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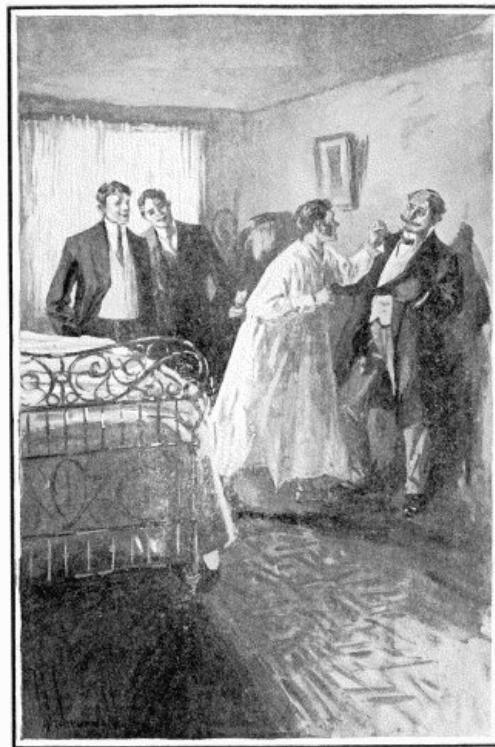
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK MERRIWELL DOWN SOUTH ***



"What's that!" howled the little professor, dancing about in his night robe." (See page [109](#))

Frank Merriwell Down South

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

AUTHOR OF

"Frank Merriwell's School-Days," "Frank Merriwell's Chums,"
"Frank Merriwell's Foes," etc.

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Frank Merriwell Down South

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[Transcriber's Note: The following list of illustrations has been created for this electronic edition. Some illustrations have been moved to positions closer to their appearance in the text.]

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

["What's that! howled the little professor, dancing about in his night robe."](#)(See page [109](#))

["Frank began shooting, and his first bullet brought down one of the ponies of the pursuers."](#) (See page [14](#))

["The white canoe had stopped, and was lying calmly on the inky surface of the shadowed water."](#) (See page [147](#))

["Kate grasped the assailant by the collar, and with astonishing strength, pulled him off the prostrate lad."](#) (See page [218](#))

Frank Merriwell Down South.

CHAPTER I.

A WONDERFUL STORY.

"It is in the heart of the Sierra Madre range, one hundred and twenty-five miles west of Zacatecas," said the dying man. "Across the blue chasm you can see its towers and turrets glistening in the sunshine. It is like a beautiful dream—dazzling, astounding, grand!"

"He wanders in his mind," softly declared Professor Scotch. "Poor fellow! His brain was turned and he was brought to his death by his fruitless search for the mythical Silver Palace."

The man who lay on a bed of grass in one corner of the wretched adobe hut turned a reproachful look on the little professor.

"You are wrong," he asserted, in a voice that seemed to have gained strength for the moment. "I am not deranged—I am not deceived by an hallucination. With my eyes I have seen the wonderful Silver Palace—yes, more than that, I have stood within the palace and beheld the marvelous treasures which it contains."

The professor turned away to hide the look on his face, but Frank Merriwell, deeply interested, bent over the unfortunate man, asking:

"By what route can this wonderful palace be reached?"

"There is no route. Between us and the Silver Palace lie waterless deserts, great mountains, and, at last, a yawning chasm, miles in width, miles in depth. This chasm extends entirely round the broad plateau on which the wonderful palace stands like a dazzling dream. The bottom of the chasm is hidden by mists which assume fantastic forms, and whirl and sway and dash forward and backward, like battling armies. Indians fear the place; Mexicans hold it in superstitious horror. It is said that these mist-like forms are the ghosts of warriors dead and gone, a wonderful people who built the Silver Palace in the days of Cortez—built it where the Spaniard could not reach and despoil it."

Despite his doubts, the professor was listening with strong interest to this remarkable tale.

The fourth person in the hut was the Dutch boy, Hans Dunnerwust, who sat on the ground, his back against the wall, his jaw dropped and his eyes bulging. Occasionally, as he listened to the words of the dying man, he would mutter:

"Chimminy Gristmas!"

For several weeks Frank Merriwell, our hero, Hans, his chum, and Professor Scotch, his guardian, had been exploring the country around the city of Mendoza, Mexico. They had come to Mexico after having numerous adventures in our own country, as related in "Frank Merriwell Out West," a former volume of this series.

Only a short hour before they had run across the sufferer, whose head seemed so full of the things he had seen at what he called the Silver Palace. They had found him almost dead in a hut at the edge of a sandy plain, suffering great pain and calling loudly for aid. They had done what they could, and then he had begun to talk, as related above.

With surprising strength the man on the bed of grass sat up, stretching out his hands, gazing across the sunlit sand-plain beyond the open door of the hut, and went on:

"I see it now—I see it once again! There, there—see it gleaming like a dazzling diamond in the sunshine! See its beautiful towers and turrets! That dome is of pure gold! Within those walls are treasures untold! There are great vaults of gold and silver ornaments, bars and ingots! There are precious stones in profusion! And all this treasure would make a thousand men rich for life! But it's not for me—it's lost to me forever!"

With a stifled moan, he fell back into Frank's arms, and was lowered on the bed of grass.

Professor Scotch hastily felt the man's pulse, listened for the beating of his heart, and then cried:

"Quick, Frank—the brandy! It may be too late, but we'll try to give him a few more minutes of life."

"That's right!" palpitated Frank. "Bring him back to consciousness, for we have not yet learned how to reach the Silver Palace."

"There is no such place as the Silver Palace," sharply declared the professor, as he forced a few drops of brandy between the lips of the unfortunate man. "The fellow has dreamed it."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps! Why, Frank, I took you for a boy of more sense! Think—think of the absurdity! It is

impossible!"

"It may be."

"I know it is."

"Vell, maype you don'd nefer peen misdooken, brofessor?" insinuated Hans, recovering for a moment from his dazed condition.

The professor did not notice the Dutch boy's words, for the man on the bed of grass drew a long, fluttering breath and slowly opened his eyes.

"I thought I saw the palace once more," he whispered. "It was all a delusion."

"That is true," nodded the professor, "it is all a delusion. Such a place as this Silver Palace is an absurd impossibility. The illness through which you have passed has affected your mind, and you dreamed of the palace."

"It is not so!" returned the man, reproachfully. "I have proof! You doubt me—you will not believe?"

"Be calm—be quiet," urged the professor. "This excitement will cut your life short by minutes, and minutes are precious to you now."

"That is true; minutes are precious," hastily whispered the man. "It is not the fever I am dying of—no, no! The water from the spring you may see behind the hut—it has destroyed many people. This morning, before you came, a peon found me here. He told me—he said the spring was poison. The water robs men of strength—of life. I could not understand him well. He went away and left me. I could see him running across the desert, as if from a plague. And now I am dying—dying!"

"But the Silver Palace?" observed Frank Merriwell. "You are forgetting that."

"Yah," nodded the Dutch lad; "you peen forgetting dot, ain'd id?"

"The proof," urged Frank. "You say you have proof."

"Yah," put in Hans; "you say you haf der broof. Vere id peen?"

"It is here," declared the unfortunate, as he fumbled beneath the straw. "You are my countrymen—you have been kind to me. Alwin Bushnell may never return. It is terrible to think all that treasure may be lost—lost forever!"

"Who is Alwin Bushnell?"

"My partner—the one who was with me when I found the palace."

"Where is he now?"

"Heaven knows! He went for another balloon."

"Another balloon?"

"Yes; it was with the aid of a balloon that we reached the Silver Palace. Without it we could not have crossed the gulf."

"Absurd!" muttered the professor.

Despite the fact that the word was merely murmured, the miserable man on the bed of grass did not fail to catch it.

"Oh, I will convince even you!" he exclaimed, gasping for breath, and continuing to fumble beneath the straw. "You shall see—you shall know! But our balloon—we had no means of obtaining a further supply of gas. It was barely sufficient to take us across the gulf, with a few pieces of treasure. We struck against the side of the bluff—we were falling back into the abyss! Barely were we able to scramble out of the car and cling to the rocks. Then we saw the balloon rise a little, like a bird freed of burden; but it suddenly collapsed, fluttered downward, and the mists leaped up and clutched it like a thousand exulting demons, dragging it down from our sight. We crawled up from the rocks, but it was a close call—a close call."

He lay exhausted, his eyes closed, his hand ceasing to fumble beneath the straw. Once more Professor Scotch gave him a little of the brandy.

Frank Merriwell was more than interested; he could feel his heart trembling with excitement. Something seemed to tell him that this man was speaking the truth, and he was eager to hear more.

For a long time the unfortunate lay gasping painfully for breath, but, at last, he was easier. He opened his eyes, and saw Frank watching him steadily, with an anxious expression.

"Ah!" he murmured, exultantly, "you believe me—you do not doubt! I must tell you everything. You shall be Jack Burk's heir. Think of it—heir to wealth enough to make you richer than Monte Cristo! Witness—witness that I make this boy my heir!"

He turned to the professor and Hans, and both bowed, the former saying:

"We are witnesses."

"Good! We escaped with our lives, but we brought little of the treasure with us. I was determined to find the way back there, and I made a map. See, here it is."

He thrust a soiled and crumpled piece of paper into Frank's hand, and the boy saw there were lines and writing on it.

"How we found our way out of the mountains, how we endured the heat of the desert I cannot tell," went on the weak voice of the man on the bed of straw. "We reached Zacatecas, and then Bushnell went for another balloon. He knows friends who have money and power, and he will get the balloon—if he lives."

"But the proof—the proof that you were going to show us?"

"It is here! Look!"

From beneath the straw Jack Burk drew forth a queer little figure of solid gold—a figure like the pictures of Aztec gods, which Frank had seen.

"This is proof!" declared the man. "It is some of the treasure we brought from the palace. Bushnell took the rest."

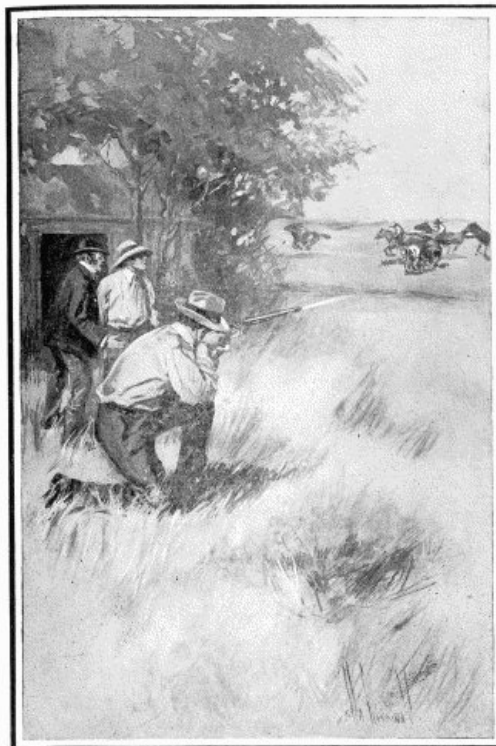
The professor excitedly grasped the little image, and gazed searchingly at it.

"It is all right—it is genuine!" he finally exclaimed.

"Of course it is genuine!" said the man on the bed of grass. "And there are more in the Silver Palace. There the treasures of the Aztecs were hidden, and they have remained. The country all around is full of fierce natives, who hold the palace in awe and prevent others from reaching it. They have kept the secret well, but——"

"Vot vos dot?" interrupted Hans.

At some distance on the plain outside the hut were wildly galloping horses, for they could hear hoof-beats and loud cries. Then came a fusillade of pistol shots!



"Frank began shooting, and his first bullet brought down one of the ponies of the pursuers." (See page [14](#))

CHAPTER II.

GONE.

"Bandits!" cried Jack Burk. "It may be Pacheco!"

"Pacheco?" questioned Frank.

"Pacheco, the human hawk! He haunts the mountains and the desert. He pursued us across the desert, but we escaped him. I have been in hiding here to avoid him. He believes we brought

much treasure from the mountains."

The professor had leaped to the door, and was looking away on the plain. Now he cried, excitedly:

"Look here! A band of horsemen pursuing a white man—plainly an American. Look, he is shooting again!"

Once more the shots were heard.

Frank ran to the door, catching up a rifle that had been leaning against the wall of the hut, for he knew he was in a "bad man's land."

"Stand aside!" he shouted, forcing his way past the professor. "No countryman of mine can be in danger that I do not try to give him a helping hand."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Get a crack at those Greasers."

"You are crazy! You will bring the entire band down on us!"

"Let 'em come! One Yankee is good for six Greasers."

Past the hut at a distance a single horseman was riding, hotly spurring the animal which bore him. At least a dozen dark-faced, fierce-looking ruffians, mounted on hardy little ponies, were in pursuit.

As Professor Scotch had said, the fugitive was plainly an American, a native of the United States. He had turned in the saddle to send bullets whistling back at his pursuers.

Frank ran out and dropped on one knee. The professor followed him, and Hans came from the hut.

Just as Frank lifted the rifle to his shoulder and was on the point of shooting, the voice of Jack Burk sounded from the doorway, to which he had dragged himself:

"It is Bushnell, my partner! Al! Al! Al Bushnell!"

His voice was faint and weak, and it did not reach the ears of the man out on the plain.

Then Frank began shooting, and his first bullet brought down one of the ponies of the pursuers, sending a bandit rolling over and over in the dust, to leap up like a cat, and spring behind a comrade on the back of another pony.

"Dot peen britty goot, Vrankie," complimented Hans Dunnerwust.

Again and again Frank fired, and the bandits quickly swerved away from the hut, feeling their ponies sway or fall beneath them.

In an astonishingly brief space of time the course of pursuit was deflected, giving the fugitive a chance to get away into Mendoza, which lay at a distance of about three miles from the hut.

The man in flight heard the shots, saw the figures in front of the hut, and waved his hand to them.

The professor excitedly beckoned for Bushnell to come to the hut, but the horseman did not seem to understand, and he kept straight on toward the town.

"Confound him!" exploded the professor. "Why didn't he come?"

"He don'd like a trap to run into," said Hans.

"But there is no trap here."

"How he known dot?"

"Well, I don't know as I blame him. Of course he could not be sure it was not a trap, and so he was cautious."

Frank was calmly refilling the magazine of the rifle with fresh cartridges.

"Why you didn't shoot some uf der pandits deat, Vrankie?" asked Hans.

"I do not wish to shed human blood if I can avoid it."

"You don't done dot uf you shoot six or elefen uf dose togs."

"Oh, they are human beings."

"Don't you belief me? Dey vos volves—kiotes."

"Well, I did not care to shoot them if I could aid the man in any other way, and I succeeded. See, they have given up the pursuit, and the fugitive is far away in that little cloud of dust."

"Frank!"

"Yes, professor."

"We should follow him, and bring him back to his dying partner."

"And leave Jack Burk here alone—possibly to die alone?"

"We can't do that."

"Of course not."

"What then?"

"We'll have to consider the matter. But Burk— Look—see there, professor! He is flat on his face in the doorway! He fell like that after trying to shout to his partner."

Frank leaped forward, and turned the man on his back. It was a drawn, ghastly face that the trio gazed down upon.

Professor Scotch quickly knelt beside the motionless form, feeling for the pulse, and then shaking his head gravely.

"What is it?" anxiously asked Frank. "Has he—"

He was silent at a motion from the professor, who bent to listen for some movement of the man's heart.

After a few seconds, Professor Scotch straightened up, and solemnly declared:

"This is the end for him. We can do nothing more."

"He is dead?"

"Yes."

There was an awed hush.

"Now we can leave him," the professor finally said. "Pacheco, the bandit, cannot harm him now."

They lifted the body and bore it back to the wretched bed of straw, on which they tenderly placed it.

"The idol—the golden image?" said the professor. "You must not forget that, Frank. You have it?"

"Little danger that I shall forget it. It is here, where it fell from my fingers as I ran out."

He picked up the image, and placed it in one of his pockets.

Then, having covered the face of Jack Burk with his handkerchief, Frank led the way from the hut.

Their horses had been tethered near at hand, and they were soon mounted and riding away toward Mendoza.

The sun beat down hotly on the plain of white sand, and the sky was of a bright blue, such as Frank had never seen elsewhere.

Outside Mendoza was a narrow canal, but a few feet in width, and half filled with water, from which rose little whiffs of hot steam.

Along the side of the canal was a staggering rude stone wall, fringed with bushes in strips and clumps.

Beyond the canal, which fixed the boundary of the plain of sand, through vistas of tree trunks, could be seen glimpses of brown fields, fading away into pale pink, violet, and green.

The dome and towers of a church rose against the dim blue; low down, and on every side were spots of cream-white, red, and yellow, with patches of dark green intervening, revealing bits of the town, with orange groves all about.

Across the fields ran a road that was ankle deep with dust, and along the road a string of burros, loaded with great bundles of green fodder, were crawling into the town.

An undulating mass of yellow dust finally revealed itself as a drove of sheep, urged along by peons, appeared.

Groups of natives were strolling in both directions, seeking the shadows along the canal. The women were in straw hats, with their black hair plaited, and little children strung to their backs; the men wore serapes and sandals, and smoked cigarettes.

Along the side of the canal were scattered scores of natives of all ages and both sexes, lolling beneath the bushes or soaking their bodies in the water, while their heads rested on the ground.

Those stretched in the shadow of the bushes had taken their bath, and were waiting for their bodies to dry, covered simply by serapes.

From beneath such a covering dark-eyed native girls stared curiously at the passing trio, causing Hans no small amount of confusion.

"I say, Vrankie," said the Dutch boy, "vot you dinks apoudt dot pusiness uf dakin' a path in public mit der roadt beside?"

"It seems to be the custom of the country," smiled Frank; "and they do not seem to think it at all improper."

"Vell, somepody better toldt dem to stob id. Id keeps mein plood mein face in so much dot I shall look like you hat peen drinking."

"They think nothing of it," explained the professor. "You will notice with what deftness they disrobe, slipping out of their clothes and into the water without exposing much more than a bare toe."

"Oxcuse you!" fluttered Hans. "I don'd like to took mein chances py looking. Somepody mighd make a misdake."

The sun was low down as they rode into the town.

"We have no time to lose," said Frank. "We must move lively, if we mean to return to the hut before nightfall."

"That's right," nodded Professor Scotch.

They were successful in finding a native undertaker, but the fellow was very lazy, and he did not want to do anything till the next day.

"To-morrow, señors, to-morrow," he said.

That did not satisfy, however, and he was soon aroused by the sight of money. Learning where the corpse was, he procured a cart and a burro, and they again set out along the road.

They found whole families soaking in groups in the canal, sousing their babies in the water, and draining them on the bank.

Young Indian girls in groups were combing out their hair and chatting merrily among themselves and with friends in the water.

"Dere oughter peen some law for dot," muttered Hans.

Leaving the canal, they set out upon the sand-plain, the undertaker's burro crawling along at an aggravating pace, its master refusing to whip it up, despite urging.

The sun had set, and darkness was settling in a blue haze on the plain when the hut was reached.

Frank lighted a pocket lamp he always carried, and entered.

A cry of astonishment broke from his lips.

"Professor! professor!" he called; "the body is gone!"

CHAPTER III.

HELD FOR RANSOM.

"Gone!"

The professor was astonished.

"Shimminy Gristmas! I don'd toldt you dot!" came from Hans Dunnerwust.

"Yes, gone," repeated Frank, throwing the light about the room and finally bringing it back to the bed of grass.

"But—but it's impossible."

"Impossible or not, it is true, as you may see."

"But the man was dead—as dead as he could be!"

"Yah!" snorted Hans. "Py shingoes! dot peen der trute. Dot man vos teader as a goffin nail, und don'd you vorget him!"

The trio were silent, staring in stupefied amazement at the bed of grass.

An uncanny feeling began to creep over Frank, and it seemed that a chill hand touched his face and played about his temples.

Hans' teeth began to chatter.

"I am quite ill," the professor faintly declared, in a feeble tone of voice. "The exertions of the day have been far too severe for me."

"Yah, yah!" gurgled the Dutch lad. "You vos anodder. Oxcuse me while I go oudt to ged a liddle fresh air."

He made a bolt for the open door, and Professor Scotch was not long in following. Frank, however, was determined to be thoroughly satisfied, and he again began looking for the body of the dead man, once more going over the entire hut.

"The body is gone, beyond a doubt," he finally muttered.

"There is no place for it to be concealed here, and dead men do not hide themselves."

He went out, and found Professor Scotch and Hans awaiting his appearance with no small amount of anxiety.

"Ah!" said the professor, with a deep breath of relief, "you are all right."

"All right," said Frank, with amusement; "of course I am. What did you think? Fancy I was going to be spirited away by spooks?"

The little man drew himself up with an assumption of great dignity.

"Young man," he rumbled, in his deepest tone, "don't be frivolous on such an occasion as this. You are quite aware that I do not believe in spooks or anything of the sort; but we are in a strange country now, and strange things happen here."

"Yah," nodded Hans. "Dot peen oxactly righdt."

"For instance, the disappearance of that corpse is most remarkable."

