that Don Carlos had any thing to do with the horse-thieves, and yet it did not seem possible that such proceedings as the old trapper had witnessed could go on in his rancho without his knowledge. Don Carlos was a prominent personage in the settlement. He was one of the wealthiest men in Southern California, numbered his cattle and horses by thousands, his money by bushels instead of dollars (Uncle James had once told his nephews that he had seen three barrels of gold in the old Spaniard's bed-room), and there was no need that he should risk his life by engaging in any such business. Besides, he had lost several fine horses himself, and had been untiring in his efforts to discover the thieves. If he was one of the guilty parties, he certainly had reason to congratulate himself on the skillful manner in which he had avoided arousing the suspicions of his neighbors.

"I have told you the story, youngsters," said Dick, "an' you can do what you think best. You can bear one thing in mind, howsomever, an' that is, if you're goin' to be keerless, like you allers are, an' try to find out what's been goin' on at that rancho, you can look to the settlers for help, if you want any. Ole Bob says that thar aint money enough in Californy to hire him to go back thar; an' if he won't go, you'd better believe that Dick Lewis won't go nuther. I don't want to see any thing that ole Bob is afeared of."

"I think we had better let the matter rest until Uncle James returns," said Frank. "He will know what ought to be done. Now let us go out and look at that trap."

"You had better keep away from thar," said Dick. "If Ole Davy happens to be prowlin' about in the woods, he'll larn you more of the nater of grizzly bars than you ever knowed afore."

"O, we're not going to trouble him," replied Johnny.

"And if he knows when he is well off he won't trouble us either," said Archie. "I've wanted to fight somebody ever since I lost that horse; and I'm just as willing it should be Old Davy as any one else."

The cousins had a good deal of trouble in selecting their horses; but, with the trapper's assistance, they were finally mounted to their satisfaction, and after securing their weapons, and a couple of axes, with which to repair the trap, they whistled to their dogs, and galloped toward the mountains.

CHAPTER IV

“OLD DAVY.”

It was a long time before the boys ceased to wonder at the singular story they had just heard. They discussed it while they were riding toward the mountains; but after they had all expressed an opinion, they were as much in the dark as they had been before. They could not understand it at all. Dick Thomas declared that old Bob must have fallen asleep while he was watching the rancho, and that the bridge of clouds, the streaks of fire, and the boat that was ferried across the creek without hands, were things which he had seen only in his dreams. Such incidents, he said, might have happened in feudal times, and in some old castle which had been built with secret doors and dungeons and passage-ways; but no one need try to make him believe that they could take place at that late day, in a civilized country, and in a house that had been erected simply for a dwelling. It was ridiculous. Johnny said that was his opinion, too; but Frank and Archie, who knew that the old trapper was not the man to fall asleep while watching for an enemy, were confident that something unusual and exciting had been going on at Don Carlos' rancho. Bob was a very ignorant man, and of course he was superstitious. He believed in signs and omens, and any thing he could not account for was sure to frighten him. This may have led him to exaggerate the occurrences at the rancho, but, for all that, they knew that he had been a witness to some strange scenes.

“Old Bob didn't make up that story,” said Archie, decidedly, “and he never dreamed it, either. He saw something, and I'll know what it was before I am two days older. It's my opinion that that old Spaniard has got my horse: and if he has, he must give him up, or there'll be a bigger fuss in this settlement than there was when the Indians attacked it years ago.”

But all thoughts of Don Carlos and his rancho, and the mysterious things that had happened there, were soon driven out of their minds; for, by this time, they had reached the spring near which Frank, Archie, and Johnny had been captured by Pierre and his band, and there they found the trap of which they were in search. It was built of heavy logs, with a movable top, like the lid of a box, to which, when the trap was set, a “trigger” was adjusted, in such a manner that, when the bait was removed, the top would fall down, confining the bear in the pen. The boys thought that Old Davy must have possessed immense power of muscle to work his way out of that trap. He had left the marks of his great claws and teeth on the logs, and there were the prints of his feet where he had passed along the muddy bank of the spring into the woods.

Frank and his companions sat in their saddles looking at the trap, while the dogs, with all the bristles on their backs sticking straight up, ran about in a state of intense excitement. The boys were all thinking about the same thing: and that was, if they dared to send on the dogs, and could find and shoot Old Davy, what a feather it would be in their caps! That would be doing something that Dick Lewis and Bob Kelly and all the best hunters in the settlement had tried in vain to accomplish. There was one of their number who was reckless enough to believe that they could do it, and that was Archie Winters.

“Hi! hi!” he yelled, so suddenly that he startled all his companions. “Look to him, dogs. Hunt him up!”

No sooner were the words spoken, than the dogs uttered a simultaneous yelp, and disappeared in the bushes. There were five of them in the pack – Marmion, and four splendid hounds, which belonged to Dick. Their young masters had often declared that they should never follow Old Davy's trail, for he was a famous hand to destroy dogs, and during his numerous fights, he had killed nearly all the finest animals of this species in the settlement. A few months before, every farmer in that section of the country had pointed with pride to his pack of fifteen or twenty hounds, to which he gave as much care and attention as he bestowed upon his horses; but Old Davy had thinned them

all out, and now some of the settlers had only two or three remaining. Frank and Dick had, thus far, kept their favorites at a safe distance from the grizzly, but Archie had sent them right into his mouth. When the dogs came up with him, they would of course attack him, and that would be the last of them. A bear that could demolish twenty fierce hounds in a single fight, would not wink over five antagonists. However, it was too late to recall them. They were already out of sight, and yelping fierce and loud as they swept up the mountain in pursuit of the grizzly.

"I've seen my hounds for the last time," said Dick.

"And I'll never put eyes on Marmion again," chimed in Frank. "What made you send them on, Archie?"

"Now look here, fellows," replied the latter. "We have said a hundred times that we wanted to see Old Davy, and I'd like to know if we'll ever have a better chance than we've got now. Let's follow the dogs, and when they bring us within sight of the bear, we'll call them off. We can look at him without having a fight with him, can't we?"

The others were by no means sure of that. Those who knew Old Davy best said that he was a quarrelsome fellow, and that he never hesitated to assault anybody who invaded his dominions. A black bear, unless driven desperate by hunger, will generally take to his heels at the sight of a human being; but Old Davy was a grizzly, and one of the most ferocious of his species. But, although the boys were well aware of all these facts, they did not hesitate to follow Archie, who, without waiting to hear what his companions had to say to his proposition, put spurs to his horse, and dashed into the bushes. They unslung their guns as they went (although they all declared that they had not the slightest intention of shooting at the bear if they came up with him), and, guided by the hoarse baying of the hounds in front, galloped through the trees, and up the side of the mountain, like a squad of cavalry on the charge.

The higher they went the more difficult the ascent became. The bushes were thick, fallen logs incumbered the ground, and the trees and saplings grew so closely together that their horses could scarcely force their way through them. It was a splendid hiding-place for a bear, and Frank could not help asking himself how many chances there were in a hundred that all of them would succeed in making their escape, if Old Davy should suddenly pounce down upon them.

After a tedious, fatiguing ride of half an hour, during which time the music of the hounds continued to ring out louder and clearer, as the trail grew warmer, they reached the top of a spur of the mountain, and were on the point of descending into the ravine on the opposite side, when Dick Thomas, who was leading the way, suddenly uttered an exclamation, and stopped his horse.

"What is it?" asked his companions in a breath.

"We'd better be getting away from here, fellows," replied Dick, so excited that he could scarcely speak plainly. "There's the old rascal himself."

"Who? Where? You don't mean Old Davy!"

The boys had talked bravely enough about meeting this dreaded monster; but now that they were close upon him, their courage began to ooze out at the ends of their fingers, and the faces they turned toward Dick were a good deal paler than usual.

"Yes, I do mean Old Davy. Don't you see him sitting there at the foot of that mammoth oak?"

The boys looked through the trees in the direction Dick pointed, and, sure enough, there was the grizzly, scarcely more than a hundred yards distant. There could be no mistake as to his identity, for there was the bald spot on his forehead as plain as daylight. They had got themselves into a nice scrape.

That was the first thought that passed through Frank's mind, and the next was that he would never again have a word to say about Marmion's courage. He had never been more astonished in his life, than he was when he witnessed the actions of his favorite. The hero of a score of hard-fought battles, the dog that had been at the killing of half a dozen bears, and never once hesitated to attack the largest of them – Marmion the infallible, upon discovering Old Davy, uttered one

howl of terror, and faced about and fled for dear life. The hounds followed close at his heels, and such a scrambling to get out of harm's way Frank had never seen before. They were out of sight in an instant.