"Dot peen der first dime I nefer known a deat man to ged ub un valk away all alone mit himseluf by," declared Hans.

"What do you think has happened here, professor?" asked Frank.

"It is plain Jack Burk's body is gone."

"Sure enough."

"And does it not seem reasonable that he walked away himself?"

"Vell, you don'd know apout dot," broke in Hans. "Maype he don'd pelief we vos goin' pack here to bury him, und he got turet uf vaiting for der funerals."

"There must have been other people here after we left," said Frank.

"Right," nodded the professor.

"Bandits?"

"Bushnell?"

"One or the other."

"Perhaps both."

Frank fell to examining the ground for "signs," but, although his eyes were unusually keen, he was not an expert in such matters, and he discovered nothing that could serve as a revelation.

"The man was dead beyond a doubt, professor—you are sure?"

"Sure?" roared the little man, bristling in a moment. "Of course I'm sure! Do you take me for a howling idiot?"

"Don't get excited, professor. The best of us are liable to err at times. It would not be strange if you——"

"But I didn't—I tell you I didn't! The body may have been removed by the bandits which hang about this section."

"Or by Al Bushnell, Burk's partner."

"Yes; Bushnell may have recognized him, although he did not seem to do so. In that case, he has been here——"

"And that explains everything."

"Everything."

"He took the body away to give it decent burial."

"And we have had our trouble for nothing."

By this time the native undertaker got the drift of the talk, and set up a wail of lamentation and accusation. He had come all that distance at great expense to himself and great waste of time during which he might have been sleeping or smoking. It was robbery, robbery, robbery. It was like the *Americanoes*. He had a wife and many—very many children depending on him. He had been tricked by the *Americanoes*, and he would complain that he had been cheated. They should

be arrested; they should be compelled to pay.

"Oh, come your perch off, und gone took a fall to yourseluf!" cried Hans, in disgust. "You gif me der lifer gomblaint!"

The native continued to wail and lament and accuse them until Frank succeeded in quieting him by paying him three times as much as he would have asked had the body been found in the hut. The old fellow saw how he could make it appear as a clean case of deception on the part of the strangers, and he worked his little game for all there was in it. Having received his money, he lost no time in turning his cart about and heading back toward Mendoza, evidently fearing the body might be found at last and forced upon him.

"We'd better be going, too," said Professor Scotch.

"That's right," agreed Frank. "There is no telling what danger we may encounter on the plain after nightfall."

"Vell, don'd let us peen all nighd apout gedding a mofe on," fluttered Hans, hastening toward the horses.

So they mounted and rode away toward Mendoza, although Frank was far from satisfied to do so without solving the mystery of the remarkable disappearance.

Darkness was falling heavily on the plain, across which a cool and refreshing breath came from the distant mountains.

Frank kept his eyes open for danger, more than half expecting to run upon a gang of bandits at any moment. As they approached the town they began to breathe easier, and, before long, they were riding along the dusty road that led into the little town.

Entering Mendoza they found on each hand low buildings connected by long, white adobe walls, against which grew prickly pears in abundance, running in straggling lines away out upon the open country.

About the edges of the town were little fires, winking redly here and there, with earthen pots which were balanced on smoldering embers raked out from the general mass.

Withered and skinny old hags were crooning over the pots, surrounded by swarthy children and lazy men, who were watching the preparation of the evening meal.

Groups of peons, muffled to the eyes with their serapes, were sitting with their backs to the adobe walls, apparently fast asleep; but Frank noted that glittering, black eyes peered out from between the serapes and the huts, and he had no doubt but that many of the fellows would willingly cut a throat for a ridiculously small sum of money.

Within the town it was different. All day the window shutters had been closely barred, but now they were flung wide, and the flash of dark eyes or the low, musical laugh of a señorita told that the maidens who had lolled all the hot day were now astir.

Doors were flung wide, and houses which at midday had seemed uninhabited were astir with life. In the patios beautiful gardens were blooming, and through iron gates easy-chairs and hammocks could be seen.

Many of the señoritas had come forth, and were strolling in groups of threes or fours, dressed in pink and white lawn, with Spanish veils and fans. The most of them wore white stockings and red-heeled slippers.

Many a witching glance was shyly cast at Frank, but his mind was so occupied that he heeded none of them.

The hotel was reached, and they were dismounting, when a battered and tattered old man, about whose shoulders was cast a ragged blanket, and whose face was hidden by a scraggly, white beard, came up with a faltering step.

"Pardon me," he said, in a thin, cracked voice, "I see you are Americans, natives of the States, Yankees, and, as I happen to be from Michigan, I hasten to speak to you. I know you will have pity on an unfortunate countryman. My story is short. My son came to this wretched land to try to make a fortune. He went into the mines, and was doing well. He sent me home money, and I put a little aside, so that I had a snug little sum after a time. Then he fell into the hands of Pacheco, the bandit. You have heard of Pacheco, gentlemen?"

"We have," said Frank, who was endeavoring to get a fair look into the old man's eyes.

"We surely have," agreed the professor.

"Vell, you can pet my poots on dot!" nodded Hans.

"The wretch—the cutthroat!" cried the old man, shaking his clinched hand in the air. "Why didn't he kill me? He has robbed me of everything—everything!"

"Tell us—finish your story," urged the professor.

Frank said nothing. The light from a window shone close by the old man. Frank was waiting for

the man to change his position so the light would shine on his face.

For some moments the man seemed too agitated to proceed, but he finally went on.

"My son—my son fell into the hands of this wretched bandit. Pacheco took him captive. Then he sent word to me that he would murder my son if I did not appear and pay two thousand dollars ransom money. Two thousand dollars! I did not have it in the world. But I had a little home. I sold it—I sold everything to raise the money to save my boy. I obtained it. And then—then, my friends, I received another letter. Then Pacheco demanded three thousand dollars."

"Der brice vos on der jump," murmured Hans.

"But that is not the worst!" cried the old man, waving his arms, excitedly. "Oh, the monster—the demon!"

He wrung his hands, and groaned as if with great anguish.

"Be calm, be calm," urged Professor Scotch. "My dear sir, you are working yourself into a dreadful state."

"How can I be calm?" groaned the stranger. "It is not possible to be calm and think of such a terrible thing!"

"What terrible thing?" asked Frank. "You have not told the entire story, and we do not know what you mean."

"True, true. Listen! With that letter Pacheco—the monster!—sent one of my boy's little fingers!"

"Shimminy Gristmas! I don'd toldt you dot, do I?"

"Horrible! horrible!"

The professor and Hans uttered these exclamations, but Frank was calm and apparently unmoved, with his eyes still fastened on the face of the old man.

"How you toldt dot vos der finger uf your son, mister?"

"That's it, that's it—how could you tell?" asked the professor.

"My son—my own boy—he added a line to the letter, stating that the finger had been taken from his left hand, and that Pacheco threatened to cut off his fingers one by one and send them to me if I did not hasten with the ransom money."

"Dot seddled you!"

"You recognized the handwriting as that of your son?"

"I did; but I recognized something besides that."

"What?"

"The finger."

"Oh, you may have been mistaken in that—surely you may."

"I was not."

"How do you know?"

"By a mark on the finger."

"Ah! what sort of a mark?"

"A peculiar scar like a triangle, situated between the first and second joints. Besides that, the nail had once been crushed, after which it was never perfect."

"That was quite enough," nodded Professor Scotch.

"Yah," agreed Hans; "dot peen quide enough alretty."

Still Frank was silent, watching and waiting, missing not a word that fell from the man's lips, missing not a gesture, failing to note no move.

This silence on the part of Merriwell seemed to affect the man, who turned to him, saying, a trifle sharply:

"Boy, boy, have you no sympathy with me? Think of the suffering I have passed through! You should pity me."

"What are you trying to do now?" asked Frank, quietly.

"I am trying to raise some money to ransom my son."

"But I thought you did raise money?"

"So I did, but not enough."

"Finish the story."

"Well, when I received that letter I immediately hastened to this land of bandits and half-breeds. I did not have three thousand dollars, but I hoped that what I had would be enough to soften Pacheco's heart—to save my poor boy."

"And you failed?"

The old man groaned again.

"My boy is still in Pacheco's power, and I have not a dollar left in all the world! Failed—miserably failed!"

"Well, what do you hope to do—what are you trying to do?"

"Raise five hundred dollars."

"How?"

"In any way."

"By begging?"

"I do not know how. Anyway, anyway will do!"

"But you cannot raise it by begging in this land, man," said the professor. "This is a land of beggars. Everybody seems to be poor and wretched."

"But I have found some of my own countrymen, and I hoped that you might have pity on me—oh, I did hope!"

"What? You didn't expect us to give you five hundred dollars?"

"Think of my boy—my poor boy! Pacheco has threatened to murder him by inches—to cut him up and send him to me in pieces! Is it not something terrible to contemplate?"

"Vell, I should dink id vos!" gurgled the Dutch boy.

"But how did you lose your money?"

"I was robbed."

"By whom?"

"Pacheco."

"How did it happen?"

"I fell into his hands."

"And he took your money without setting your son free?"

"He did."

"Did you tell him it was all you had in the world?"

"I told him that a score of times."

"What did he say?"

"Told me to raise more, or have the pleasure of receiving my boy in pieces."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three days."

"Near here?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been in Mendoza?"

"Two days, and during that time I have received this from Pacheco."

He took something from his pocket—something wrapped in a handkerchief. With trembling fingers, he unrolled it, exposing to view—

A bloody human finger!

CHAPTER IV.

UNMASKED.

Hans and Professor Scotch uttered exclamations of horror, starting back from the sight revealed by the light that came from the window set deep in the adobe wall.

Frank's teeth came together with a peculiar click, but he uttered no exclamation, nor did he start.

This seemed to affect the old man unpleasantly, for he turned on Frank, crying in an accusing manner and tone:

"Have you no heart? Are you made of stone?"

"Hardly," was the reply.

"This finger—it is the second torn from the hand of my boy by Pacheco, the bandit—Pacheco, the monster!"

"Pacheco seems to be a man of great determination."

Professor Scotch gazed at Frank in astonishment, for the boy was of a very sympathetic and kindly nature, and he now seemed quite unlike his usual self.

"Frank, Frank, think of the suffering of this poor father!"

"Yah," murmured Hans; "shust dink how pad you would felt uf you efer peen py his blace," put in Hans, sobbing, chokingly.

"It is very, very sad," said Frank; but there seemed to be a singularly sarcastic ring to the words which fell from his lips.

"Have you seen your son since he fell into the hands of Pacheco, sir?" asked the professor.

"Yes, I saw him; but I could scarcely recognize him, he was so changed—so wan and ghastly. The skin is drawn tightly over his bones, and he looks as if he were nearly starved to death."

"Did he recognize you?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

The man wrung his hands with a gesture of unutterable anguish.

"Oh, his appeal—I can hear it now! He begged me to save him, or to give him poison that he might kill himself!"

"Where is he now?"

"In a cave."

"Where is the cave?"

"That I cannot tell, for I was blindfolded all the time, except while in the cave where my boy is kept."

"It is near Mendoza?"

"It must be within fifty miles of here."

"Perhaps it is nearer?"

"Possibly."

"But you have no means of knowing in which direction it lies?"

"No."

"Your only hope is to raise the five hundred dollars?"

"That is my only hope, and that can scarcely be called a hope, for I must have the money within a day or two, or my boy will be dead."

"Hum! hum!" coughed the professor. "This is a very unfortunate affair—very unfortunate. I am not a wealthy man, but I——"

"You will aid me?" shouted the old man, joyously. "Heaven will bless you, sir—Heaven will bless you!"

"I have not said so—I have not said I would aid you," Scotch hastily said. "I am going to consider the matter—I'll think it over."

"Then I have no hope."

"Why not?"

"If your heart is not opened now, it will never open. My poor boy is lost, and I am ready for death!"

The old man seemed to break down and sob like a child, burying his face in his hands, his body shaking convulsively.

Frank made a quick gesture to the others, pressing a finger to his lips as a warning for silence.

In a moment the old man lifted his face, which seemed wet with tears.

"My last hope is gone!" he sighed. "And you are travelers—you are rich!"

He turned to Frank, to whom, with an appealing gesture, he extended a hand that was shaking as if with the palsy.

"You—surely you will have sympathy with me! I can see by your face and your bearing that you are one of fortune's favorites—you are rich. A few dollars——"

"My dear man," said Frank, quite calmly, "I should be more than delighted to aid you, if you had told the truth."

The old man fell back. He was standing fairly in the light which shone from the window.

"What do you mean?" he hoarsely asked. "Do you think I have been lying to you—do you fancy such a thing?"

"I fancy nothing; I know you have lied!"

"Frank!" cried Professor Scotch, in amazement.

"Shimminy Gristmas!" gurgled Hans Dunnerwust, in a dazed way.

The manner of the old man changed in a twinkling.

"You are insolent, boy! You had better be careful!"

"Now you threaten," laughed Frank. "Well, I expected as much from a beggar, a fraud, and a scoundrel!"

Professor Scotch and Hans fell into each other's arms, overcome with excitement and wonder.

Frank was calm and deliberate, and he did not lift his voice above the tone used in ordinary conversation.

Still another step did the man fall back, and then a grating snarl broke from his lips, and he seemed overcome with rage. He leaned forward, hissing:

"You insulting puppy!"

"The truth must always seem like an insult to a scoundrel."

"Do you dare?"

"What is there to fear?"

"Much."

Frank snapped his fingers.

"Your tune has changed in the twinkling of an eye. You are no longer the heart-broken father, begging for his boy; but you have flung aside some of the mask, and exposed your true nature."

Professor Scotch saw this was true, and he was quaking with fear of what might follow this remarkable change.

As for Hans, it took some time for ideas to work their way through his brain, and he was still in a bewildered condition.

For a moment the stranger was silent, seeming to choke back words which rose in his throat. Finally, he cried:

"Oh, very well! I did not expect to get anything out of you; but it would have been far better for you if I had. Now——"

"What?"

Frank asked the question, as the speaker faltered.

"You shall soon learn what. I am going to leave you, but we shall see more of each other, don't forget that."

"Wait—do not be in a hurry. I am not satisfied till I—see your face!"

With the final words, Frank made a leap and a sweep of his hand, clutching the white beard the man wore, and tearing it from his face!

The beard was false!

The face exposed was smoothly shaven and weather-tanned.

"Ha!" cried Frank, triumphantly. "I thought so! This poor old man is Carlos Merriwell, my villainous cousin!"

CHAPTER V.

KIDNAPED.

As our old readers know, Carlos Merriwell was Frank's deadly enemy, although they were blood cousins.

Carlos was the son of Asher Merriwell, the brother of Frank's father.

At the time of his death, Asher Merriwell was supposed to be a crusty old bachelor, a man who had never cared for women and had never married. But he had not been a woman-hater all his life, and there was a romance in his career.

Asher Merriwell had been snared by the wiles of an adventuress, and he had married her. By this woman he had a son, but the marriage had been kept a secret, so that when she deceived him and they quarreled they were able to separate and live apart without the fact becoming public that Merriwell had been married.

Fortunately the woman died without openly proclaiming herself as the wife of Asher Merriwell. In her veins there had been Spanish blood, and her son was named Carlos.

After the death of his wife, Asher Merriwell set about providing for and educating the boy, although Carlos continued to bear his mother's maiden name of Durcal.

As Carlos grew up he developed into a wild and reckless young blade, making no amount of trouble and worry for his father.

Asher Merriwell did his best for the boy, but there was bad blood in the lad's veins, and it cost the man no small sums to settle for the various "sports" in which Carlos participated.

Finally Carlos took a fancy to strike out and see the world for himself, and he disappeared without telling whither he was going.

After this, he troubled his father at intervals until he committed a crime in a foreign country, where he was tried, convicted, and imprisoned for a long term of years.

This was the last straw so far as Asher Merriwell was concerned, and he straightway proceeded to disown Carlos, and cut him off without a cent.

It was afterward reported that Carl Durcal had been shot by guards while attempting to escape from prison, and Asher Merriwell died firmly believing himself to be sonless.

At his death, Asher left everything to Frank Merriwell, the son of his brother, and provided that Frank should travel under the guardianship of Professor Scotch, as the eccentric old uncle believed travel furnished the surest means for "broadening the mind."

But Carlos Merriwell had not been killed, and he had escaped from prison. Finding he had been cut off without a dollar and everything had been left to Frank, Carlos was furious, and he swore that his cousin should not live to enjoy the property.

In some ways Carlos was shrewd; in others he was not. He was shrewd enough to see that he might have trouble in proving himself the son of Asher Merriwell by a lawful marriage, and so he did not attempt it.

But there was a still greater stumbling block in his way, for if he came out and announced himself and made a fight for the property, he would be forced to tell the truth concerning his past life, and the fact that he was an escaped convict would be made known.

Having considered these things, Carlos grew desperate. If he could not have his father's property, he swore again and again that Frank should not hold it.

With all the reckless abandon of his nature, Carlos made two mad attempts on Frank's life, both of which were baffled, and then the young desperado was forced to make himself scarce.

But Carlos had become an expert crook, and he was generally flush with ill-gotten gains, so he was able to put spies on Frank. He hired private detectives, and Frank was continually under secret surveillance.

Thus it came about that Carlos knew when Frank set about upon his travels, and he set a snare for the boy in New York City.

Straight into this snare Frank walked, but he escaped through his own exertions, and then baffled two further attempts on his life.

By this time Carlos found it necessary to disappear again, and Frank had neither seen nor heard from him till this moment, when the fellow stood unmasked in the Mexican town of Mendoza.

Frank had become so familiar with his villainous cousin's voice and gestures that Carlos had not been able to deceive him. From the first, Frank had believed the old man a fraud, and he was soon satisfied that the fellow was Carlos.

On Carlos Merriwell's cheek was a scar that had been hidden by the false beard—a scar that he

would bear as long as he lived.

Professor Scotch nearly collapsed in a helpless heap, so completely astounded that he could not utter a word.

As for Hans, he simply gasped:

"Shimminy Gristmas!"

A snarling exclamation of fury broke from Carlos' lips.

"Oh, you're too sharp, my fine cousin!" he grated, his hand disappearing beneath the ragged blanket. "You are too sharp to live!"

Out came the hand, and a knife flashed in the light that shone from the window of the hotel. Frank, however, was on the alert, and was watching for just such a move. With a twisting movement, he drew his body aside, so the knife clipped down past his shoulder, cutting open his sleeve, but failing to reach his flesh.

"That was near it," he said, as he whirled and caught Carlos by the wrist.

Frank had a clutch of iron, and he gave Carlos' wrist a wrench that forced a cry from the fellow's lips, and caused the knife to drop to the ground.

"You are altogether too handy with such a weapon," said the boy, coolly. "It is evident your adeptness with a dagger comes from your mother's side. Your face is dark and treacherous, and you look well at home in this land of dark and treacherous people."

Carlos ground forth a fierce exclamation, making a desperate move to fling Frank off, but failing.

"Oh, you are smart!" the fellow with the scarred face admitted. "But you have been lucky. You were lucky at Fardale, and you were lucky in New York. Now you have come to a land where I will have my turn. You'll never leave Mexico alive!"

"I have listened to your threats before this."

"I have made no threats that shall not come true."

"What a desperate wretch you are, Carlos! I would have met you on even terms, and come to an agreement with you, if you——"

"Bah! Do you think I would make terms? Not much! You have robbed me of what is rightfully mine, and I have sworn you shall not take the good of it. I'll keep that oath!"

A strange cry broke from his lips, as he found he could not tear his wrist from Frank's fingers.

Then came a rush of catlike footfalls and a clatter of hoofs. All at once voices were heard, crying:

"Ladrones! ladrones!"

Dark figures appeared on every hand, sending natives fleeing to shelter. Spanish oaths sounded on the evening air, and the glint of steel was seen.

"Shimminy Gristmas!" gurgled Hans Dunnerwust. "Uf we don'd peen in a heap uf drouble, I know noddings!"

"It's the bandits, Frank!" called Professor Scotch. "They have charged right into the town, and they——"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Carlos. "You fear the bandits! They are my friends. They are here, and it is my turn!"

A horseman was riding straight down on Frank, and the boy flung Carlos aside, making a leap that took him out of the way.

Something, glittering brightly, descended in a sweep toward Frank's head, but the blow was stopped by Carlos, who shouted something in Spanish.

Frank understood Spanish well enough to catch the drift of the words, and he knew his cousin had not saved him through compassion, but for quite another purpose.

Carlos coveted the riches into which Frank had fallen, and he meant to have a portion of the money. If Frank were killed, there was little chance that he would ever handle a dollar of the fortune, so he had cried out that his cousin was to be spared, captured, and held for ransom.

That was enough to warn Frank of the terrible peril that overshadowed him at the moment.

Out came his revolvers, and his back went against the wall. Upward were flung his hands, and the weapons began to crack.

Two horses fell, sent down by the first two bullets from the pistols of the boy at bay.

But Frank found he could not shoot horses and save himself, for dark forms were pressing upon him, and he must fall into the clutches of the bandits in another moment unless he resorted to the most desperate measures.

"If you will have it, then you shall!" he muttered, through his set teeth, turning his aim on the human forms.

Spouts of red fire shot from the muzzles of the revolvers, and the cracking of the weapons was followed by cries and groans.

Through a smoky haze Frank saw some of the dark figures fling up their arms and topple to the ground within a few feet of him.

He wondered what had become of Hans and the professor, for he could see nothing of either, and they had been close at hand a moment before.

In the midst of all this, Frank wondered at his own calmness. His one thought was that not a bullet should be wasted, and then he feared he would find his weapons empty and useless before the desperadoes were rebuffed.

But this reception was something the bandits had not expected from a boy. They had no heart to stand up before a lad who could shoot with the skill of a Gringo cowboy, and did not seem at all excited when attacked by twenty men.

Mexican half-bloods are cowards at heart, and, by the time they saw two or three of their number fall before the fire from Frank's revolvers they turned and took to their heels like a flock of frightened sheep.

"Say, holdt on avile und led me ged a few pullets indo you, mein friendts."

It was Hans' voice, and, looking down, Frank saw the Dutch lad on the ground at his feet, whither he had crept on hands and knees.

"What are you down there for, Hans?"

"Vot you dink, Vrankie? You don'd subbose I sdood up all der dime und ged in der vay der pullets uf? Vell, you may oxcuse me! I don'd like to peen a deat man alretty yet."

"That's all right, Hans. I admire your judgment."

"Dank you, Vrankie. I admire der vay you vork dose revolfers. Dot peat der pand, und don'd you vorged him!"

At this moment, a horse with a double burden swept past in the flare of light.

"Help! Frank—Frank Merriwell! Help—save me!"

"Merciful goodness!" cried Frank. "It is the professor's voice!"

"Und he vos on dot horse!"

"Yes—a captive!"

"Dot's vat he vos!"

"Our own horses—where are they? We must pursue! What have become of our horses?"

"Dose pandits haf dooken them, I susbect."

This was true; Frank had killed two of the horses belonging to the bandits, but the desperadoes had escaped with the three animals hired by our friends.

But that was not the worst, for Professor Scotch had been captured and carried away by the bold ruffians.

Frank heard the professor's appeals for help, and heard a mocking, cold-blooded laugh that he knew came from the lips of Carlos Merriwell.

Then the clatter of hoofs passed on down the street, growing fainter and fainter, till they left the town for the open plain, and finally died out in the night.

CHAPTER VI.

CARRIED INTO THE MOUNTAINS.

In vain, Frank attempted to organize a party to pursue the bandits. The citizens of Mendoza were completely terrorized, and they had no heart to follow the desperadoes out upon the plain, which was the bandits' own stamping ground.

Frank urged, entreated, begged, and finally grew furious, but he simply wasted his breath.

"No, no, señor," protested a Mexican. "You no find anybody dat chase Pacheco dis night—no, no, not much!"

"Pacheco? You don't mean to say—you can't mean——"

"Dat was Pacheco and his band, señor."

Frank groaned.

"Pacheco!" he muttered, huskily; "Pacheco, the worst wretch in all Mexico! He is utterly heartless, and the professor will— But Pacheco is not the worst!" he suddenly gasped. "There is Carlos Merriwell, who must be one of the bandits. He may take a fancy to torture Professor Scotch simply because the professor is my guardian."

"What you say, señor?" asked the curious Mexican. "I do not understand all dat you speak."

Frank turned away, with a gesture of despair.

"Vot you goin's to done, Vrankie?" asked Hans, dolefully.

"I do not seem to be able to do anything now. This matter must be placed before the authorities, but I do not fancy that will amount to anything. The officers here are afraid of the bandits, and the government is criminally negligent in the matter of pushing and punishing the outlaws. The capture of an American to be held for ransom will be considered by them as a very funny joke."

"Vell, I don'd seen vot you goin' to done apout it."

"I do not see myself, but, come on, and we will find out."

He sought the highest officials of the town, and laid the matter before them. In the most polite manner possible, they protested their pained solicitation and commiseration, but when he urged them to do something, they replied:

"To-morrow, señor, or the next day, we will see what we may be able to do."

"To-morrow!" cried Frank, desperately. "With you everything is to-morrow, to-morrow! To-day, to-night, now is the time to do something! Delays are fatal, particularly in pursuing bandits and kidnapers."

But they shook their heads sadly, and continued to express sympathy and regret, all the while protesting it would be impossible to do anything before to-morrow or the next day.

Frank was so furious and desperate that he even had thought of following the bandits with Hans as an only companion, but the man of whom he had obtained the horses in the first place would not let him have other animals.

That was not all. This man had gone through some kind of proceeding to lawfully seize Frank and Hans and hold them till the animals captured by the bandits were paid for at the price he should name, and this he proceeded to do.

Now, Frank did not have the price demanded for the three horses, and he could not draw it that night, so he was obliged to submit, and the two boys were prisoners till near three o'clock the next afternoon, when the money was obtained and the bill paid.

At the hotel Frank found a letter awaiting him, and, to his unbounded amazement, it was from the professor.

With haste he tore it open, and these words are what he read:

"DEAR FRANK: Pacheco commands me to write this letter. We are at the headwaters of the Rio de Nieves, but we move on to the westward as soon as I have written. He tells me we are bound for the mountains beyond Huejugilla el Alto, which is directly west of Zacatecas as the bird flies one hundred and ten miles. He bids me tell you to follow to Huejugilla el Alto, where he says arrangements will be made for my ransom. Remember Jack Burk. He spoke of the mountains to the west of Zacatecas. Pacheco threatens to mutilate me and forward fragments to you if you do not follow to the point specified. He is watching me as I write, and one of his men will carry this letter to Mendoza, and deliver it. The situation is desperate, and it strikes me that it is best to comply with Pacheco's demands in case you care to bother about me. If you want me to be chopped up bit by bit and forwarded to you, do not bother to follow. I have no doubt but Pacheco will keep his word to the letter in this matter. I am, my dear boy, your devoted guardian and tutor,

"HORACE ORMAN TYLER SCOTCH."

That this letter was genuine there could be no doubt, as it was written in the professor's peculiar style of chirography; but it did not sound like the professor, and Frank knew well enough that it had been written under compulsion, and the language had been dictated by another party.

"Poor old professor!" murmured the boy. "Poor old professor! He shall be saved! He shall be saved! He knows I will do everything I can for him."

"Yah, but he don'd seem to say dot der ledder in," observed Hans, who had also read every word.

"Huejugilla el Alto is one hundred and ten miles west of Zacatecas."

"Vere you belief they findt dot name, Vrankie?"

Frank did not mind the Dutch lad's question, but bowed his head on his hand, and fell to thinking.

"We must have horses, and we must follow. 'Remember Jack Burk.' Surely the professor put that part of the letter in of his own accord. He did not speak of the Silver Palace, but he wished to call it to my mind. That palace, according to Burk, lies directly west of Zacatecas, somewhere amid the mountains beyond this place he has mentioned. The professor meant for me to understand that I would be proceeding on my way to search for the palace. Perhaps he hopes to escape."

"Yah," broke in Hans, "berhaps he meant to done dot, Vrankie."

"We would be very near the mountains—it must be that we would be in the mountains."

"I guess dot peen shust apoudt vere we peen, Vrankie."

"If he escaped, or should be rescued or ransomed, we could easily continue the search for the palace."

"You vos oxactly righdt."

"We must have horses and a guide."

"We can ged dem mit money."

"We had better proceed to Zacatecas, and procure the animals and the guide there."

"Shust oxactly vot I vould haf suggestet, Vrankie."

"We will lose no time about it."

"Vell, I guess nod!"

"But Carlos—Carlos, my cousin. It is very strange, but Professor Scotch does not mention him."

"Py shimminy! dot peen der trute!"

"And I am certain it was Carlos that captured the professor. I heard the fellow laugh—his wicked, triumphant laugh!"

"I heardt dot meinseluf, Vrankie."

"Carlos must be with the band."

"Yah."

"And Pacheco is carrying this matter out to suit my cousin."

"Yah."

"Hans, it is possible you had better remain behind."

"Vot vos dot?" gurgled the Dutch lad, in blank amazement. "Vot for vos I goin' to gone pehindt und stay, Vrankie?"

"I see a trap in this—a plot to lead me into a snare and make me a captive."

"Vell, don'd I stood ub und took mein medicine mit you all der dimes? Vot vos der maddetr mit me? Vos you lost your courage in me alretty yet?"

"Hans, I have no right to take you into such danger. Without doubt, a snare will be spread for me, but I am going to depend on fate to help me to avoid it."

"Vell, I took some stock dot fate in meinseluf."

"If I should take you along and you were killed——"

"I took your chances on dot, mein poy. Vot vos I draveling aroundt mit you vor anyhow you vant to know, ain'dt id?"

"You are traveling for pleasure, and not to fight bandits."

"Uf dot peen a bard der bleasure uf, you don'd haf some righdt to rob me uf id. Vrank Merriwell, dit you efer know me to gone pack mit you on?"

"No, Hans."

"Dot seddles dot. You nefer vill. Shust count me indo dis racket. I am going righdt along mit you, und don'd you rememper dot!"

Frank laughed.

"Hans," he said, "you are true blue. We will stick by each other till the professor is saved from Pacheco and Carlos Merriwell."

"Yah, we done dot."

They clasped hands, and that point was settled.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAMP IN THE DESERT.

Without unnecessary delay, they took the train from Mendoza to Zacatecas, which was a much larger place.

In Zacatecas they set about the task of finding a reliable guide, which was no easy matter, as they soon discovered.

The Mexican half-bloods were a lazy, shiftless set, and the full-blooded Spaniards did not seem to care about taking the trip across the desert.

Till late that night Frank searched in vain for the man he wanted, and he was finally forced to give up the task till another day.

Such a delay made him very impatient, and he felt much like starting out without a guide, depending on a compass, with which he believed he would be able to make his way due west to Huejugilla el Alto.

The landlord of the hotel at which they stopped that night was a fine-appearing man, and Frank ventured to lay the matter before him.

The landlord listened to the entire story, looking very grave, shook his head warningly, and said:

"Do not think of attempting to cross the desert alone, young señors. Without a guide you might get lost and perish for water. By all means, take a guide."

"But how are we to obtain a trustworthy guide, sir?"

"That is truly a problem, but I think I may be able to assist you in the morning."

"If you can, it will be a great favor."

"Many thanks, young señor. I will see what can be done. If you would take my advice, you would not go to Huejugilla el Alto."

"Why not?"

"It is far from the railroad, and is situated in a very wild region. If you were to go there and should never be heard of again, it would not be easy for your friends to discover what had become of you. Pacheco directed you to go there, and he means you no good. It is likely you will walk into a trap that Pacheco has set for you."

"I have considered that," said Frank, quietly; "and I have decided to go."

"Oh, very well," with a gesture expressive of regret. "I know it is quite impossible to change the determination of you Americans. If you have firmly decided to go, you will go, even though you knew all the deadly dangers that may lie in wait for you."

Being again assured that the landlord would do his best to obtain a guide, Frank proposed to retire for the night.

For all of the troubles that beset him, Frank was able to sleep soundly, having trained himself to sleep under almost any circumstances. Hans also slept and snored, to be awakened in the morning by Frank, who was shaking him roughly.

"Come, Hans, it is time we were stirring."

"Vot vos dot?" cried the Dutch lad, in surprise. "We don'd peen asleep more as fifteen minutes alretty yet."

"It is morning."

"I don'd toldt you so! Vell, dot peats der pand!"

Hans got up and dressed with great reluctance, yawning, and declaring over and over that the nights in Mexico were not more than fifteen or twenty minutes in length.

The landlord had prepared a special breakfast for them, and it proved the best they had found since leaving "the States," so they ate heartily and felt much better afterward.

After breakfast the landlord himself informed them that he had been able to obtain a guide.

"He is the very person you want, young señors, for he knows the desert and he knows the mountains. You may depend on him to lead you straight across to Huejugilla el Alto."

The guide was waiting for them, wrapped to his chin in a crimson poncho, and smoking a cigarette. He was a dark-faced, somewhat sinister-looking fellow, and he gave his name as Pedro.

While Frank did not like the appearance of the man, he felt that it was not policy to delay longer, and a bargain was soon made. Pedro not only agreed to take them quickly across the desert, but he contracted to furnish horses for them.

The forenoon was not far advanced when they rode out of Zacatecas, and, with the sun at their backs, headed toward the west.

Before the day passed Pedro showed by many things that he was quite familiar with the desert. He knew where shade and water were to be found, and, at noonday, they rested long beside a spring, with the sun beating on the wide waste of sand, over which the heat haze danced, and where no cooling breath seemed astir.

The heat affected Hans much more than it did Frank. The Dutch boy suffered, but he made no complaint.

With the sun well over into the western sky, they pushed onward again. They did not halt as the grateful shadows of night lay on the desert, but followed Pedro on and on.

At last, far across the desert, they saw the twinkling of a light that seemed like a fallen star.

"It's a camp-fire," declared Pedro, in Spanish. "Who can be there?"

"It may be bandits," suggested Frank, somewhat wary.

"No," declared the guide, "bandits do not build fires on the open plains. Bandits it cannot be."

He did not hesitate to lead them straight toward the fire.

Frank whispered to Hans:

"Have your weapons ready. This may be the trap."

As they approached the fire, they were able to make out the figures of two or three horses, but no human being was to be seen, although a coffeepot sat on some coals, fragrant steam rising from the nozzle.

Pedro stopped, seeming somewhat uneasy for the first time.

"What is it?" asked Frank, with apprehension.

"Yah, vot id vos?" asked Hans. "Vos der camp left all alone mit ids lonesome?"

"Not that, señors; but we have been heard, and the ones at the camp are hiding and watching."

"Vell, I like dot. Maype dey haf der trop on us alretty soon."

"That is likely," said Frank.

Pedro called out something in Spanish, but there was no answer, save that one of the horses lifted its head and neighed.

Then Frank tried it in English:

"Ho, the camp! Who is there, and where are you?"

Almost instantly a man's voice replied:

"I'm out hyar whar I kin take a peep at yer, as I heard yer comin'. Didn't know but you wus Greasers, an' I ain't got no use fer ther onery varmints. As yer kin talk United States, just move right up ter the fire and join me at supper."

There was a hearty freedom about the invitation that dispelled Frank's fears immediately, and they rode forward into the firelight.

As they did so, a man rose from where he had been stretched on the sand, and came forward to meet them.

"Great Scott!" shouted Frank, as the firelight fell on the man's face. "It's Alwin Bushnell, Jack Burk's partner!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TREASURE SEEKER.

"Thet thar's my handle," acknowledged the man; "but I'm strapped ef I understand how you 'uns happen ter know it!"

He stared at the boys and the guide in blank amazement. Seeing Pedro's face fairly, he gave a slight start, and then looked still more closely.

"There's no doubt," palpitated Frank; "you are Alwin Bushnell?"

"That's me," nodded the camper.

"And you are alone?"

"Certun sure."

"Bound west?"

"I reckon."

"For the mountains and the Silver——"

Frank caught himself, and stopped short, remembering Pedro, and knowing the guide's ears and eyes were wide open to hear and see everything.

Bushnell fell back a step, a look of still greater surprise coming to his bronzed and bearded face.

"W'at's thet thar you wuz goin' ter say?" he demanded.

"Wait," said Frank, "I will tell you later. It is better."

Plainly, Alwin Bushnell was puzzled, and not a little amazed.

"You know my handle, an' you seem ter know whatever way I'm trailin'. This yere lays over me, as I acknowledges instanter."

"That's not hard to explain."

"Then I begs yer to explain it without delay."

"Your partner told us of you."

"Old Jack?"

"Yes."

"When, and whar?"

"Two days ago, outside of Mendoza."

"He wuz thar?"

"Yes."

"But how did yer know me?"

"We saw you."

"When?"

"When you were pursued across the plain by bandits."

Bushnell slapped his thigh.

"Thar!" he cried; "I remembers yer now! You wuz near a doby hut, an' yer opened up on ther pizen skunks as wuz arter me."

"That's right."

"Wall, I'm much obliged, fer you socked ther lead ter them critters so they switched off an' let me get away. You kin shoot, boy."

"Some."

"Some! Wa'al, that's right, you bet! Give us a wag of your fin! I'm mortal glad ter clap peepers on yer, fer I never expected ter see yer an' thank yer fer thet trick."

Frank swung from the saddle, and surrendered his hand into the broad "paw" of the rough and hearty Westerner, who gave it a crushing grip and a rough shake, repeating:

"I'm mortal glad ter see yer, thet's whatever! But I want ter know how you happened to chip inter thet thar little game. You took a hand at jest ther right time ter turn ther run of ther cards, an' I got out without goin' broke."

"I chipped in because I saw you were a white man, and you were hard pressed by a villainous crew who must be bandits. I believe in white men standing by white men."

"Say, thet's a great motter, young man. 'White men stand by white men.' As fer me, I don't like a Greaser none whatever."

As he said this, Bushnell gave Pedro another searching look, and the guide scowled at the ground in a sullen way.

"Now," continued the Westerner, "w'at I wants ter know next is w'at yer knows about Jack Burk. We had a place all agreed on ter meet w'en I returned, but he wusn't thar, an' I hed ter go it alone. That's why I'm yere alone."

"It was not Burk's fault that he did not meet you."

"Say you so? Then lay a straight trail fer me ter foller."

"He was sick."

"Is that whatever? Wa'al, derned ef I could seem ter cut his trail anywhar I went, an' I made a great hustle fer it."

"He was in the hut where you saw us."

"Wa'al, dern my skin! Ef I'd knowed thet, I'd made a straight run fer thet yere ranch, bet yer boots!"

"He came to the door, and shouted to you."

"You don't tell me thet! An' I didn't hear him! Wa'al, wa'al! Whar wuz my ears? Whar is he now?"

"Dead."

Bushnell reeled.

"Is he that?" he gasped, recovering. "An' I didn't get to see him! Say, this clean upsets me, sure as shootin'!"

The man seemed greatly affected.

"Poor old Jack!" he muttered. "We've made many a tramp together, an' we struck it rich at last, but he'll never git ther good of thet thar strike."

Then he seemed to remember that he was watched by several eyes, and he straightened up, passing his hand over his face.

"Jack shall hev a big monumint," he cried. "Tell me whar my old pard is planted."

"That is something I do not know, Mr. Bushnell."

The man was astonished.

"Don't know? Why, how's thet?"

Frank told the entire story of Burk's death and mysterious disappearance, to which Bushnell listened, with breathless interest. When it was finished, the man cried:

"Thet thar beats me! I don't understand it, none whatever."

"No more do I," confessed Frank. "There is no doubt but Burk was dead, and the corpse did not walk away of its own accord. It was my intention to investigate the mystery, but later events prevented."

Frank then explained about the kidnaping of Professor Scotch by the bandits.

While the boy was relating this, Bushnell was closely studying the guide's face, as revealed by the firelight. Frank noted that a strange look seemed to come into the eyes of the Westerner, and he appeared to be holding himself in check.

When this explanation was finished, Bushnell asked:

"And you are on your way ter Huejugilla el Alto with ther hope of rescuin' ther professor?"

"We are," replied Frank.

"You pet my life," nodded Hans.

"This is the guide who was recommended to you in Zacatecas?"

"Yes."

"You trust him fully?"

"We are obliged to do so."

"Wa'al, boys, ef this yere critter can't take yer straight ter Pacheco, nobody kin."

"What do you mean?"

"Jest this!" cried Bushnell, explosively; "this yere Greaser galoot w'at yer calls Pedro is nobody but Ferez!"

"Who is Ferez?"

"He's Pacheco's lieutenant!"

Frank uttered a cry of amazement and anger, wheeling quickly on the Mexican, his hand seeking the butt of a revolver.

But the dark-faced rascal seemed ready for such an exposure, for, with a yell of defiance, he dropped behind his horse, and the animal shot like a rocket from the firelight into the shadows which lay thick on the desert.

Bushnell opened up with a brace of revolvers, sending a dozen bullets whistling after the fellow, in less than as many seconds.

At the first shot, Hans Dannerwust fell off his horse, striking on his back on the sand, where he

lay, faintly gurgling:

"Uf you don'd shood der odder vay, I vos a tead man!"

"Don't let him escape with a whole skin!" shouted Frank, as he began to work a revolver, although he was blinded by the flashes from Bushnell's weapon so that he was forced to shoot by guess.

Ferez seemed to bear a charmed life, for he fled straight on into the night, sending back a mocking shout of laughter. From far out on the waste, he cried:

"Bah, Gringo dogs! You cannot harm me! I will see you again, *Americanoes*. This is not the last."

With an angry exclamation of disappointment and anger, Bushnell flung his empty revolvers on the sand at his feet.

"Dern me fer a fool!" he roared. "Ef I'd done my shootin' first an' my talkin' arterward, he wouldn't got away."

But Ferez had escaped, and they could only make the best of it.