The boys had prepared themselves to see something frightful when they came within sight of Old Davy, and they were not disappointed. He was even larger and uglier than their imaginations had pictured him. He sat on his haunches at the root of a huge oak, swinging his head slowly, from side to side, and apparently unconscious of the presence of the young hunters.

"Well, fellows," said Frank, who was the coolest one in the party, "we've found the old villain, and now what are we going to do with him?"

"Let's shoot at him and run," suggested Archie.

"If the ground was clear, and I had my own horse, I would agree to that," replied Frank. "But don't you know that this mountain behind us is almost impassable? What would happen to us if we should fail to kill or disable him, and our horses should become entangled in the bushes?"

"Well, we must do something very soon," said Johnny, "for the old fellow isn't going to sit there much longer. He is getting uneasy."

Frank raised himself in his stirrups and took a survey of the ground before him, like a general who was about to lead his forces into action. But he had no intention of provoking a fight with their enemy. His only desire was to bring himself and companions safely out of the dangerous predicament in which they had thoughtlessly placed themselves. He was certain that when they began to retreat, the grizzly would assume the offensive; and in a race through those thick bushes, he would have a decided advantage, and might succeed in overtaking some of them.

"There is only one thing we can do," said he, "and that is to get down to the bottom of the ravine."

"Why, we'll have to go right past Old Davy to get there," said Archie.

"We can't help that. We must reach clear ground, where we will have a fair chance for our lives, if he takes it into his head to attack us. Move in single file, boys, keep close together, and if Old Davy shows fight, we'll give him a volley, and take to our heels."

"That's the way to do it," said Dick, approvingly. "You give the commands, Frank, and then every thing will be done in order."

The boys were, by this time, recovering from the nervousness that had been occasioned by the first sight of the grizzly; and, as their courage returned, there was more than one among them who secretly determined that he would not leave the field, until he had had at least one fair shot at the bear. They had swift horses under them, trusty weapons in their hands, and they knew that if Old Davy would keep quiet until they were well out of the bushes into clear ground, there was nothing to be afraid of.

Frank turned his horse and rode slowly down the mountain toward the bottom of the ravine, his companions following after in single file. They carried their rifles across their saddles in front of them, cocked and ready for instant use, and each boy kept his eyes fastened upon the grizzly. Old Davy watched them closely, too; and when he saw them moving about among the bushes, he raised his head and uttered an angry growl. That growl had a demoralizing effect upon the young hunters, for their line of battle was broken in an instant, and Frank's horse made one or two frantic leaps down the mountain, almost unseating his rider. The general consternation was greatly increased when Johnny called out that the bear was coming.

"Take it easy, boys!" shouted Frank, with difficulty restraining his frightened horse. "There's time enough. Wait till he comes out of the bushes, and fire at that bald spot on his forehead. Be sure of your aim, now."

It required no little nerve for the young hunters to sit there in their saddles and await the onslaught of that enraged grizzly. They could not see him now, but they heard his angry growls, and saw the bushes shake and bend as he charged toward them. Presently his enormous head and

shoulders emerged from a thicket scarcely more than twenty-five yards distant, and Frank gave the word.

“Ready! Aim! Fire!” he shouted.

Four shining rifle-barrels arose in line, four sights covered the bear's head, four fingers pressed the trigger at the same instant, a roar that awoke the echoes far and near rang through the mountains, and before the smoke cleared away, four frightened horses had dashed past Old Davy, and were carrying their riders down the ravine with the speed of the wind. The boys knew that their hands trembled, but they were all good marksmen, and they were sure that at least one of the four bullets that had been fired at the grizzly's head, had found a lodgment in some vital part; but what was their amazement, when they reached the bottom of the ravine, and turned in their saddles and looked back, to see Old Davy still on his feet, and coming down the mountain in hot pursuit, he did not appear to have been in the least injured by the storm of bullets they had rained upon him.