When this was over and the excitement had subsided, they sat about the fire and discussed the situation. Frank then showed the golden image which Burk had given him, and explained how the dying man had told of the Silver Palace.

Bushnell listened quietly, a cloud on his face. At the conclusion of the story, he rose to his feet, saying:

"Ef Jack Burk made you his heir, thet goes, an' I ain't kickin' none whatever. Old Jack didn't hev no relatives, so he hed a right to make any galoot his heir. But thar's goin' ter be plenty of worry fer anybody as tries ter reach ther Silver Palace. How'd you 'spect ter git 'crost ther chasm?"

"As yet, I have not taken that into consideration. The kidnaping of Professor Scotch has banished thoughts of everything else from my mind."

"Wa'al, ef Jack Burk made you his heir, you're entitled ter your half of ther treasure, providin' you're ready ter stand your half of ther expenses ef we fail ter git thar."

"You may depend on me so far as that is concerned."

"Wa'al, then, you see I hev three hawses. One is fer me ter ride, another is ter kerry provisions, and ther third is ter tote ther balloon."

"The balloon!"

"Thet's whatever. I hev another balloon with which ter cross thet thar chasm. It's ther only way ter git over. In crossin' ther balloon will be loaded with a ballast of sand; but when we come back, ther ballast will be pure gold!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROFESSOR'S ESCAPE.

They did not expect to reach Huejugilla el Alto without being molested by bandits, for it was presumed that Pacheco's lieutenant would carry the word to his chief, and the desperadoes would lose no time in moving against them.

Knowing their danger, they were exceedingly cautious, traveling much by night, and keeping in concealment by day, and, to their surprise, the bandits made no descent upon them.

Huejugilla el Alto proved to be a wild and picturesque place. Being far from the line of railroad, it had not even felt the touch of Northern civilization, and the boys felt as if they had been transported back to the seventeenth century.

"Hyar, lads," said Bushnell, "yer will see a town thet's clean Greaser all ther way through, an' it's ten ter one thar ain't nary galoot besides ourselves in ther durned old place thet kin say a word of United States."

The Westerner could talk Spanish after a fashion, and that was about all the natives of Huejugilla el Alto were able to do, with the exception of the few whose blood was untainted, and who claimed to be aristocrats.

However, for all of their strange dialect and his imperfect Spanish, Bushnell succeeded in making himself understood, so they found lodgings at a low, rambling adobe building, which served as a hotel. They paid in advance for one day, and were well satisfied with the price, although Bushnell declared it was at least double ordinary rates.

"We ain't likely ter be long in town before Ferez locates us an' comes arter his hawses. Ther durned bandits are bold enough 'long ther line of ther railroad, but they lay 'way over thet out

hyar. Wuss then all, ther people of ther towns kinder stand in with ther pizen varmint."

"Stand in with them—how?"

"Why, hide 'em when ther soldiers is arter 'em, an' don't bother 'em at any other time."

"I presume they are afraid of the bandits, which explains why they do so."

"Afeared? Wa'al, I'll allow as how they may be; but then thar's something of ther bandit in ev'ry blamed Greaser I ever clapped peepers on. They're onery, they are."

Frank had noted that almost all Westerners who mingled much with the people of Mexico held Spaniards and natives alike in contempt, calling them all "Greasers." He could not understand this, for, as he had observed, the people of the country were exceedingly polite and chivalrous, treating strangers with the utmost courtesy, if courtesy were given in return. Rudeness seemed to shock and wound them, causing them to draw within themselves, as a turtle draws into its shell. Indeed, so polite were the people that Frank came to believe that a bandit who had decided to cut a man's throat and rob him would first beg a man's pardon for such rudeness, and then proceed about the job with the greatest skill, suavity, and gentleness.

Having settled at the hotel, Bushnell ordered a square meal, and, when it was served, they proceeded to satisfy the hunger which had grown upon them with their journey across the desert.

Bushnell also took care to look after the horses and equipments himself.

"Ef Ferez calls fer his hawses, I don't want him ter git away with this yar balloon an' gas generator," said the Westerner, as he saw the articles mentioned were placed under lock and key. "Ef we should lose them, it'd be all up with us so fur as gittin' ter ther Silver Palace is concerned."

Frank expected to hear something from Pacheco as soon as Huejugilla el Alto was reached, but he found no message awaiting him.

"Poor professor!" he said. "I expect he has suffered untold torments since he was kidnaped."

"Yah," nodded Hans. "Uf Brofessor Scotch don'd peen britty sick uf dis vild life mit Mexico, you vos a liar."

That night they were sitting outside the hotel when they heard a great commotion at the southern end of the town.

"Vot vos dot?" gasped the Dutch boy, in alarm. "Sounds like dere vos drouple aroundt dot locality."

"That's right," agreed Frank, feeling for his revolvers; "and it is coming this way as fast as it can."

"Mebbe another revolution has broke out," observed Bushnell, lazily. "Best git under kiver, an' let ther circus go by."

They could hear the clatter of horses' hoofs, the cracking of pistols, and a mingling of wild cries.

All at once Frank Merriwell became somewhat excited.

"On my life, I believe I hear the voice of Professor Scotch!" he shouted.

"Yah!" said Hans, "I belief I hear dot, too!"

"They may be bringin' ther professor in," said Bushnell. "Ef he's thar, we'll take an interest in ther case, you bet yer boots!"

Into the hotel he dashed, and, in a moment, he returned with his Winchester.

Along the street came a horseman, clinging to the back of an unsaddled animal, closely pursued by at least twenty wild riders, some of whom were shooting at the legs of the fleeing horse, while one was whirling a lasso to make a cast that must bring the animal to a sudden halt.

"Ten to one, the fugitive is the professor!" shouted Frank, peering through the dusk.

"Then, I reckon we'll hev ter chip in right hyar an' now," said Bushnell, calmly.

He flung the Winchester to his shoulder, and a spout of fire streamed from the muzzle in an instant.

The fellow who was whirling the lasso flung up his arm and plunged headlong from the horse's back to the dust of the street.

"Professor! professor!" shouted Frank. "Stop—stop here!"

"Can't do it," came back the reply. "The horse won't stop!"

"Jump off—fall off—get off some way!"

"All right! here goes!"

In another moment Professor Scotch, for it really was that individual, flung himself from the back of the animal he had ridden, struck the ground, rolled over and over like a ball, and lay still

within thirty feet of Frank, groaning dolefully.

In the meantime, Al Bushnell was working his Winchester in a manner that was simply amazing, for a steady stream of fire seemed to pour from the muzzle of the weapon, and the cracking of the weapon echoed through the streets of Huejugilla el Alto like the rattling fire from a line of infantry.

After that first shot Bushnell lowered the muzzle of his weapon, as, in most cases at short range, his motto was to "shoot low," for he well knew more lead could be wasted by shooting too high than in any other manner.

In about three seconds he had thrown the pursuing bandits into the utmost confusion, for they had never before encountered such a reception in Huejugilla el Alto, and it was the last thing they had expected. With all possible haste, they reined about and took to flight, hearing the bullets whistling about them, or feeling their horses leap madly at the sting of lead or go plunging to the ground.

The inhabitants of the town had fled into their houses before the rush of the bandits, so there was little danger that any of Bushnell's bullets would reach innocent persons.

The confusion and rout of the bandits was brought about in a few seconds, and Bushnell was heard to mutter:

"One white man is good fer a hundred onery Greasers any time! Ther derved skunks hain't got a blamed bit of sand!"

Frank ran and lifted the fallen professor, flinging the man across his shoulder, and carrying him into the hotel.

Hans followed with frantic haste, and Bushnell came sauntering lazily in after the bandits had been routed and driven back.

"Are you badly hurt, professor?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"I'm killed!" groaned Scotch, dolefully. "I'm shot full of holes, and every bone in my body is broken! Farewell, my boy! We'll meet in a better land, where there are no bandits to molest or make afraid."

"Where are you shot?"

"Everywhere—all over! You can't touch me where I'm not shot! They fired more than four hundred bullets through me! I am so full of holes that I wonder you can see me at all!"

Bushnell made a hasty examination of the professor, who lay on the floor, groaning faintly, his eyes closed.

"Look hyar, pard," said the Westerner, roughly, "ef you want ter pass in yer chips ye'll hev ter stand up an' let me put a few more holes in yer. I can't find a place whar you're touched by a bullet an' I'm blowed ef I 'low you broke a bone when ye tumbled from ther hawse."

The professor sat up with a sudden snap.

"What's that?" he cried. "I'm not shot? I'm not all broke up? Is it possible? Can I believe you?"

"Yah," nodded Hans, gravely; "I can belief me. You vas all righdt broffessor, und dot is sdraight."

"Wow!" shouted Scotch, bounding to his feet like a rubber ball. "That's what I call great luck! Why, I thought I must be killed sure! I don't know how I escaped all those bullets. And then the fall! Providence must have been with me."

"Vell, I don'd know apoudt dot pefore you come der town in," said Hans; "but you vos alone mit yourself when we saw you, broffessor."

The landlord of the hotel came bustling up in a perfect tumult of terror, wringing his hands and almost weeping.

"Oh, señors!" he cried, in Spanish, "what have you done? You have ruined me! You stopped at my house, and you shoot the ladrones. Ah, señors, you know not what that means to me. Pacheco will come down on me—he will raid my house; I am a ruined man, and you are responsible for it. You must leave my house without delay! If you remain here, the whole town will rise against me! All the people will know this must make Pacheco very angry, and they will know he must take revenge on the place. They will be angry with me because I allow it. Carramba! How could I help it? I could do nothing. It came, and it was all over before I know what was doing. Señors, you must have pity on me—you must leave my house immediately."

Bushnell caught enough of this to translate it to the others.

"Ther best thing we kin do is ter git out instanter," he said. "Ef we wait, ther outlaws will watch every road out of ther town, an' we'll hev trouble in gittin' away."

"Then let's get away immediately," fluttered the professor. "If I fall into their hands again, I'm a dead man!"

"Yes, we will get out immediately," decided Frank; "but we'll do it as secretly and silently as

possible."

Bushnell nodded his satisfaction, and, thirty minutes later, the party was ready to move. They left the hotel by a back way, and, guided by the landlord, made their way along dark and narrow streets, creeping cautiously through the town till the outskirts were reached.

There Frank gave the landlord some money, and, after calling down blessings on their heads, he quickly slipped away and disappeared.

"Now we'll hustle right along," said the Westerner. "We'll put a good long stretch between ourselves an' Huejugilla el Alto before mornin'. We're off, bound straight inter ther mountains ___"

"And straight for the Silver Palace," added Frank.

CHAPTER X.

THE STRANGER.

They were fortunate in getting away without being seen by any of the bandits, and at dawn they were well up into the mountains, where Bushnell found a secluded place for them to camp and rest, as rest was something of which they all sorely stood in need.

Bushnell prepared breakfast, and Frank insisted that Professor Scotch should explain how he escaped from Pacheco's gang.

"Don't ask me," sighed the little man, fondling his red whiskers. "I can't explain it—really I can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, I don't know how I happened to do it. They forced me to write that letter against my will, two of them standing over me with drawn daggers while I was writing, and prodding me a bit whenever I refused to put down the words Pacheco ordered written."

"Then Pacheco speaks English?"

"As well as I do."

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know."

"How is that?"

"He kept his face concealed with his serape quite up to his eyes."

"Thar's a mystery about Pacheco," broke in Bushnell. "No one seems ter know jest what ther varmint looks like."

"Go on, professor," urged Frank; "tell us just how you escaped."

"I tell you I do not know myself. All I know is that they tied me to a horse, and brought me across a plain of burning sand, where I nearly perished for want of water, and was nearly sawed in two by the backbone of the horse I rode. I believed it was a case of gone goose with me. At last they camped in a wild spot, and I was so badly used up that I could scarcely eat or do anything but lay around and groan. They seemed to think there was no need of watching me very closely, and I noticed that I was alone sometimes. Then, feeling utterly reckless, I began to watch for a chance to sneak away. I didn't care if I were shot, or if I escaped and perished from hunger and thirst. I was bound to make the attempt. Last night I made it. A saddleless horse strayed along where I was, and I made a jump for the animal. Before they knew what I was doing, I was on the beast's back and yelling into its ears like a maniac. The horse scooted out of the camp, and I clung on. The bandits pursued me, and everything else is a haze till I heard Frank calling for me to jump off. I recognized his voice and fell off the horse, although I had not the least idea in the world where I was."

"Wa'al," chuckled Bushnell, "thet's w'at I call dead fool luck, beggin' yer pardon fer speakin' so open like, at which I means no harm whatever."

"Oh, ye needn't beg my pardon," quickly said Professor Scotch. "I don't want any credit for getting away. It wasn't a case of brains at all."

Breakfast was prepared, and they ate heartily, after which Frank, Hans, and the professor lay down to sleep, while Bushnell smoked a black pipe.

But even Bushnell was not made of iron, and the pipe soothed him to slumber, so the entire party slept, with no one to guard.

All at once, some hours later, they were awakened by an exclamation from Frank, who sat up and stared at the form of a stranger, the latter being quietly squatting in their midst, calmly puffing

at a cigarette, while his poncho was wrapped about him to his hips.

Frank's exclamation awakened Bushnell like an electric shock, and, even as his eyes opened, his hand shot out, the fingers grasping the butt of a revolver that was pointed straight at the stranger.

"Stiddy, thar!" called the Westerner. "I hev ther drop on yer, an' I'll sock yer full of lead ef yer wiggle a toenail! You hear me chirp!"

The stranger continued smoking, his coal-black eyes being the only part of him to move, for all of the threatening revolver.

Hans sat up, gasping:

"Shimminy Gristmas! Der pandits haf caught us alretty soon!"

At this Professor Scotch gave a groan of dismay, faintly gurgling:

"Then I'm a goner!"

That the stranger was a half-blood could be seen at a glance.

"Drap thet cigaroot, an' give an account of yerself instanter right off!" ordered Bushnell, threateningly. "Who in blazes be yer?"

The cigarette fell from the man's lips, and he answered:

"I am Rodeo."

"Wa'al, who is Rodeo?"

"The brother of Pacheco."

"Don't I toldt you dot!" panted the Dutch boy.

Professor Scotch groaned again, and rolled a little farther from the half-blood, but still made no effort to sit up.

"Wa'al, dern your skin!" cried Bushnell. "You've got a nerve to come hyar! I s'pose Pacheco an' his gang of onery varmints is within whoopin' distance?"

"I am alone; there is no one within call."

"Wa'al, w'at be yer hyar fer, thet's what I wants ter know?"

"I found you asleep, and I came to warn you."

"Of what?"

"Danger. The ladrones are on your trail already. Before the sun sinks behind the mountains they will be here. If you are not gone, you must all fall into their hands."

Bushnell looked doubtful and suspicious, while a puzzled expression came into his bronzed face.

"Look hyar," he said; "you're up ter some game, an' I'm derved ef I know what she am, but yer wants ter understand yer can't monkey with this old coon none whatever. I hold the drop on yer, Old Socks, an' I may take a fancy ter bore yer once jest fer fun, so ye'd best talk straight an' squar', an' be lively about it."

"Yah," nodded Hans, threateningly, "you petter peen in a plamed pig hurry apoudt dot talking pusiness."

"What do you wish me to say, señors?"

"Explain why you're hyar ter warn us."

"Because I'm the brother of Pacheco."

"Thet don't go down with this old coon. Pacheco is ther leader of ther bandits."

"He was the leader of the bandits."

"Was the leader?"

"Si, señor."

"An' ain't he now?"

"No, señor."

"How long since?"

"At least one month."

"Oh, say, thet thar won't do—I tells yer it won't, fer we know er blamed sight better! Rodeo, lying is dangerous with me 'round."

"Señor, I do not lie; I tell you the truth. One month ago Pacheco was the leader of the band; now

he is dead, and another is in his place. This other killed him in a battle, and by that he won the right to be leader of the band. He has taken my brother's name, and he calls himself Pacheco. Señors, I swear to you I speak the truth—I swear by all the saints! My brother is dead, and there is an impostor in his place."

Frank was impressed, and his hand fell on Bushnell's arm.

"I believe the fellow really speaks the truth," he said. "He seems sincere, and his eyes are square and steady."

"Yer can't tell about ther skunks," muttered the Westerner; "but still this one does seem ter be layin' a straight trail."

"I have taken my oath," continued the half-blood, a red light in his dark eyes—"I have sworn to kill the murderer of my brother, and I will keep the oath. That's why I am here. I have been watching the band for two weeks; I know every move they will make. I know when you leave Huejugilla el Alto, and I know they will follow. I make sure of that, and then, with my heart full of joy, I ride fast in advance. At last—at last they go to my country in the mountains! My people are there—my other brothers, my cousins, my relatives. They will all stand by me, and they will be ready to avenge Pacheco. The wrath of my people shall fall on the head of the impostor! You wonder why I warn you? I will explain. You are bound far in the mountains, and the false Pacheco will follow. If you are captured, he may turn back. I want him to follow you—I want you to lead him into the snare. That is why I am here, and that is why I have warned you, señors. It is done, and now I will go."

He arose to his feet, heedless of Bushnell's command to "keep still," and strode toward the horses. They saw an extra animal was there, and, in a moment, he had flung himself on the creature's back.

"*Buenos dias, señores.*"

A clatter of hoofs, the flutter of a poncho, and a crimson serape, and Rodeo's horse was galloping up the ravine that still led deeper into the mountains. Man and horse soon vanished from view.

CHAPTER XI.

THE AWAKENING VOLCANO.

Two days later, shortly after sunset, the party camped far in the depths of the Sierra Madre Mountains.

The words of Rodeo, the half-blood, had proved true, for they were pursued by the bandits, but, thanks to the skill of Bushnell, they had been able to give the desperadoes the slip.

"By ther end of another day we oughter be able ter clap our peepers on ther Silver Palace," declared the Westerner.

Professor Scotch was now as eager as any of them to see the wonderful palace, all his doubts having been dispelled by Bushnell's straightforward narrative of the discovery of the place by himself and Jack Burk.

"I wonder what causes that column of smoke we saw rising amid the mountains to the westward to-day?" said Frank.

Bushnell shook his head.

"Thet thar has troubled me some," he admitted. "It seems ter be fair an' squar' in ther direction of ther Silver Palace."

"Maype dose pandits peen aheadt uf us und purn der balace up," suggested Hans, with an air of very great wisdom.

"I scarcely think they would be able to burn a building made of stone, gold, and silver," smiled Frank.

"Wa'al, not much," said Bushnell. "Ther palace will be thar when we arrive. You needn't worry about thet."

They were very tired, and, feeling secure in the depths of a narrow ravine, they soon slept, with the exception of Frank, who had the first watch.

The moon came up over the mountain peaks, which stood out plainly in the clear light, every gorge and fissure being cut black as ink, and showing with wonderful distinctness.

The shadow was deep in the narrow ravine, and Frank sat with his back to a wall of rock, looking upward, when he was startled to see a figure rise in the bright moonlight.

On the brink of the ravine above stood a man who seemed to be peering down at them.

"Awaken!" cried this man, in a loud voice. "You are in great danger!"

The cry aroused every sleeper, and Bushnell started up with his Winchester clutched ready for use.

"What is it?" he asked.

Frank clutched his arm, gasping:

"Merciful goodness! look there—look at that man's face! Can the dead return to life?"

He pointed at the man on the brink of the ravine above them. The light of the moon fell fairly on the face of this man, which was plainly revealed to every one of the startled and thunderstruck party.

"Move lively, down there!" cried the man, with a warning gesture.

"There have been spies upon you, and Pacheco knows where you have stopped for the night."

Bushnell dropped his rifle, clutching at the neck of his shirt, and gasping for breath.

"By ther livin' gods!" he shouted, "it's my pard, Jack Burk, or it's his spook!"

"Id vas a sbook!" gurgled Hans Dunnerwust, quivering with fear. "Id vos der sbook uf der man vot we seen deat as a toornail!"

In truth, the man on the brink of the ravine looked like Jack Burk, who had been declared dead in the adobe hut near Mendoza.

"It is a resemblance—it must be a resemblance!" muttered Frank.

Once more the man above uttered a warning:

"You were trailed by a spy," he declared. "The spy saw you camp here, and he has gone to bring Pacheco and the bandits. They will be here soon. If you escape, you must move without further delay."

"It not only looks like my pard," said Bushnell, hoarsely, "but it has ther voice of my pard! Ef Jack Burk is dead, thet shore is his spook!"

And then, as suddenly as he had appeared, the man above vanished from view.

"Gone!" gasped Professor Scotch, wiping the cold perspiration from his face. "I never took stock in ghosts before, but now——"

"Remember his warning," cut in Frank. "We had better heed it."

"Dot vos righd," nodded Hans.

"Yes, thet's right," agreed Bushnell. "We'll git out of hyar in a howlin' hurry. Ef Jack Burk is dead, then thet wuz his spook come to warn his old pard."

There was saddling and packing in hot haste, and the little party was soon moving along the ravine.

For at least thirty minutes they hastened onward, and then the Westerner found a place where the horses could climb the sloping wall of the ravine and get out of the gorge. It was no easy task to make the animals struggle to the top, but Bushnell succeeded in forcing them all up. When the party was out of the ravine every one breathed with greater freedom.

"There," said Frank, "I do not feel as if we might be caught like rats in a trap."

Frank was the last to move from the ravine, and, just as he was about to do so, he seemed to catch a glimpse of something moving silently in the darkness.

"Hist!" came the warning from his lips. "Come here, Bushnell—professor, Hans, stay with the horses. Be cautious, and come lively."

He flung himself on his face in the shadow of a great bowlder, and peered down into the darkness below.

The Westerner and the professor came creeping to his side.

"What is it?" asked Bushnell.

"Look," directed Frank. "What do you make of it?"

Peering down into the dark depths of the gorge, they saw black figures flitting silently past, men and horses, as they were able to make out.

"Horsemen!" breathed the professor. "They must be the bandits!"

"But look!" came cautiously from Frank's lips; "they are riding swiftly, yet the feet of their horses make no sound!"

"That's right!" gasped Scotch. "Great Jupiter! can they be more ghosts?"

"Mysteries are crowding each other," said Frank.

Bushnell was silent, but he was watching and listening.

Like a band of black phantoms, the silent horsemen rode along the ravine and disappeared. Frank could hear the professor's teeth chattering as if the man had a chill.

"This bub-bub-beats my tut-tut-tut-time!" confessed Scotch. "I rather think we'd better turn back and let the Silver Palace alone."

"Rot!" growled Bushnell. "Them varmints wuz Pacheco's gang, an' they hed the feet of their critters muffled, thet's all. Don't git leery fer thet. All ther same, ef Jack Burk or his spook hedn't warned us, them onery skunks w'u'd hed us in a consarned bad trap."

This was the truth, as they all knew, and they were decidedly thankful to the mysterious individual who had warned them.

Bushnell now resorted to the trick of "covering the trail," in order to do which it was necessary to muffle the feet of their horses and lead them over the rocky ground, where their bandaged hoofs could make no mark. At length he came to a stream, and he led the way into the water, following the course of the stream, and having the others trail along in single file directly behind him.

When they halted again Bushnell assured them that there was little danger that the bandits would be able to follow them closely, and they rested without molestation till morning.

At daybreak the Westerner was astir, being alive with eagerness and impatience, as he repeatedly declared they would behold the wonderful Silver Palace before another sunset.

Eating a hasty breakfast, they pushed forward, with the Westerner in the lead.

Once more the tower of smoke, which they had noted the day before, was before them, but now it seemed blacker and more ominous than on the previous day.

It was not far from midday when, away to the westward, they heard rumbling sounds, like distant thunder.

"Vot id vas, ain'd id?" asked Hans, in alarm. "I don'd seen no dunder shower coming up somevere, do I?"

"It did not seem like thunder," said Frank, soberly. "It was more like a rumbling beneath the ground, and I fancied the earth quivered a bit."

"Perhaps it is an earthquake," put in the professor, apprehensively. "I believe they have such convulsions of nature in this part of the world."

Bushnell said nothing, but there was a troubled look on his face, and he urged them all forward at a still swifter pace.

The smoke tower was now looming near at hand, and they could see it shift and sway, grow thin, and roll up in a dense, black mass. It cast a gloom over their spirits, and made them all feel as if some frightful disaster was impending.

Again and again, at irregular intervals, they heard the sullen rumbling, and once all were positive the earth shook.

It was noticed that directly after each rumbling the smoke rolled up in a thick, black mass that shut out the light of the sun and overcast the heavens.

The professor was for turning back, but Bushnell was determined to go forward, and Frank was equally resolute. Hans had very little to say, but his nerves were badly shaken.

"In less than an hour we shall be able to see the Silver Palace," assured Bushnell. "We would be fools to turn back now."

So they went on, and, at last, they climbed to the top of a rise, from which point the Westerner assured them that the palace could be seen.

An awe-inspiring spectacle met their gaze. They looked across a great gulf, from which the smoke was rolling upward in clouds, and out of which came the sullen mutterings they had heard.

"Merciful goodness!" cried Professor Scotch. "It must be the crater of a volcano!"

"Yah!" gasped Hans; "und der volcano vos doin' pusiness at der oldt standt alretty yet."

"The volcano may have been dormant for centuries," said the professor, "but it is coming to life now!"

"Where is the Silver Palace?" demanded Frank.

Bushnell clutched the boy's arm with a grip of iron, pointing straight through the smoke clouds that rose before them.

"Look!" he shouted, hoarsely; "it is thar! See—the smoke grows thinner, an' thar she am! See her glitter! In thet thar palace is stored enough treasure ter make us richer then ther richest men in ther world, an' ten thousand volcanoes ain't goin' ter keep me from it, you bet yer boots!"

True enough, through the parted smoke clouds gleamed the towers and turrets of the wonderful palace that had remained hidden in the heart of the mountains hundreds of years, jealously guarded by the fierce natives, who believed it sacred, and who had kept the secret well from the outside world.

CHAPTER XII.

DOOM OF THE SILVER PALACE.

Bushnell leaped from his horse and began tearing the packs from the backs of the led animals. He worked with mad haste, and there was an awesome, insane glare in his eyes.

"The man is crazy!" roared Professor Scotch. "The volcano is certain to break forth before long—it must be on the verge of breaking forth now. If we remain here we are doomed!"

"Oxcuse me!" fluttered Hans. "I vos retty to gone righd avay queek."

The professor turned to Frank with his appeal:

"Come, boy, let's get away before destruction comes upon us. We must not remain here."

Frank sprang down from his snorting horse, flung the rein to Hans, and leaped to Bushnell's side.

"You are mad to think of remaining here!" he said, swiftly. "Come away, and we will return when the volcano is at peace."

"No!" thundered the treasure-seeker, "I will not go! The Silver Palace is there, and I mean to have my share of the treasure. Go if you are afraid, but here I stay till the balloon is inflated, and I can cross the chasm. The wind is right for it, and nothing shall stop me!"

He picketed the horses, and began ripping open the packs.

Frank turned to Professor Scotch, saying, quietly:

"Bushnell will not go, and I shall stay with him. At the same time, I advise you to go. Take Hans with you, and get away from here. Leave a plain trail, and Bushnell will be able to follow it, if we succeed in reaching the palace and returning alive."

The professor entreated Frank to change his mind, but the lad was determined, and nothing could alter that determination.

At last Scotch gave up in despair, groaning:

"If you stay, I stay. I am your guardian, but you seem to have things all your own way. If this volcano cooks us all, you will be to blame for it."

Frank said no word, but went about the task of assisting Bushnell in the work of inflating the balloon.

The Westerner had a "gas generator," which he was getting in order. As soon as this was ready, the balloon was unrolled, spread out, drawn up by means of poles and lines, and then secured to the ground by one stout rope, which was hitched about the base of a great boulder.

Then Bushnell built a fire and set the "gas generator" at work.

In the meantime the volcano had continued to mutter. At intervals the clouds of smoke parted, and they saw the wonderful Silver Palace standing on a plateau beyond the chasm.

The palace seemed to cast a spell over them all, and they felt the fever of the gold-hunter beginning to burn in their throbbing veins.

It was more than an hour after their arrival that the balloon began to fill with gas and Frank uttered a cheer as he saw the silk bulging like a bladder that is inflated with wind.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Bushnell, wildly. "In a few minutes we'll go sailin' over ther gulf, right through ther smoke, ter ther Silver Palace. Ha, ha, ha!"

The man's face was flushed till it was nearly purple, and his eyes were bloodshot. The fever had fastened itself firmly upon him.

More and more did the balloon expand. Bushnell had brought out a folding car, which he securely attached.

"In ten minutes more we'll be ready for the trip!" he shouted.

At that instant a series of wild cries reached their ears, and, turning swiftly, they saw a band of dark-faced men pouring through a fissure in the rocks to the north of them.

"Shimminy Gristmas!" cried Hans Dunnerwust, in terror. "Dot saddles us!"

"Who is it? Who are they?" fluttered the professor.

"They look like bandits," acknowledged Frank.

"It is Pacheco's band!" cried Bushnell, hastily securing his rifle. "Ther pizen varmints hev come ten minutes too soon! Ther balloon would take us all over in another ten minutes, but now it won't carry more than two. We must hold ther skunks off till she fills."

"Right!" shouted Frank Merriwell. "And we must be ready to go the instant she does fill. We can't hold 'em back long, for we have no shelter here. Professor, Hans, into that car! Get in, I say, and be ready! We'll try to stand the whelps off till the balloon is inflated, but we must be ready to start at any instant."

Professor Scotch and Hans were hastily bundled into the car.

The bandits hesitated long enough to gather and prepare for the charge, with their chief in the lead. It was plain they saw the treasure-seekers had no shelter, and they meant to close in without delay.

"Reddy for 'em, Frank!" called Bushnell, dropping on one knee, his Winchester in his hands. "They're comin' right soon!"

This was true. With mad cries and a fusillade of shots, the bandits charged.

Bushnell opened fire, and Frank followed his example. Several of the bandits were seen to fall, but still the others came on.

"Lead won't stop 'em!" snarled the Westerner. "It'll be hand ter hand in a jiffy."

"And that means——"

"We'll get wiped out."

"The balloon——"

"Won't carry more'n two—possibly three. In with ye, boy! You may escape! It don't make any diffrunce 'bout an old coon like me."

"Not much will I get in and leave you!" cried Frank. "We are partners in this expedition, and partners we'll stay to the end!"

"But ther others—ther professor an' ther Dutch boy! They might escape if——"

"They shall escape!"

Out flashed a knife in Frank Merriwell's hand, and, with one sweeping slash, he severed the strong rope that held the tugging, tossing balloon to the earth. Away shot the balloon, a cry of amazement and horror breaking from the lips of the professor and Hans.

"Mein gootness!" gasped the Dutch boy. "Vot vos happened?"

"I'll tell you," groaned the professor. "The balloon could not carry all four of us, and Frank Merriwell, like the noble, generous, hot-headed, foolish boy he is, refused to leave Bushnell. At the same time he would not doom us, and he cut the rope, setting the balloon free. He has remained behind to die at Bushnell's side."

"Led me git outd!" sobbed Hans. "I vant to go pack und die mit him!"

"It was too late now. Look—see there! We are directly over the Silver Palace! What a beautiful ——"

The professor's words were interrupted by a frightful rumbling roar that came up from the gulf surrounding the plateau on which the palace stood. All the way around that gulf a sheet of flame seemed to leap upward through smoke, and then, paralyzed, helpless, hypnotized by the spectacle, they saw the plateau and the palace sink and disappear into the blackness of a great void. Then, like a black funeral pall, the smoke rolled up about them and shut off their view.

But they knew that never again would the eyes of any human being behold the marvelous Silver Palace of the Sierra Madre Mountains.

When the balloon had ascended higher another current of air was encountered, and the course changed. Away they floated over the mountain peaks and out beyond the great range.

At last they came down, made a safe landing, and, to their satisfaction, found themselves within a mile of Huejugilla el Alto.

They had escaped the most frightful perils, but Professor Scotch's heart lay like lead in his bosom, and Hans Dunnerwust was not to be comforted, for they had left Frank Merriwell to his doom.

In Huejugilla el Alto they remained four days, neither of them seeming to have energy enough to do anything.

And, on the fourth day, Frank, Al Bushnell, and two others rode into town and stopped at the hotel.

Picture the meeting between Frank and his friends! Hans shed nearly a bucketful of joyful tears,

and Professor Scotch actually swooned from sheer amazement and delight. When the professor recovered, he clung to Frank's hands, saying:

"This is the happiest moment of my life—if I am not dreaming! Frank, my dear boy, I never expected to see you again. How did you escape?"

"The eruption of the volcano broke the bandits up," explained Frank; "and, by the time they had recovered and were ready to come at us again, a band of natives, headed by Rodeo, Pacheco's brother, came down on them. A terrible battle ensued. The bandits were defeated, many of them slain, among the latter being the false Pacheco. And whom do you fancy the impostor proved to be, professor?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"He was my villainous cousin, Carlos Merriwell."

"And he is dead?"

"Yes."

"That is a good thing. He will not trouble you any more."

"No, I shall never be troubled by him again. With Rodeo and the natives was Jack Burk——"

"Jack Burk! The man is dead!"

"Not quite, professor," declared a familiar voice, and Burk himself stepped forward. "I am still quite lively for a dead man."

"But—I saw you dead!" declared the astounded professor.

"You saw me nearly dead, but not quite. You remember I told you of a native who had found me in the hut, and how he had said it was not a fever that ailed me, but was a trouble brought on by drinking the water of the spring near the hut?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I told you the native hastily left me—left me to die alone, as I supposed."

"I remember that."

"He did not leave me to die, but went for an antidote. While you were away he returned and administered some of the antidote for the poison, bringing me around, although but a feeble spark of life fluttered in my bosom. Then he took me on his shoulders, and carried me from the hut to another place of shelter, where he brought me back to my full strength in a remarkably brief space of time."

"I understand why we did not find you," said the professor.

"We followed the bandits," Jack Burk continued. "This native was Rodeo, the brother of the true Pacheco, and he is here."

Rodeo stepped forward, bowing with the politeness of a Spanish don.

"Rodeo made me swear to aid him in hunting down the murderer of his brother. That was the pay he asked for saving my life. I gave the oath, and it was his whim that I should not reveal myself to you till the right time came. But when I saw the spy tracking you, saw him locate you, and saw him hasten to tell the bandits, I was forced to appear and give a warning."

"We took you for a ghost."

"I thought it possible you might, and I fancied that might cause you to give all the more heed to the warning."

"Well, of all remarkable things that ever happened in my life, these events of the past few days take the lead," declared Scotch. "However, I have come through all dangers in safety, and I am happy, for Frank is alive and well."

"But the Silver Palace is gone, with all its marvelous treasure," said Frank.

"That's right, boy," nodded Bushnell, gloomily. "The palace has sunk inter the earth, an' nary galoot ever gits the benefit of all the treasure it contained."

"Don't take it so hard, partner," said Jack Burk. "Mexico is the land of treasures, and we may strike something else before we cross the Death Divide."

"Vell," sighed Hans Dunnerwust, "you beoples can hunt for dresure all you don'd vant to; but I haf enough uf dis pusiness alretty soon. I nefer vos puilt for so much oxcitemend, und I vos goin' to took der next drain for home as soon as I can ged to him. Uf I don'd done dot I vos afrait mein mutter vill nefer seen her leedle Hansie some more."

"I fancy I have had quite enough of Mexico for the present," smiled Frank. "The United States will do me a while longer, and so, if you are going home, Hans, Professor Scotch and myself will accompany you till we strike Uncle Sam's domain, at least."

A few days later, bidding their friends adieu, they left Mexico, taking their way northward to New Orleans, where new adventures awaited them, as the chapters to follow will prove.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STAMPEDE IN A CITY.

It was the day before Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the "Queen City of the South" was in her gayest attire, being thronged with visitors from the North and from almost every part of the world.

It was Monday, when Rex, king of the carnival, comes to town and takes possession of the city.

Early in the forenoon the river front in the vicinity of Canal Street was thronged with people seeking advantageous positions from which to witness the king's landing.

It was a jovial, good-natured gathering, such as is never seen in any other city. Every one seemed to have imbibed the spirit of the occasion, and there was no friction or unpleasantness. Every one was exceedingly polite and courteous, and all seemed to feel it a duty to make the occasion as pleasant for other folks as possible.

The shipping along the river was decorated, and flags flew everywhere. The sun never shone more brightly and New Orleans never presented more subtle allurements.

Seated in a private carriage that had stopped at a particularly favorable spot were Professor Scotch and Frank, who had arrived a few days before.

"Professor," said Frank, who was almost bursting with pent-up enthusiasm and youthful energy, "this makes a fellow feel that it is good to be living. In all the places we have visited, I have seen nothing like this. I am sorry Hans is no longer with us to enjoy it."

"And you will see nothing like it anywhere in this country but right here," declared the professor, who was also enthused. "Northern cities may get up carnivals, but they allow the spirit of commerce to crowd in and push aside the true spirit of pleasure. In all their pageants and processions may be seen schemes for advertising this, that or the other; but here you will see nothing of the kind. In the procession to-day and the parade to-morrow, you will see no trade advertisements, no schemes for calling attention to Dr. Somebody-or-other's cure for ingrowing corns, nothing but the beautiful and the artistic."

Frank laughed.

"It's seldom you speak like this, professor," he said. "You must be in love with the South."

"I am a Northerner, but I think the South very beautiful, and I admire the people of the South more than I can tell. I do not know as they are naturally more gentle and kind-hearted than Northerners, but they are certainly more courteous and chivalrous, despite their quick tempers and more passionate dispositions. Northerners are too brusque. If they ask pardon for rudeness, they do it as if they regretted the breath spent in uttering the words. It is quite the opposite with Southerners, for they seem——"

"Hold on, professor," interrupted Frank. "You may tell me all about that some other time. Hark! hear the whistles on the river? The king must be coming!"

"Yes, he is coming."

There was a stir among the people, a murmur ran over the great throng. Then the royal yacht, accompanied by more than a dozen other steamers, all gayly decorated, was seen approaching.

The great crowd began to cheer, hundreds of whistles shrieked and roared at the same instant, bands of music were playing, and, as the royal yacht drew near the levee at the foot of Canal Street, the booming of cannons added to the mad uproar of joy.

All over the great gathering of gayly dressed people handkerchiefs fluttered and hats were waved in the air, while laughing, excited faces were seen everywhere.

The mad excitement filled Frank Merriwell's veins, and he stood erect in the carriage, waving his hat and cheering with the cheering thousands, although there was such an uproar at that moment that he could scarcely hear his own voice.

The king, attired in purple and gold, was seen near the bow of the royal yacht, surrounded by courtiers and admirers.

To Frank's wonder, a dozen policemen had been able to keep Canal Street open for the procession from the levee as far as could be seen. Elsewhere, and on each side of the street, the throng packed thickly, but they seemed to aid the police in the work of holding the street clear, so there was no trouble at all. Not once had Frank seen the pushing and swaying so often seen when great crowds assemble in Northern cities, and not once had the policemen been compelled to draw a club to enforce orders.

As the royal yacht drew into the jetty a gathering of city officers and leading citizens formed to greet and welcome him. These gentlemen were known as "dukes of the realm," and constituted the royal court. They were decorated with badges of gold and bogus jewels.

The yacht drew up at the levee, and King Rex, accompanied by his escort, landed, where he was greeted with proper ceremony by the dukes of the realm.

Then the king was provided with a handsomely decorated carriage, which he entered, and a procession was formed. The king's carriage somewhat resembled a chariot, being drawn by four mettlesome coal-black horses, all gayly caparisoned with gold and silver trimmings and nodding plumes.

A magnificent band of music headed the procession, and then came a barge that was piled high with beautiful and fragrant flowers. In this barge was a girl who seemed to be dressed entirely in flowers, and there was a crown of flowers on her head. She was masked, but did not seem to be more than sixteen or seventeen years of age.

She was known as "the Queen of Flowers," and other girls, ladies of the court, dressed entirely in white, accompanied her.

The king's carriage followed the flower barge, and, directed by the queen, who was seated on a throne of flowers, the girls scattered flowers beneath the feet of the horses, now and then laughingly pelting some one in the throng with them.

As the procession started, the cannons boomed once more, and the steam whistles shrieked.

And then, in less than a minute, there came a startling interruption. The cheering of the people on one of the side streets turned to shrieks of terror and warning, and the crowd was seen to make a mad rush for almost any place of shelter.

"What's the matter, Frank?" asked Professor Scotch, in alarm.

"Don't know," was the reply, as Frank mounted to the carriage seat, on which he stood to obtain a view. "Why, it seems that there are wild cattle in the street, and they're coming this way."

"Good gracious!" gasped the professor. "Drive on, driver—get out of the way quickly!"

"That's impossible, sir," replied the driver, immediately. "If I drive on, we are liable to be overturned by the rushing crowd. It is safer to keep still and remain here."

"Those cattle look like Texas long-horns!" cried Frank.

"So they are, sir," assured the driver. "They have broken out of the yard in which they were placed this morning. They were brought here on a steamer."

"Texas long-horns on a stampede in a crowded city!" fluttered Frank. "That means damage—no end of it."

In truth, nearly half a hundred wild Texan steers, driven to madness by the shrieking whistles and thundering cannons, had broken out of the frailty constructed yard, and at least a dozen of them had stampeded straight toward Canal Street.

Persons crushed against each other and fell over each other in frantic haste to get out of the way for the cattle to pass. Some were thrown down and trampled on by the fear-stricken throng. Men shouted hoarsely, and women shrieked.

Mad with terror, blinded by dust, furious with the joy of sudden freedom, the Texan steers, heads lowered, horns glistening, eyes glowing redly and nostrils steaming, charged straight into the crowd.

It was a terrible spectacle.

"For Heaven's sake, is there no way of stopping those creatures?" cried Frank.