CHAPTER V

A RUNNING FIGHT

It was one of Dick's sayings that bear-hunting was a "business by itself" – as much so as book-keeping or steamboating; and Frank and Archie had been in California long enough to learn that the trapper told the truth in this, as in other matters. It was a favorite pastime with the settlers in that section of the country, and the cousins had seen as many as thirty men take part in a single hunt. They were generally divided into two parties: some went in the drive – that is, they followed the hounds, and if the bear was brought to bay by them, they signaled to their companions with their hunting horns. The others were scattered about among the mountains, watching the "runaways," and holding themselves in readiness to shoot the bear if he attempted to pass by them. This was the part our four boys always took in a bear-hunt, and they had engaged in so many during the last few weeks, that they began to consider themselves experts in the business. They had never killed a grizzly, but they could boast of having had an exciting fight with one. How it would have ended it is hard to tell. The boys were getting the worst of it (by that we mean that the bear was charging upon them, and they were running for dear life toward the place where they had left their horses), when Mr. Harris, who happened to be near at hand, came up and put an end to the fight by shooting the bear through the head. The boys afterward had reason to wish that he had stayed away a few minutes longer; for all the hunters in the settlement laughed at them, and Mr. Harris created a great deal of amusement by showing how Johnny looked when he was running through the bushes, with his coat-tails sticking straight out behind him. They defended themselves against the charge of cowardice with a good deal of spirit, and did not, by any means, acknowledge themselves whipped. They affirmed that it was their intention to draw the bear into open ground, and continue the fight on horseback; but the old hunters refused to believe this story, and the boys solemnly avowed that, if they ever got a fair chance, they would show them that they could kill a bear as well as any body. Now they had an opportunity to try their skill on Old Davy, and this was the time to make good their boasts. The result of this day's work would be a fair test of their abilities as bear-hunters. There were no dogs to worry the grizzly, and no experienced men, with quick eyes and steady hands, to ride up and rescue them if they came to close quarters with their enemy. They had no one to depend upon but themselves; and, if they killed the bear, the glory would be all their own.

"I am going to have one more shot at that fellow before I leave him," said Archie, with as much apparent indifference as though he was speaking of shooting at a squirrel. "He'll never rob any more cow-pens when I am done with him."

The boys were all wonderfully brave and reckless now that they imagined themselves safe from the claws of the grizzly: but when they reached the bottom of the ravine, and found that their situation there was not much better than it had been on the mountain-side, their courage all left them again, and they had nothing more to say about shooting Old Davy. They were really in more danger now than they had been before, for they had but one way to run. On two sides of them were precipitous cliffs, which could not be scaled on horseback; behind them was the grizzly; and in front an almost impenetrable wall of bushes shut them off from the prairie beyond. They took this all in at a glance, and, knowing that there was but one way of escape open to them, they urged their horses forward at increased speed, and dashed pell-mell into the bushes, where, a moment afterward, they found themselves brought to a dead halt. Their horses, snorting with terror, exerted themselves to the utmost, but without making any perceptible headway, and but a short distance behind them came the bear, lumbering along as easily as though the bushes, which effectually checked their progress, had been nothing more than so many straws in his way. It was a critical moment, and more than one among the young hunters gave himself up for lost. Beyond a doubt

it would have been the last bear-hunt for somebody, had it not been for the coolness and courage of Frank Nelson. Seeing that the grizzly was gaining rapidly, and that he would certainly overtake them before they could work their way out of the bushes, he very deliberately slung his rifle over his shoulder, and drew one of his revolvers. Reining in his plunging, frantic horse, he faced about in his saddle, and took a deliberate aim at the bear's head.

"Shoot close, Frank," said Johnny, whose horse seemed to be hopelessly entangled in the bushes. "If you miss, somebody is done for."

With almost breathless anxiety his companions awaited the result of his shot; and when the smoke of the revolver had cleared away, and Old Davy was seen struggling on the ground, the shout that went up from four pairs of strong lungs was almost deafening.

"Hurrah for the champion rifle-shot!" yelled Dick. "He's down!"

"But he's up again!" exclaimed Frank, "Push ahead, fellows!"

During the delay occasioned by Frank's lucky shot, short as it was, the boys gained considerable ground; and before the grizzly was fairly on his feet again, they had worked their way out of the bushes into the bed of a creek which ran through the ravine. As the water was but a few inches deep, it formed an excellent highway; and, with another shout, the boys gave rein to their horses, which set off at a rapid gallop, leaving Old Davy far in the rear. They were safe now, and their courage rose again.