"We'll all be killed!" quavered Professor Scotch.

Into Canal Street rushed the crowd, and the procession was broken up in a moment. The one thought of everybody seemed to be to get out of the way of the steers.

The horses on the flower barge became unmanageable, turned short, snorting with terror, and upset the barge, spilling flowers, girls, and all into the street. Then, in some way, the animals broke away, leaving the wrecked barge where it had toppled.

The girls, with one exception, sprang up and fled in every direction.

The one exception was the Queen of Flowers, who lay motionless and apparently unconscious in the street, with the beautiful flowers piled on every side of her.

"She is hurt!" cried Frank, who was watching her. "Why doesn't some one pick her up?"

"They do not see her there amid the flowers," palpitated the professor. "They do not know she has not fled with the other girls!"

"The cattle—the steers will crush her!" shouted the driver.

"Not if I can save her!" rang out the clear voice of our hero.

Professor Scotch made a clutch at the lad, but too late to catch and hold him.

Frank leaped from the carriage, clearing the heads of a dozen persons, struck on his feet in the street, tore his way through the rushing, excited mob, and reached the side of the unconscious Flower Queen. He lifted her from the ground, and, at that very instant, a mad steer, with lowered head and bristling horns, charged blindly at them!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HOT BLOOD OF YOUTH.

A cry of horror went up from those who beheld the peril of the brave boy and the Queen of Flowers, for it looked as if both must be impaled by the wicked horns of the mad steer.

Well it was that Frank was a lad of nerve, with whom at such a moment to think was to act. Well it was that he had the muscles and strength of a trained athlete.

Frank did not drop the girl to save himself, as most lads would have done. She felt no heavier than a feather in his arms, but it seemed that he would be unable to save himself, if he were unincumbered.

Had he leaped ahead he could not have escaped. With all the energy he possessed, he sprang backward, at the same time swinging the girl away from the threatening horns, so that his own body protected her in case he was not beyond reach of the steer.

In such a case and in such a situation inches count, and it proved thus in this instance.

One of the steer's horns caught Frank's coat sleeve at the shoulder, and ripped it open to the flesh as far as his elbow, the sharp point seeming to slit the cloth like a keen knife.

But Frank was unharmed, and the unconscious girl was not touched.

Then the steer crashed into the flower barge.

Frank was not dazed by his remarkable escape, and he well knew the peril might not be over.

Like a leaping panther, the boy sprang from the spot, avoiding other mad steers and frantic men and women, darted here and there through the flying throng, and reached a place where he believed they would be safe.

It was a brave and nery act—the act of a true hero.

The stampeded steers dashed on, and the danger at that point was past. Men and women had been trampled and bruised, but, remarkable though it seemed, when the steers were finally captured or dispatched, it was found that no person had been killed outright.

Men crowded about Frank and the Flower Girl. The lad had placed the girl upon some steps, and he called for water.

"Remove her mask," directed some one. "Give her air."

"Yes, remove her mask!" cried scores of voices.

They were eager to see her face, that they might again recognize the girl who had passed through such peril.

Frank hesitated, although he also longed to look on the face of the girl he had saved. She was most beautifully formed for a girl of her age, and that her face was pretty he had not a doubt.

He reached out his hand to unfasten the mask. As he did so his wrist was clutched by strong fingers, and a panting voice hissed in his ear:

"Would you do it? Well, you shall not! I will take charge of that young lady, if you please!"

Looking over his shoulder, Frank saw the dark, excited face of a youth of twenty or twenty-one. That face was almost wickedly handsome, although there was something decidedly repellent about it. The eyes were black as midnight, while the lips were full and red.

With a twisting snap Frank freed his wrist.

"You?" he said, calmly—"who are you?"

"One who knows this unfortunate young lady, and has a right to protect her."

"Which is ver' true, sah," declared a man with a bristling white mustache and imperial, who stood just behind the youth with the dark face. "I give you my word of honah, sah, that it is true."

The words were spoken with great suavity and politeness, and Frank noted that the speaker seemed to have a military air.

Frank hesitated, and then straightened up, stepping back and bowing, as he said:

"That settles it, gentlemen. If you know the young lady, I have nothing more to say."

The young man instantly lifted the Flower Queen in his arms. As he did so she opened her eyes, and Frank saw she was looking straight at his face.

Then came a staggering surprise for the boy from the North. He saw the girl's lips part, and he distinctly heard her faintly exclaim:

"Frank Merriwell!"

Frank fell back a step, then started forward.

"You—you know me?" he cried.

Quick as a flash, the youth with the dark face passed the girl to the man with the white mustache and imperial, and the latter bore her through the throng to a carriage.

Frank would have followed, but the dark-faced youth blocked the way, saying, harshly:

"Hold on! You did her a service. How much do I owe you?"

"Stand aside!" came sharply from Frank's lips. "She knows me—she spoke my name! I must find out who she is!"

"That you cannot do."

"Who will prevent it?"

"I will!"

Frank measured the other from head to heels with his eyes.

"Stand aside!"

"Now, don't go to putting on any airs with me, my smart youngster. By sheer luck, you were able to save her from possible injury. Like all Northerners, you have your price for every service. How much do I owe you?"

Frank's face was hot with anger.

"You say 'like all Northerners,' but it is well for the South that you are not a representative Southerner. You are an insolent cad and a puppy!"

"You have insulted me!"

"I simply returned what you gave."

"And it shall cost you dear!" hissed the youth with the dark face.

Quickly he leaned forward and struck Frank's cheek with his open hand.

Then something else happened.

Like a bolt, Frank's fist shot out and caught the other under the chin, hurling him backward into the arms of a man behind him, where he lay gasping and dazed.

Frank would have rushed toward the carriage, but he saw it move swiftly away, carrying the mysterious Queen of Flowers, and, with deep regret, he realized he was too late.

The man with the bristling white mustache and imperial did not depart in the carriage, but he again forced his way through the crowd, and found his companion slowly recovering from the stunning blow he had received.

"Mistah Raymon', sah, what does this mean?" he cried, in amazement.

"It means that I have been insulted and struck!" hissed the one questioned, quivering with unutterable anger.

"Struck, sah!" cried the man, in unbounded amazement. "You were struck! Impossible, sah—impossible!"

"It is true!"

"Who struck you, sah?"

"This young coxcomb of a Northern cur!"

The man glared at Frank, who, with his hands on his hips, was quietly awaiting developments, apparently not at all alarmed. He did not quail in the least before the fierce, fire-eating look given him by the man with the bristling mustache and imperial.

"If this—ah!—young gentleman struck you, Mistah Raymon', sah, there can be but one termination of the affaiah. He will have to meet you, sah, on the field, or humbly apologize at once."

"That's right!" blustered the young man, fiercely. "I'll have his life, or an instant apology!"

Frank smiled as if he were quite amused.

"As I happen to feel that I am the one to whom an apology is due, you will have to be satisfied with taking my life," he said.

The youth with the dark face drew out a handsome card case, from which he extracted an engraved card, which he haughtily handed to Frank, who accepted it, and read aloud:

"'Mr. Rolf Raymond.' A very pretty name. Allow me; my card, Mr. Raymond. I am stopping at the St. Charles Hotel. You will be able to find me without difficulty."

"Rest assured that a friend of mine will call on you without delay, Mr. Merriwell," stiffly said Raymond, thrusting Frank's card into his pocket.

Professor Scotch had forced his way through the crowd in time to catch the drift of this, and the full significance of it dawned upon him, filling him with amazement and horror.

"This will not do—it will never do!" he spluttered. "Dueling is a thing of the past; there is a law for it! I will not have it! Frank, you hot-headed young rascal, what do you mean by getting into such a scrape?"

"Keep cool, professor," said the boy, calmly. "If this young gentleman insists on forcing me into a duel, I cannot take water—I must give him satisfaction."

"I tell you I won't have it!" roared the little man, in his big, hoarse voice, his face getting very red. "I am your guardian. You are a minor, and I forbid you to fight a duel."

"If Mistah Merriwell will apologize, it is possible that, considering his age, sah, Mistah Raymon' will not press this mattah," smoothly said the man with the bristling mustache.

"What has he to apologize for?" asked Scotch.

"He struck Mistah Raymon', sah."

"Did you do that, Frank?"

"Yes; but he struck me first."

"He did, eh?" roared the professor, getting very red in the face. "Well, I don't think you'll apologize, Frank, and you're not going to fight. You're a boy; let him take a man. If he wants to fight anybody, I'm just his hairpin, and I'll agree to do him up with any kind of a weapon from a broad-ax to a bologna sausage!"

CHAPTER XV.

MYSTERY OF THE FLOWER QUEEN.

Frank looked at Professor Scotch in amazement, for he had never known the little man to use such language or show such spirit in the face of actual danger.

"I wonder if the professor has been drinking, and, if so, where he got his drinks?" was the thought that flashed through Frank's mind.

"Mistah Raymon', sah, has no quarrel with you, sah," said the individual with the bristling mustache. "If there is to be any further trouble, sah, I will attend to your case."

"You? Who are you?"

"I, sah, am Colonel La Salle Vallier, the ver' particular friend of Mistah Raymon'. If yo' say so, we will exchange cards, sah."

"Then we will exchange. Here is mine."

"And here, sah, is mine."

"This," said Colonel Vallier, "precludes yo' from interfering in this othah affair, Professor Scotch."

"Hey? It does! How's that, I'd like to know?"

"I am at your service, professor," bowed the colonel. "You shall make such arrangements as yo' choose. Pistols or swords make no difference to me, for I am a dead shot and an expert swordsman. I trust yo' will excuse us now, gentlemen. We will see yo' later. Good-day."

He locked arms with the young man, and they turned away, with a sweeping salute. The throng parted, and they passed through.

Professor Scotch stood staring after them till Frank tapped him on the shoulder, saying:

"Come, professor, we may as well get out of this."

"Excuse-a me, señors," said a soft, musical voice, and a young man with a Spanish face and pink cheeks was bowing before them. "I t'ink you need-a to be tole 'bout it."

"Told about what?" demanded Frank, who took an instant dislike to this softly smiling fellow with the womanish voice and gentle ways. "What do you mean?"

"Excuse-a me," repeated the stranger, who was gaudily dressed in many colors. "Yo' are strangar-a-rs from de Noath, an' yo' do not know-a de men what you have a de troubl' wid. Excuse-a me; I am Manuel Mazaro, an' I know-a dem. De young man is son of de ver' reech Señor Roderick Raymon', dat everybody in New Orle'n know. He is ver' wile—ver' reckless. Ha! He love-a to fight, an' he has been in two duel, dough he is ver' young. But de odare, señors—de man wid de white mustache—ah!"

Manuel Mazaro threw up his hands with an expression that plainly said words failed him.

"Well, what of the other?" asked Frank, impatiently.

"Señors," purred Mazaro, "he is de wor-r-rst fightar ever leeve! He like-a to fight fo' de sport of keelin'. Take-a my advice, señors, an' go 'way from New Orle'n'. Yo' make ver' gre't mistake to get in troubl' wid dem."

"Thank you for your kind advice," said Frank, quietly. "I presume it is well meant, but it is wasted. This is a free country, and a dozen fire-eaters like Colonel La Salle Vallier and Mr. Rolf Raymond cannot drive us out of New Orleans till we are ready to go. Eh, professor?"

"Well, I guess not!" rumbled the little man, stiffening up and looking as fierce as he could.

"Oh, ver' well, ver' well," said Mazaro, lifting his eyebrows, the ghost of a scornful smile on his face. "You know-a your own biz. Good-day, señors."

"Good-day, sir."

They passed through the crowd and sought their carriage, which was waiting for them, although the driver had begun to think they had deserted him.

The procession, which had been broken up by the stampeded steers, was again forming, making it evident that the pleasure-loving people were determined that the unfortunate occurrence should not ruin the day.

The Queen of Flowers and her subjects had vanished, and the flower barge was a wreck, so a part of the programme could not be carried out.

The procession formed without the flower barge, and was soon on its way once more, the band playing its liveliest tune.

The way was lined with tens of thousands of spectators, while flags fluttered from every building. All along the line the king was greeted with cheers and bared heads. It was a most magnificent spectacle.

The carriage bearing Frank and the professor had found a place in the procession through the skill of the driver, and the man and boy were able to witness this triumphal entrance of King Rex to the Crescent City.

At the City Hall, the Duke of Crescent City, who was the mayor, welcomed Rex with great pomp and ceremony, presenting him the keys and the freedom of the city.

Shortly afterward, the king mysteriously disappeared, and the procession broke up and dispersed.

Frank and the professor returned to the St. Charles Hotel, both feeling decidedly hungry.

Frank had little to say after they had satisfied their hunger and were in their suite of rooms. He had seemed to be thinking all the while, and the professor again repeated a question that he had asked several times:

"What in the world makes you so glum, Frank? What are you thinking about?"

"The Queen of Flowers," was the reply.

"My boy," cried the professor, enthusiastically, "I am proud of you—yes, sir, proud! But, at one time, I thought you were done for. That steer was right upon you, and I could see no way for you to escape the creature's horns. I held my breath, expecting to see you impaled. And then I saw you escape with no further injury than the slitting of your coat sleeve, but to this minute I can't say how you did it."

Frank scarcely seemed to hear the professor's words. He sat with his hand to his head, his eyes fixed on a pattern in the carpet.

"She knew my name," he muttered. "She spoke it distinctly. There can be no doubt about that."

Professor Scotch groaned dismally.

"There you go again!" he exclaimed. "Now, what are you mumbling about?"

"The Queen of Flowers."

"Confound the Queen of Flowers!" exploded Scotch. "You saved her life at the risk of your own, but you don't know her from Adam."

"She knows me."

"How is that?"

"She spoke my name."

"You must be mistaken."

"I am not."

Professor Scotch looked incredulous.

"Why, she was unconscious."

"She was when I saved her from the steer."

"And she recovered afterward?"

"Yes; just as Colonel Vallier was taking her to the carriage."

"And she spoke your name then?"

"Yes. First I saw her open her eyes, and I noticed that she was looking straight at me; then I heard her distinctly but faintly pronounce my name."

The professor still looked doubtful.

"You were excited, my boy, and you imagined it."

"No, professor, it was no case of imagination; I know she called me Frank Merriwell, but what puzzles me is the fact that this young cad, Raymond, was determined I should not speak with her, and she was carried away quickly. Why should they wish to keep us from having a few words of conversation?"

"That is a question I cannot answer, Frank."

"There's a mystery here, professor—a mystery I mean to solve. I am going to find out who the Queen of Flowers really is."

"And get into more trouble, you hot-headed young rascal. I should think you were in trouble enough already, with a possible duel impending."

A twinkle of mischief showed in Frank's eyes.

"How about yourself, professor?"

"Oh, the young scoundrel won't dare to meet me," blustered Scotch, throwing out his chest and strutting about the room.

"But he is not the one you will have to meet. You exchanged cards with Colonel La Salle Vallier."

"As a mere matter of courtesy."

"That might go in the North, but you exchanged under peculiar circumstances, and, taking everything into consideration, I have no doubt but you will be waited on by a friend of Colonel Vallier. You will have to meet him."

"Hey!" roared the professor, turning pale. "Is it possible that such a result will come from a mere matter of politeness? Why, I'm no fighter, Frank—I'm no blood-and-thunder ruffian! I did not mean to hint that I wished to meet the colonel on the field of honor."

"But you have, and you can't back out now. You heard what Manuel Mazaro had to say about him. He is a dead shot and a skilled swordsman. Oh, professor, my heart bleeds for you! But you shall have a great funeral, and I'll plant tiddly-wink posies all over your grave."

"Cæsar's ghost!" groaned Scotch, collapsing on a chair, and looking very ill indeed. "This is a terrible scrape! I don't feel well. I fear I am going to be very ill."

CHAPTER XVI.

PROFESSOR SCOTCH FEELS ILL.

Frank found it impossible to restrain his laughter longer, and he gave way to it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he merrily shouted. "You surely look ill, professor! I'd like to have your picture now! Ha, ha, ha! It would make a first-rate picture for a comic paper."

"This is no laughing matter," came dolefully from Scotch. "I don't know how to fire a pistol, and I

never had a sword in my hand in all my life. And to think of standing up and being shot full of holes or carved like a turkey by that fire-eater with the fierce mustache! It is awful, awful!"

"But you were eager to fight the young fellow."

"No, I was not. I was simply putting up a bluff, as you call it. I was doing my level best to get you out of the scrape, Frank. I didn't think he would fight me, and so I pretended to be eager to meet him. And now see what a scrape I am in! Oh, my soul and body! What can I do?"

"Fight."

"Never!"

"I don't see how you can get out of it."

"I'll run away."

In a moment Frank became very grave.

"That is impossible, professor," he said, with the utmost apparent sincerity. "Think of the disgrace! It would be in all the papers that Professor Scotch, a white-livered Northerner, after insulting Colonel La Salle Vallier and presenting his card, had taken to his heels in the most cowardly fashion, and had fled from the city without giving the colonel the satisfaction that is due from one gentleman to another. The Northern papers would copy, and you would find yourself the butt of ridicule wherever you went."

The professor let out a groan that was more dismal and doleful than any sound that had previously issued from his lips.

"What can I do?" he gasped.

"There is one way to get out of the difficulty."

"Name it! name it!" shouted the wretched man. "I'll do anything!"

"Then commit suicide."

The professor collapsed again.

"Are you entirely heartless?" he moaned. "Can you joke when I am suffering such misery?"

His face was covered with perspiration, and he was all a-quiver, so that Frank was really touched.

"You can apologize, professor."

"Apologize for what? I don't know that I have done anything to apologize for; but then I'll apologize rather than fight."

"Well, I guess you'll be able to get out of it some way."

But it was no easy thing to reassure the agitated man, as Frank soon discovered.

"I'll tell you what, professor," said the boy; "you may send a representative—a substitute."

"I don't think it will be easy to find a substitute."

"Oh, I'll find one."

"Perhaps Colonel Vallier will not accept him."

"But you must be too ill to meet the colonel, and then he'll have to accept the substitute or nothing."

"But who will act as substitute? I don't know any one in New Orleans who'll go and be shot in my place."

"Barney Mulloy has agreed to join us here, and he may arrive on any train," went on Frank, mentioning an old school chum.

"That wild Irishman!" cried the professor, hopefully. "Why, he'd fight a pack of wildcats and think it fun!"

"Yes, Barney is happiest when in trouble. According to my uncle's will, I am at liberty to carry a companion besides my guardian on my travels, and so, when Hans Dunnerwust got tired of traveling and went home, I sent for Barney, knowing he'd be a first-class fellow to have with me. He finally succeeded in making arrangements to join us, and I have a telegram from him, stating that he would start in time to reach here before to-morrow. If you are forced into trouble, professor, Barney can serve as a substitute."

"That sounds very well, but Colonel Vallier would not accept a boy."

"Then Barney can disguise himself and pretend to be a man."

"I'm afraid it won't work. Not that Barney Mulloy will hesitate to help me out of the scrape, for he was the most dare-devil chap in Fardale Academy, next to yourself, Frank. You were the leader in all kinds of daring adventures, but Barney made a good second. But he can't pass muster as a

man."

"Perhaps he can. But you have not yet received a challenge from Colonel Vallier; so don't worry about what may not happen."

"I can't help worrying. I shall not take any further pleasure in life till we get out of this dreadful city."

"Oh, brace up! Come on; let's go out and see the sights."

"No, Frank—no, my boy. I am indisposed—I am quite ill. Besides that, I might meet Colonel Vallier. I shall remain in my room for the present."

So Frank was obliged to go out alone, and, when he returned for supper, he found the professor in bed, looking decidedly like a sick man.

"I am very ill, Frank—very ill," Scotch declared. "I fear I am in for a protracted illness."

"Nonsense, professor! Why, you'll miss all the fun to-morrow, and we're here to see the sport."

"Confound the sport! I wish we had stayed away from this miserable place!"

"Why, you were very enthusiastic over New Orleans and the people of the South this morning."

"Hang the people of the South—hang them all! They're too hot-headed—they're altogether too ready to fight over nothing. Now, I'm a peaceable man, and I can't fight—I simply can't!"

"Well, well! I don't fancy you'll have to fight," said Frank, whose conscience was beginning to smite him.

"Then I'll have to apologize, and I'll be jiggered if I know what I'm going to apologize for!"

"What makes you so sure you'll have to apologize?"

"Look at this—read it!"

The professor drew an envelope from beneath his pillow and passed it to Frank. The envelope contained a note, which the boy was soon reading. It was from Colonel Vallier, and demanded an apology, giving the professor until the following noon in which to make it, and hinting that a meeting of honor would surely follow if the apology was not forthcoming.

"Whew!" whistled Frank. "This does seem like business. When did you receive this?"

"Shortly after you went out."

"I scarcely thought the colonel would press the affair."

"There's a letter for you on the table."

"From whom is it?"

"Don't know. Raymond, I suppose. The same messenger brought them both."

Frank picked up the letter and tore it open. It proved to be from Rolf Raymond, and was worded much like the note to Professor Scotch.

The warm blood of anger mounted to the boy's cheeks.

"This settles it!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Rolf Raymond shall have all the fight he wants. I am a good pistol shot and more than a fair swordsman. At Fardale I was the champion with the foils. If he thinks I am a coward and a greenhorn because I come from the North, he may find he has made a serious mistake."

The professor literally writhed in the bed.

"But you may be killed, and I'd never forgive myself," he moaned.

"Killed or not, I can't show the white feather!" cried Frank, warmly.

"I do not believe in duelling."

"Nor do I, but I have found it necessary to do some things I do not believe in. I am not going to run, and I am not going to apologize, for I believe an apology is due me, if any one. This being the case, I'll have to fight."

"Oh, what a scrape—what a dreadful scrape!" groaned Scotch, wringing his hands. "Why did we ever come here?"

"Oh, do brace up, professor!" cried Frank, impatiently. "We have been in worse scrapes than this, and you were not so badly broken up. It was only a short time ago down in Mexico that Pacheco's bandits hemmed us in on one side and there was a raging volcano on the other; but still we live and have our health. I'll guarantee we'll pull through this scrape, and I'll bet we come out with flying colors."

"You may feel like meeting Rolf Raymond, but I simply can't stand up before that fire-eating colonel."

"There seems to be considerable bluster about this business, and I'll wager something you won't have to stand up before him if you will put on a bold front and make-believe you are eager to meet him."

"Oh, my boy, you don't know—you can't tell!"

"Come, professor, get out of bed and dress. We want to see the parade this evening. They say it will be great."

"Oh, I wish the parades were all at the bottom of the sea!"

"We couldn't see them then, for we're not mermaids or fishes."

"Will you never be serious?"

"I don't know; perhaps I may, when I'm too sick to be otherwise. Are you going to get up?"

"No."

"Do you mean to stay in bed?"

"Yes."

"And miss the parade to-night?"

"I don't care for the old parade."

"Well, I do, and I'm going to see it."

"Will you see some newspaper reporters and state that I am very ill—dangerously ill—that I am dying. Do this favor for me, Frank. Colonel Vallier can't force a dying man to meet him in a duel."

"I am shocked and pained, professor, that you should wish me to tell a lie, even to save your life; but I'll see what I can do for you."

CHAPTER XVII.

LED INTO A TRAP.

Frank ate alone, and went forth alone to see the parade. The professor remained in bed, apparently in a state of utter collapse.

The night after Mardi Gras in New Orleans the Krewe of Proteus holds its parade and ball. The parade is a most dazzling and magnificent spectacle, and the ball is no less splendid.

The streets along which the parade must pass were lined with a dense mass of people on both sides, while windows and balconies were filled.

Shortly after the appointed time the parade started.

It consisted of a series of elaborate and gorgeous floats, the whole forming a line many blocks in length.

Hundreds of flaring torches threw their lights over the moving *tableau*, and it was indeed a splendid dream.

Never before had Frank seen anything of the kind one-half as beautiful, and he was sincerely glad they had reached the Crescent City in time to be present at Mardi Gras.

The stampede of the Texan steers and the breaking up of the parade that day had made a great sensation in New Orleans. Every one had heard of the peril of the Flower Queen, and how she was rescued by a handsome youth who was said to be a visitor from the North, but whom nobody seemed to know.

Now, the Krewe of Proteus was composed entirely of men, and it was their policy to have nobody but men in their parade. These men were to dress as fairies of both sexes, as they were required to appear in the *tableau* of "Fairyland."

But the managers of the affair had conceived the idea that it would be a good scheme to reconstruct the wrecked flower barge and have the Queen of Flowers in the procession.

But the Queen of Flowers seemed to be a mystery to every one, and the managers knew not how to reach her. They made many inquiries, and it became generally known that she was desired for the procession.

Late in the afternoon the managers received a brief note, purporting to be from the Flower Queen, assuring them that she would be on hand to take part in the evening parade.

The flower barge was put in repair, and piled high with the most gorgeous and dainty flowers, and, surmounting all, was a throne of flowers.

Before the time for starting the mysterious masked queen and her attendants in white appeared.

When the procession passed along the streets the queen was recognized everywhere, and the throngs cheered her loudly.

But, out of the thousands, hundreds were heard to say:

"Where is the strange youth who saved her from the mad steer? He should be on the same barge."

Frank's heart leaped as he saw the mysterious girl in the procession.

"There she is!" was his thought. "How can I follow her? How can I trace her and find out who she is?"

As the barge came nearer, he forced his way to the very edge of the crowd that lined the street, without having decided what he would do, but hoping she would see and recognize him.

When the barge was almost opposite, he stepped out a little from the line and lifted his hat.

She saw him!

In a moment, as if she had been looking for him, she caught the crown of flowers from her head and tossed them toward him, crying:

"For the hero!"

He caught them skillfully with his right hand, his hat still in his left. And the hot blood mounted to his face as he saw her tossing kisses toward him with both hands.

"What's it mean?" asked a spectator.

"Don't know," answered another.

But a third cried:

"I'll tell you what it means! That young fellow is the one who saved the Queen of Flowers from the mad steer! I know him, for I saw him do it, and I observed his face."

"That explains why she flung her crown to him and called him the hero."

"Yes, that explains it."

"Three cheers for the hero!"

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

The crowd burst into wild cheering, and there was a general struggle to get a fair view of Frank Merriwell, who had suddenly become the object of attention, the splendors of the parade being forgotten for the time.

Frank was confused and bewildered, and he sought to get away as quickly as possible, hoping to follow the Queen of Flowers. But he found his way blocked on every hand, and a hundred voices seemed to be asking:

"What's your name?"

"Where do you belong?"

"Won't you please tell us your name?"

"Haven't I seen you in New York?"

"Aren't you from Chicago?"

Somewhat dazed though he was, Frank noted that, beyond a doubt, the ones who were so very curious and who so rudely demanded his name were visitors in New Orleans. More than that, from their appearance, they were people who would not think of such acts at home, but now were eager to know the Northern lad who by one nifty and daring act had made himself generally talked about in a Southern city.

Some of the women declared he was "So handsome!" and "So manly!" to Frank's increasing dismay.

"I'd give a hundred dollars to get out of this!" he thought.

He must have spoken the words aloud, although he was not aware of it, for a voice at his elbow, low and musical, said:

"Come dis-a-way, señor, an' I will tek yo' out of it."

Frank saw Manuel Mazaro close at hand. The Spaniard—for such Mazaro was—bowed gracefully, and smiled pleasantly upon the boy from the North.

A moment Frank hesitated, and then he said:

"Lead on; I'll follow."

Quickly Mazaro skirted the edge of the throng for a short distance, plunged into the mass, made sure Frank was close behind, and then forced his way through to a doorway.

"Dis-a way," he invited.

Frank hesitated.

"Where does it lead?"

"Through a passage to annodare street, señor."

Frank felt his revolver in his pocket, and he knew it was loaded for instant use.

"I want to get ahead of this procession—I want to see the Queen of Flowers again."

"I will tek yo' there, señor."

"Lead on."

Frank passed his hand through the crown of flowers, to which he still clung. Without being seen, he took his revolver from his pocket, and held it concealed in the mass of flowers. It was a self-cocker, and he could use it skillfully.

As Mazaro had said, the doorway led into a passage. This was very narrow, and quite dark.

No sooner were they fairly in this place than Frank regretted that he had come, for he realized that it was a most excellent chance for assassination and robbery.

His one fear was of being attacked behind. He was quite ready for any that might rise in front.

"Dis-a way, señor," Mazaro kept repeating. "Dis-a way."

Frank fancied the fellow was speaking louder than was necessary. In fact, he could not see that it was necessary for Mazaro to speak at all.

And then the boy was sure he heard footsteps behind them!

He was caught between two fires—he was trapped!

Frank's first impulse was to leap forward, knock Mazaro down, and take to his heels, keeping straight on through the passage.

A second thought followed the first quite swiftly.

He knew not where the passage led, and he knew not what pitfalls it might contain.

At that moment Frank felt a thrill of actual fear, nervy though he was; but he understood that he must not let fear get the best of him, and he instantly flung it off.

His ears were open, his eyes were open, and every sense was on the alert.

"Let them come!" he almost exclaimed, aloud. "I will give them a warm reception!"

Then he noticed that they passed a narrow opening, like a broken door, and, the next moment he seemed to feel cat-like footfalls at his very heels.

In a twinkling Frank whirled about, crying:

"Hold up where you are! I am armed, and I'll shoot if crowded!"

He had made no mistake, for his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness of the passage, and he could see three dark figures blocking his retreat along the passage.

For one brief second his eyes turned the other way, and it seemed that Manuel Mazaro had been joined by two or three others, for he saw several forms in that direction.

This sudden action of the trapped boy had filled these fellows with surprise and dismay, and curses of anger broke from their lips, the words being hissed rather than spoken.

Frank knew he must attract attention in some way, and so of a sudden he fired a shot into the air.

The flash of his revolver showed him several dark, villainous faces.

"Upon him!" cried Mazaro, in Spanish. "Be quick about it!"

"Back!" shouted Frank, lifting the revolver. "I'll not waste another bullet!"

"Thot's th' talk, me laddybuck!" rang out a familiar voice. "Give th' spalpanes cold lead, an' plinty av it, Frankie! O'im wid yez!"

"Barney Mulloy!" Frank almost screamed, in joyous amazement.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BARNEY ON HAND.

"That's me name, an' this is me marruck!" cried the Irish lad, from the darkness.

There was a hurrying rush of feet, and then—smack! smack!—two dark figures were seen flying through the darkness as if they had been struck by battering-rams.

"Hurrah!" cheered Frank, thrusting the revolver into his pocket, and hastening to leap into the battle. "Give 'em glory, Barney!"

"Hurro!" shouted the Irish youth. "Th' United Shtates an' Ould Oireland foriver! Nothing can shtand against th' combination!"

This unexpected assault was too much for Manuel Mazaro and his satellites.

"Car-r-r-ramba!" snarled the Spaniard. "Dis treek is spoiled! We will have to try de odare one, pardnares."

"We're reddy fer yer thricks, ye shnakes!" cried Barney.

"Are you armed?" asked Frank.

"To th' muzzle wid grape-shot an' canister!" was the reply.

But the boys were not compelled to resort to deadly weapons, for the Spaniard and his gang suddenly took to their heels, and seemed to melt away in the darkness.

"Musha! musha!" gasped Barney. "Where hiv they gone, Oi dunno?"

"They've skipped."

"An' lift us widout sayin' good-avenin'?"

"So it seems."

"Th' impoloight rascals! They should be ashamed av thimsilves!"

"Barney!"

"Frankie!"

"At school you had a way of always showing up just when you were needed most, and you have not gotten over it."

"It's harrud to tache an ould dog new thricks, Frankie."

"You don't want to learn any new tricks; the old ones you know are all right. Barney, give me your hand."

"Frankie, here it is, an' I'm wid yez, me b'y, till Oi have ter lave yez, which won't be in a hurry, av Oi know mesilf."

The two lads clasped hands in the darkness of the passage.

"Now," said Frank, "to get out of this place."

"Th' sooner th' quicker."

"Which way shall we go?"

"Better go th' way we came in."

"Right, Barney. But how in the world did you happen to appear at such an opportune moment? That sticks me."

"Oi saw yez, me b'y, whin th' crowd was cheerin' fer yez, but Oi couldn't get to yez, though Oi troied me bist."

"And you followed."

"Oi did, but it's lost yez Oi would, av ye wasn't sane to come in here by thim as wur watchin' av yez."

"Which was dead lucky for me."

"Thot it wur, me darlint, unliss ye wanter to shoot th' spalpanes ye wur wid. Av they'd crowded yez, Oi reckon ye'd found a way to dispose av th' lot."

"They were about to crowd me when I fired into the air."

"An' th' flash av th' revolver showed me yer face."

"That's how you were sure it was me, is it?"

"Thot wur wan way. Fer another, Oi hearrud yer voice, an' ye don't suppose Oi wouldn't know thot av Oi should hear it astraddle av th' North Pole, do yez?"

"Well, I am sure I knew your voice the moment I heard it, and the sound gave no small amount of

satisfaction."

The boys now hurried back along the narrow passage, and soon reached the doorway by which they had entered.

The procession had passed on, and the great crowd of people had melted from the street.

As soon as they were outside the passage, Barney explained that he had arrived in town that night, and had hurried to the St. Charles Hotel, but had found Professor Scotch in bed, and Frank gone.

"Th' profissor was near scared to death av me," said Barney. "He wouldn't let me in th' room till th' bellboy had described me two or thray toimes over, an' whin Oi did come in, he had his head under th' clothes, an', be me soul! I thought by th' sound that he wur shakin' dice. It wuz the tathe av him chattering together."

Frank was convulsed with laughter, while Barney went on:

"'Profissor,' sez Oi, 'av it's doice ye're shakin', Oi'll take a hand at tin cints a corner.'"

"What did he do then?"

"He looked out at me over the edge av th' bed-sprid, an' he sez, sez he, 'Are ye sure ye're yersilf, Barney Mulloy? or are ye Colonel Sally de la Vilager'—or something av th' sort—'in disguise?'"

Frank laughed harder than before.

"What did you do then, Barney?"

"Oi looked at him, an' thot wur all Oi said. Oi didn't know what th' mon mint, an' he samed to be too broke up to tell. Oi asked him where yo wur, an' he said ye'd gone out to see th' parade. Whin Oi found out thot wur all Oi could get out av him, Oi came out an' looked fer yez."

When Frank had ceased to laugh, he explained the meaning of the professor's strange actions, and it was Barney's turn to laugh.

"So it's a duel he is afraid av, is it?"

"Yes."

"An' he wants a substitute?"

"Yes."

"Begobs, it's niver a duel was Oi in, but the profissor wuz koind to me at Fardale, an' it's a debt av gratitude Oi owe him, so Oi'll make me bluff."

"I do not believe Colonel Vallier will meet any one but Professor Scotch, but the professor will be too ill to meet him, so he will have to accept a substitute, or go without a fight."

"To tell ye th' truth, Frankie, Oi'd rather he'd refuse to accept, but it's an iligant bluff Oi can make."

"You're all right, Barney."

"Tell me what brought this duel aboit."

So Frank told the whole story about the rescue of the Flower Queen, the appearance of Rolf Raymond and Colonel Vallier, and how the masked girl had called his name just as they were taking her away, with the result already known to the reader.

Barney was intensely interested.

"An' thot wur her Oi saw in th' parade to-noight?"

"Yes."

"She flung ye some flowers?"

"She did. It was her crown of flowers. I still have it here, although it is somewhat crushed."

"Ah, Frankie, me b'y, it's a shly dog ye are! Th' girruls wur foriver getting shtuck on yez, an' Oi dunno what ye hiv been doin' since l'avin' Fardale. It's wan av yer mashes this must be."

"I've made no mashes, Barney."

"Not m'anim' to, perhaps, but ye can't hilp it, laddybuck, fer they will get shtuck on yez, av ye want thim to or not. Ye don't hiv ter troy to catch a girrul, Frankie."

"But I give you my word that I cannot imagine who this can be. All the curiosity in my nature is aroused, and I am determined to know her name before I rest."

"Well, b'y, Oi'm wid yez. What shall we do?"

"Go to the place where the Krewe of Proteus holds its ball."

"Lade on."

As both were strangers in New Orleans, they did not know how to make the shortest cut to the ballroom, and Frank found it impossible to obtain a carriage. They were delayed most exasperatingly, and, when they arrived at the place where the ball was to be held, the procession had broken up, and the Queen of Flowers was within the ballroom.

"This is most unfortunate!" cried Frank, in dismay. "I meant to get here ahead of the procession, so that I could speak to her before she got inside."

"Well, let's go in an' spake to her now."

"We can't."

"Whoy not?"

"This is a very exclusive affair."

"An' we're very ixclusive pable."

"Only those having invitations can enter the ballroom."

"Is thot so? Thin it's outside we're lift. What can we do about thot?"

"Nothing."

"Is it too late to git inoitations?"

"They can't be bought, like tickets."

"Well, what koind av a shindig do ye call this, Oi dunno?"

Barney was thoroughly disgusted.

Frank explained that Professor Scotch had been able to procure invitations, but neither of them had fancied they would care to attend the ball, so the opportunity had been neglected.

"Whinever Oi can get something fer nothing, Oi take it," said Barney. "It's a use Oi can make fer most things Oi get."

The two boys lingered outside the building. Frank hoped the Flower Queen would come out, and he would be able to speak to her before she entered a carriage and was carried away.

Sweet strains of music floated down to the ears of the restless lads, and, with each passing moment, Frank grew more and more disgusted with himself.

"To think that I might be in there—might be waltzing with the Queen of Flowers at this moment, if I had asked the professor to obtain the invitations!" he cried.

"It's harrud luck!" said Barney; "but ye'll know betther next toime."

"Next time will be too late. In some way, I must meet this girl and speak to her. I must, and I will!"

"That's th' shtuff, me b'y! Whiniver ye say anything loike thot, ye always git there wid both fate. Oi'll risk yez."

Two men in dress suits came out to smoke and get a breath of air. They stood conversing within a short distance of the boys.

"She has been the sensation of the day," said one. "The whole city is wondering who she is."

"She seems determined to remain a mystery."

"Yes, for she has vanished from the ballroom in a most unaccountable manner. No one saw her take her departure."

"Not even Rolf Raymond."

"No. He is as much mystified as anybody. The fellow knows her, but he positively refuses to disclose her identity."

Frank's hand had fallen on Barney's arm with a grip of iron, and the fingers were sinking deeper and deeper into the Irish lad's flesh as these words fell on their ears.

"It is said that the young fellow who saved her from the steer to-day does not know her."

"No. She saw him in the crowd to-night, and flung him her crown, calling him a hero. He was nearly mobbed by the crowd, that was determined to know his name, but he escaped in some way, and has not been seen since."

"That settles it!" Frank hissed in Barney's ear. "They are speaking of the Flower Queen."

"Sure," returned the Irish lad; "an' av yersilf, Frankie, b'y."

"She is no longer in the ballroom."

"No."

"We are wasting our time waiting here."

"Roight ye are."

"Then we will wait no longer. Come, we'll go to the hotel."

CHAPTER XIX.

A HUMBLE APOLOGY.

Barely were they in their apartments at the hotel when there came a knock on the door, and a boy entered, bearing a salver on which were two cards.

"Colonel La Salle Vallier and Mr. Rolf Raymond," read Frank. "Bring them up."

"What's that?" roared Professor Scotch, from the bed. "Are you crazy?"

Frank hustled the boy out of the room, whispering:

"Bring them up, and admit them without knocking."

He slipped a quarter into the boy's hand, and the little fellow grinned and hurried away.

Frank turned back to find Professor Scotch, in his night robe, standing square in the middle of the bed, wildly waving his arms, and roaring:

"Lock the door—barricade it—keep them out! If those desperadoes are admitted here, this room will run red with gore!"

"That's right, professor," agreed Frank. "We'll settle their hash right here and at once. We'll cook 'em."

"Whoop!" shouted the little professor, in his big, hoarse voice. "This is murder—assassination! Lock the door, I say! I am in no condition to receive visitors."

"Be calm, professor," chirped Frank, soothingly.

"Be calm, profissor," echoed Barney, serenely.

"Be calm!" bellowed the excited little man. "How can I be calm on the eve of murder and assassination? I am an unarmed man, and I am not even dressed!"

"Niver moind a little thing loike thot," purred the Irish lad.

"It's of no consequence," declared Frank, placidly.

"No consequence!" shouted Scotch. "Oh, you'll drive me crazy! You want me to be killed! It is a plot to have me murdered! I see through the vile scheme! I'll call the police!"

He rushed into the front room, and flung up a window, from which he howled:

"Fire! Police!"

He would have shrieked murder and several other things, but Frank and Barney dragged him back and closed the window.

"Great Scott!" gasped Frank. "It'll be a wonder if the whole police force of the city does not come rushing up here."

"Perhaps they'll not be able to locate th' spot from which th' croy came," said Barney. "Let us hope not."

"Yes, let us hope not."

The professor squirmed out of the grasp of the two boys, and made a wild dash for the door.

Just before he reached it, the door was flung open, and Colonel Vallier, followed by Rolf Raymond, strode into the room.

The colonel and the professor met just within the doorway.

The collision was violent, and both men recoiled and sat down heavily upon the floor, while Rolf Raymond barely saved himself from falling astride the colonel's neck.

Sitting thus, the two men glared at each other, the colonel being in a dress suit, while the professor wore a night robe.

Frank and Barney could not restrain their laughter.

Then a most remarkable thing happened.

Professor Scotch became so angry at what he considered the unwarranted intrusion of the visitors that he forgot how he was dressed, forgot to be scared, and grew fierce as a raging lion.

Without rising, he leaned forward, and shook his fist under Colonel Vallier's nose, literally roaring:

"What do you mean by entering this room without knocking, you miserable old blowhard? You ought to have your face thumped, and, by thunder! I believe I can do it!"