"Isn't there any way to get the better of that fellow?" asked Archie. "If we can induce him to follow us out on the prairie, I'll ride home after Dick Lewis. He'll fix him."

"Oh, he will follow us," replied Johnny: "you need not be at all uneasy about that. I guess you haven't learned much about grizzlies yet."

Archie thought of the adventures he had had with these animals when he and his friends were encamped at the Old Bear's Hole, and told himself that he had learned a good deal about them; perhaps quite as much as his friend Johnny, who had lived among them all his life.

"I declare, he's coming now," continued the latter, looking over his shoulder. "I don't believe we have hurt him at all."

The others were of the same opinion. Old Davy made headway astonishingly for an animal that had five bullets in him, and during the next ten minutes they did not gain on him more than a stone's throw. But that did not cause them any uneasiness. They knew that the grizzly could not overtake them as long as the way was clear before them, and as they dashed along they discussed the best means of conquering their dreaded enemy. When they got him out on the prairie should they stop and fight him, or go home after the trapper? They knew that they would gain a good deal of honor, if they could exhibit the grizzly's skin as a trophy of their prowess, but they were so much afraid of him that they did not want to permit him to come within shooting distance of them again, if they could avoid it. They did not have time, however, to come to any decision on these points, for they suddenly discovered something that drove all their plans for Old Davy's destruction out of their minds, and turned their thoughts to a matter of much more importance – their own safety. As they swept around an abrupt bend in the creek, they found themselves brought to a standstill by a huge tree which had fallen across the ravine. Against the body of the tree was piled a mass of smaller logs and branches, which had probably lodged there during high water, the whole forming an obstruction at least seven feet in height. They could not go around it, because of the cliffs on each side; and they dared not turn back, for there was the grizzly close behind them. They were fairly cornered.

The boys became appalled when they saw the danger of their situation, and for a moment they sat in their saddles as motionless as if they had been turned into stone. Then a glance over their shoulders showed them that the grizzly still kept up the pursuit; and that once more aroused them.

"What shall we do?" asked Archie, turning his pale face toward his cousin, to whom he always looked for advice and assistance in times of danger.

Frank's answer was not given in words. When they first discovered the obstruction in their path, they had stopped their horses, and during the half a minute of inactivity that preceded Archie's question, Frank had taken a survey of the situation, and determined upon his course. The others knew what it was when they saw him bend forward in his saddle, and gather his reins firmly in his hand.

"You can't do it!" Dick almost gasped. "It is too high."

Before the words were fairly uttered, Frank's horse was flying down the ravine at the top of his speed. For a moment the gravel and water flew about in all directions, then there was a crushing among the branches which had lodged against the body of the tree, and Frank had disappeared from view. His horse had jumped the log; and if the others could be induced to follow, the young hunters were safe.

"I did it easily enough, didn't I?" shouted Frank, waving his hat to his companions. "Come on, fellows. It's your only chance."

As soon as he could stop his horse he turned to wait for the others. Then for the first time he realized how high the obstruction was – what a tremendous jump his horse must have made to carry him safely over it – and he trembled when he saw his companions preparing to follow him. As he sat in his saddle, he could just look over the log and watch their movements. A very slight accident – a single instant's hesitation on the part of one of their horses – might result in a terrible tragedy.

Johnny was the first to take the leap. In response to a light touch from his spurs, his horse arose in the air and sailed over the log like a bird. Two of them were safe, and their courage arose again wonderfully: but now misfortunes befell them. Archie's horse made an awkward start, and striking his fore-feet against a branch of the tree, fell rather than jumped over the obstruction, dashing his rider with stunning violence to the ground. Dick's horse came on gallantly enough, but stopped when he reached the log, laid back his ears, and stubbornly refused to move an inch in any direction. Johnny turned white with terror, and the ramrod with which Frank was driving home a ball in his rifle, trembled like a leaf in his grasp. There was Archie lying stunned and bleeding where he had fallen, Dick on a balky horse, which only kicked viciously when his rider touched him with his spurs, and the bear close behind, and coming on as fiercely as ever.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.