"Sah!" gasped the colonel, in the greatest amazement and dismay.

"Don't 'sah' me, you measly old fraud!" howled Scotch, waving his fists in the air. "I don't believe in fighting, but this is about my time to scrap. If you don't apologize for the intrusion, may I be blown to ten thousand fragments if I don't give you a pair of beautiful black eyes!"

"Sah, there seems to be some mistake, sah," fluttered Colonel Vallier, turning pale.

"You made the mistake!" thundered Scotch, leaping to his feet like a jumping jack. "Get up here, and let me knock you down!"

"I decline to be struck, sah."

"You don't dare to get up!" howled the excited little man, growing still worse, as the colonel seemed to shrink and falter. "Why, I can lick you in a fraction of no time! You've been making lots of fighting talk, and now it's my turn. Get up and put up your fists."

"Will somebody kindly hold this lunatic?" palpitated Colonel Vallier. "I am no prize-fightah, gentlemen."

"That isn't my lookout," said the professor, who was forcing things while they ran his way. "Get up and take off your coat! We'll settle this affair without delay."

"With pistols, sah?"

"Yes, with pistols, if you want to!" cried the professor, to the amazement of the boys. "I am ready, sir. We will settle it with pistols, at once, in this room."

"But this is no place for a duel, sah; yo' should know that, sah."

"This is just the place."

"The one who survives will be arrested, sah."

"There won't be a survivor, so you needn't fear arrest."

"No survivah, sah?"

"No."

"How is that?"

"I'll tell you how it is. You are such a blamed coward that you won't fight me with your fists, for fear I will give you the thumping you deserve; but you know you are a good pistol shot, and you think I am not, so you hope to shoot me, and escape without harm to yourself. Well, I am no pistol shot, but I am not going to miss you. We'll shoot across that center table, and the width of the table is the distance that will divide us. In that way, I'll stand as good a show as you do, and I'll agree to shoot you through the body very near to the heart, so you'll not linger long in agony. Come, sir, get ready."

Colonel Vallier actually staggered.

"Sah—sah!" he fluttered; "you're shorely crazy!"

"Not a bit of it. Come, get ready!"

"This is murder, sah!"

"It is a square deal. One has as good show as the other."

"But I—I never heard of such a duel—never!"

"There are many things you have never heard about, Colonel Vallier."

"But, sah, I can't fight that way! You'll have to excuse me, sah."

"What's that!" howled the little professor, dancing about in his night robe. "Do you refuse to give me satisfaction?"

"I refuse to be murdered."

"Then you'll apologize?"

The colonel gasped.

"Apologize! Why, I can't—"

"Then I'm going to give you those black eyes just as sure as my name is Scotch! Put up your fists!"

The colonel retreated, holding up his hands helplessly, while the professor pranced after him like

a fighting cock.

"This is disgraceful!" snapped Rolf Raymond, taking a step, as if to interfere. "It must be stopped at once!"

"Hold on!" came sternly from Frank. "Don't chip in where you're not wanted, Mr. Raymond. Let them settle this matter themselves."

"That's roight, me laddybuck," said Barney Mulloy. "If you bother thim, it's a pair av black oies ye may own yersilf."

"We did not come here to be bullied."

"No," said Frank; "you came to play the bullies, and the tables have been turned on you. Take it easy."

The two boys placed themselves in such a position that they could prevent Raymond from interfering between the colonel and the professor.

"Don't strike me, sah!" gasped Vallier, holding up his open hands, with the palms toward the bantam-like professor.

"Then do you apologize?"

"You will strike me if I do not apologize?"

"You may bet your life that I will, colonel."

"Then I—ah—I'll have to apologize, sah."

"And this settles the entire affair between us?"

"Eh—I don't know about that."

"Well, you had better know. Does this settle the entire affair?"

"I suppose so, sah."

"You apologize most humbly?"

"I do."

"And you state of your own free will that this settles all trouble between us?"

The colonel hesitated, and Scotch lifted his fists menacingly.

"I do, sah—I do!" Vallier hastened to say.

"Then that's right," said Professor Scotch, airily. "You have escaped the worst thumping you ever received in all your life, and you should congratulate yourself."

Frank felt like cheering with delight. Surely Professor Scotch had done himself proud, and the termination of the affair had been quite unexpected by the boys.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PROFESSOR'S COURAGE.

Colonel Vallier seemed utterly crestfallen and subdued, but Rolf Raymond's face was dark with anger, as he harshly said:

"Now that this foolishness is over, we will proceed to business."

"That's right," bowed Frank. "The quicker you proceed the better satisfied we will be. Go ahead."

Rolf turned fiercely on Frank, almost snarling:

"You must have been at the bottom of it all! Where is she?"

Frank was astonished, as his face plainly showed.

"Where is she?" he repeated.

"Whom do you mean, sir?"

"It is useless to pretend that you do not know. You must have found an opportunity to communicate with her somehow, although how you accomplished it is more than I understand."

"You are speaking in riddles. Say what you mean, man."

"I will. If you do not immediately tell us where she is, you will find yourself in serious trouble. Is that plain enough?"

A light came to Frank.

"Do you mean the Queen of Flowers?" he eagerly asked.

"You know I mean the Queen of Flowers."

"And you do not know what has become of her?"

"How can we? She disappeared mysteriously from the ballroom. No one saw her leave, but she went."

"She must have returned to her home."

"That will not go with us, Merriwell, for we hastened to the place where she is stopping with her father, and she was not there, nor had he seen her. He cannot live long, and this blow will hasten the end. You will be responsible. Take my advice and give her up at once, unless you wish to get into trouble of a most serious nature."

Frank saw that Raymond actually believed he knew what had become of the Flower Queen.

"Look here," came swiftly from the boy's lips, "it is plain this is no time to waste words. I do not know what has become of the Flower Queen, that is straight. I did know she had disappeared from the ballroom, but I supposed she had returned to her home. I do not know her name as yet, although she knows mine. If anything has happened to her, I am not responsible; but I take a great interest in her, and I am ready and eager to be of assistance to her. Tell me her name, as that will aid me."

Rolf Raymond could not doubt Frank's words, for honesty was written on the boy's face.

"Her name," he said—"her name is—for you to learn."

His taunting laugh brought the warm blood to Frank's face.

"All right!" cried the boy from the North. "I'll learn it, no thanks to you. More than that, if she needs my aid, she shall have it. It strikes me that she may have fled of her own accord to escape being persecuted by you. If so——"

"What then?"

"We'll meet again."

"That we will! Colonel Vallier may have settled his trouble with Professor Scotch, but mine is not settled with you."

"You are right."

"We may yet meet on the field of honor."

"I shall be pleased to accommodate you," flashed Frank; "and the sooner, the better it will satisfy me."

"That's th' talk!" cried Barney Mulloy, admiringly. "You can do th' spalpane, Frankie, at any old thing he'll name!"

"The disappearance of Miss ——, the Flower Queen, prevents the setting of a time and place," said Raymond, passionately; "but you shall be waited on as soon as she is found. Until then I must let nothing interfere with my search for her."

"Very good; that is satisfactory to me, and I will do my best to help find her for you. Now, if your business is quite over, gentlemen, your room would give us much more pleasure than your company."

Not another word did Raymond or Vallier say, but they strode stiffly to the door and bowed themselves out. Barney closed the door after them.

Then both the boys turned on Professor Scotch, to find he had collapsed into a chair, and seemed on the point of swooning.

"Professor," cried Frank, "I want to congratulate you! That was the best piece of work you ever did in all your life."

"Profissor," exclaimed Barney, "ye're a jewil! Av inny wan iver says you lack nerve, may Oi be bitten by th' wurrust shnake in Oireland av Oi don't break his head!"

"Boys!" gasped the professor, "fan me! I can't seem to get my breath! How did I do it? It scares me to think of it."

"You were a man, professor, and you showed Colonel Vallier that you were utterly reckless. You seemed eager for a fight."

"Fight!" groaned the little man. "I couldn't fight a child! I never fought in my life. I don't know how to fight."

"Colonel Vallier didn't know that. It was plain, he believed you a desperate slugger, and he wilted immediately."

"But I can't understand how I came to do such a thing. Till their unwarranted intrusion—till I collided with the colonel—I was in terror for my life. The moment we collided I seemed to forget that I was scared, and I remembered only that I was mad."

"And you seemed more than eager for a scrap."

"Ye samed doying fer a bit av a row, profissor."

"What if he had struck me!" palpitated the little man. "Oh, gracious! It would have been terrible!"

"For him. If he'd struck you, you'd been so mad that nothing could have stopped you. You would have waded into him, and given him the worst thrashing he ever received."

"Thot's pwhat ye would, profissor, sure as fate."

Scotch began to revive, and the words of the boys convinced him that he was really a very brave man, and had done a most daring thing. Little by little, he began to swell, like a toad.

"I don't know but you're right," he said, stiffening up. "I was utterly reckless and desperate at the time."

"That's right, professor."

"Profissor, ye're a bad mon ter buck against."

"That is a fact that has not been generally known, but, having cowed one of the most desperate duelists in the South, and forced him to apologize, I presume I have a right to make some pretensions."

"That's a fact."

"Ye've made a riccord fer yersilf."

"And a record to be proud of," crowed the little man, getting on his feet and beginning to strut, forgetful of the fact that he was in his night robe and presented a most ludicrous appearance.

"The events of this evening shall become a part of history. Future generations shall regard me as one of the most nery and daring men of my age. And really, I don't know but I am. What's the use of being a coward when you can be a hero just as well. Boys, this adventure has made a different man of me. Hereafter, you will see that I'll not quail in the face of the most deadly dangers. I'll even dare to walk up to the mouth of a cannon—if I know it isn't loaded."

The boys were forced to laugh at his bantam-like appearance, but, for all of the queer twist he had given his last expression, the professor seemed very serious, and it was plain that he had begun to regard himself with admiration.

"Think, boys," he cried—"think of my offer to fight him with pistols across yonder narrow table!"

"That was a stroke of genius, professor," declared Frank. "That broke Colonel Vallier up more than anything else."

"He wilted at that."

"Of course you did not mean to actually fight him that way?"

"Well, I don't know," swelled the little man. "I was reckless then, and I didn't care for anything."

Suddenly Frank grew grave.

"This other matter they spoke of worries me," he said. "I can't understand what has happened to the Queen of Flowers."

"Ye mustn't let thot worry yez, me b'y."

"I can't help it."

"She may be home by this toime."

"And she may be in desperate need of a helping hand."

"Av she is, Oi dunno how ye can hilp her, Frankie."

"Nor do I know of any way. Why should any one kidnap her?"

"Oi dunno."

"It would be a most daring thing to do, as she is so well known; but there are daring and desperate ruffians in New Orleans."

"Oi think ye're roight, me b'y."

"It may be that she has been persecuted so that she fled of her own accord, and yet I hardly think that is true."

"No more do Oi, Frankie."

"If it is not true, surely she is in trouble."

"Well?"

"Oh, I can't remain quietly here, knowing she may need aid!"

"Pwhat will yez do?"

"I am going out."

"Where?"

"Somewhere—anywhere! Will you come along?"

"Sure, me b'y, Oi'm wid yez firrust, larrust, an' all th' toime!"

CHAPTER XXI.

FRANK'S BOLD MOVE.

The professor declined to go out. He returned to bed, and the boys left the hotel.

"Where away, Frankie?" asked Barney.

"I don't know," replied Frank, helplessly. "There is not one chance in millions of finding the lost Flower Queen, but I feel that I must move about. We'll visit the old French quarter by night. I have been there in the daytime, and I'd like to see how it looks at night. Come on."

And so they made their way to the French quarter, crossing Canal Street and turning into a quiet, narrow way, that soon brought them to a region of architectural decrepitude.

The streets of this section were not overlighted, and seemed very silent and lonely, as, at this particular time, the greater part of the inhabitants of the quarter were away to the scenes of pleasure.

The streets echoed to the boys' feet. There were queer balconies on every hand, the stores were mere shops, all of them now closed, and many windows were nailed up. Rust and decay were on all sides, and yet there was something impressive in the almost Oriental squalor of the place.

"It sames loike we'd left th' city intoirely for another place, so it does," muttered Barney.

"That is true," admitted Frank. "New Orleans seems like a human being with two personalities. For me this is the most interesting part of the city; but commerce is beginning to crowd in here, and the time is coming when the French quarter will cease to be an attraction for New Orleans."

"D'ye think not, Frankie?"

"It is a certain thing."

"Well, we'll get our look at it before it is gone intoirely."

A few dark figures were moving silently along the streets. The night was warm, and the shutters of the balcony windows were opened to admit air.

At a corner they halted, and, of a sudden, Frank clutched the arm of his companion, whispering:

"Look—see that man?"

"Yes, me b'y."

"Did you see his face?"

"Nivver a bit."

"Well, I did, and I do not believe I am mistaken in thinking I have seen it before."

"Whin?"

"To-night."

"Pwhere?"

"In the alley where I was trapped by Manuel Mazarro and his gang."

"It wur darruk in there, Frankie."

"But I fired my revolver, and by the flash I saw a face."

"So ye soay."

"It was the face of the man who just passed beneath this light."

"An' pwhat av thot, Frankie?"

"He might lead me to Manuel Mazarro."

"Pwhat do yez want to see thot spalpane fer?"

"Mazaro knows a good deal."

"Fer instance, pwhat?"

"Why I was attacked, and the object of the attack. He might be induced to tell."

"It sure wur a case av intinded robbery, me b'y."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not. But he knows more. He knows all about Rolf Raymond and Colonel Vallier."

"Well?"

"Rolf Raymond and Colonel Vallier know a great deal about the lost Flower Queen. It is possible Mazaro knows something of her. Come on, Barney; we'll follow that man."

"Jist as ye say, me lad."

"Take the other side of the street, and keep him in sight, but do not seem to be following him."

They separated, and both kept in sight of the man, who did not seem to fear pursuit or dream any one was shadowing him.

He led them straight to an antiquated story and a half Creole cottage, shaded by a large willow tree, the branches of which touched the sides and swept the round tiles of the roof. The foliage of the old tree half concealed the discolored stucco, which was dropping off in many places.

Over the door was a sign which announced that it was a café. The door was open, and, in the first room could be seen some men who were eating and drinking at a table. There was another room beyond.

The man the boys had followed entered the cottage, passed through the first room, speaking to the men at the table, and disappeared into the room beyond.

Frank and Barney paused outside.

"Are yez goin' to folly him, Frankie, b'y?" asked the Irish lad.

"To be sure I am."

"There's no tellin' pwhat koind av a nest ye will get inther."

"I'll have to take my chances on that."

"Thin Oi'm wid yez."

"No, I want you to remain outside, so you will be on hand in case I need air."

"How'll I know ye nade it?"

"You'll hear me cry or shoot."

"Av Oi do, you'll see Barney Mulloy comin' loike a cyclone."

"I know I may depend on you, and I know this may be a nest of assassins. These Spaniards are hot-blooded fellows, and they make dangerous rascals."

Frank looked at his revolver, to make sure it was in perfect working order, dropped it into the side pocket of his coat, and walked boldly into the cottage café.

The men in the front room stared at him in surprise, but he did not seem to give them a glance, walking straight through into the next room.

There he saw two Spanish-looking fellows talking in low tones over a table, on which drinks were setting.

One of them was the man he had followed.

They were surprised to see the boy coolly walk into the room, and advance without hesitation to their table.

The one Frank had followed seemed to recognize the lad, and he appeared startled and somewhat alarmed.

With the greatest politeness, Frank touched his cap, asking:

"Señor, do you know Manuel Mazaro?"

The fellow scowled, and hesitated, and then retorted:

"What if I do?"

"I want to see him."

"And you have come here for that?"

"Yes."

"I will see if he be here. Wait."

At one side of the room was a door, opening on a dark flight of stairs. Through this doorway and up the stairs the fellow disappeared.

Frank sat down at the table, feeling the revolver in the side pocket of his coat.

The other man did not attempt to make any conversation.

In a few minutes the one who had ascended the stairs reappeared.

"Señor Mazaró will soon be down," he announced.

Then he sat at the table, and resumed conversation with his companion, speaking in Spanish, and not even seeming to hear the "thank you" from Frank.

It was not long before Mazaró appeared, and he came forward without hesitation, smiling serenely, as if delighted to see the boy.

"Oh, señor!" he cried, "yo' be not harm in de scrape what we run into?"

"I was not harmed, no, thanks to you, Mazaró," said the boy, coolly. "It is a wonder that I came out with a whole skin."

"Señor, you do not blame me fo' dat? I deed not know-a it—I deed not know-a de robbares were there."

"Mazaró, you are a very good liar, but it will not work with me."

The Spaniard showed his teeth, and fell back a step.

"De young señor speak-a ver' plain," he said.

"It is my way. Mazaró, we may as well understand each other first as last. You are a scoundrel, and you're out for the dollars. Now, it is possible you can make more money by serving me than in any other way. If you can help me, I will pay you well."

Mazaró looked ready to sink a knife into Frank's heart a moment before, but he suddenly thawed. With the utmost politeness, he said:

"I do not think-a I know what de señor mean. If he speak-a litt'l plainer, mebbe I ondarstan'."

"Sit down, Mazaró."

The Spaniard took a seat at the table.

"Now," said Frank, quietly, "order what you wish to drink, and I will pay for it. I never drink myself, and I never carry much money with me nights, but I have enough to pay for your drink."

"De señor is ver' kind," bowed Manuel, and he ordered a drink, which was brought by a villainous-looking old woman.

Frank paid, and, when Mazaró was sipping the liquid, he leaned forward and said:

"Señor Mazaró, you know Rolf Raymond?"

"Si, señor."

"And Colonel Vallier?"

"Si, señor."

"And the Queen of Flowers?"

"I know of her, señor; I see her to-day."

"You know more. She has disappeared, and you know what has become of her."

It was a chance shot, but Frank saw it went home.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE QUEEN IS FOUND.

Mazaró changed color, and then he regained his composure.

"Señor," he said, smoothly, "I know-a not what made you t'ink dat."

"I do not think; I know."

"Wondareful—ver' wondareful," purred the Spaniard, in mock admiration. "You give-a me great

s'prise."

Frank was angry, but he held himself in restraint, appearing cool.

"Your face betrayed it."

"Ah! Dat show yo' have-a ver' gre't eye, señor."

"You do not deny it?"

"Why should I do dat when you know-a so much?"

"You dare not deny it."

"Dare, señor? I dare ver' many thing you do not know."

Mazaro was exasperatingly cool.

"Look here, man," said Frank, leaning toward the Spaniard; "are you aware that you may get yourself into serious trouble? Are you aware that kidnaping is an offense that makes you a criminal of the worst sort, and for which you might be sent up for twenty years, at least?"

The Spaniard smiled.

"It is eeze to talk, but dat is not proof," he said.

"You scoundrel!" exclaimed the boy, his anger getting the better of him for the moment. "I have a mind to convey my suspicions to the police, and then——"

"An' den what, señor? Ah! you talk ver' bol' fo' boy like you. Do you know-a what? Well, see; if I snappa my fingare, quick like a flash you get a knife 'tween your shouldares. Den you not tell-a the police."

Frank could not repress a shiver. He looked swiftly around, and saw the black eyes of the other two men were fastened upon him, and he knew they were ready to obey Mazaro's signal.

"W'at yo' t'ink-a, señor?" smiled Manuel, insolently.

"That is very well," came calmly from Frank's lips. "If I were to give the signal my friends would rush in here to my aid. If you stab me, make sure the knife goes through my heart with the first stroke, so there will be little chance that I'll cry out."

"Den you have-a friends near, ha? I t'ink so mebbe. Call-a dem in."

"No, thank you. They will remain outside till they are needed."

"Ver' well. Now we undarestan' each odder. Yo' have-a some more to say?"

"Yes."

"Say him."

"I have told you that you might find it profitable to serve me."

"I hear dat."

"I meant it."

"W'at yo' want done?"

"No dirty work—no throat-cutting. I want information."

"Ha! W'at yo' want-a know?"

"I want to know who the Queen of Flowers is."

"Any more?"

"Yes; I want to know where she is, and you can tell me."

"Yo' say dat, but yo' can't prove it. I don't say anyt'ing, señor. 'Bo't how much yo' pay fo' that info'mation, ha?"

"Good money, and a fair price."

"Fair price notting; I want good-a price. Undarestand-a?"

"I understand."

"W'at yo' gif?"

"To know where she is? A hundred dollars."

Mazaro smiled scornfully.

"Dat notting. Yo' don' talk de biz. Yo' don' have-a de mon' enough."

"Wait," urged Frank. "I am a Yankee, from the North, and I will make a trade with you."

"All-a right, but I don't admit I know anyt'ing."

Manuel leaned back in his chair, lazily and deftly rolling a cigarette, which he lighted. Frank watched this piece of business, thinking of the best manner of approaching the fellow.

And then something happened that electrified every one within the café.

Somewhere above there came the sound of blows, and a crashing, splintering sound, as of breaking wood. Then a shriek ran through the building.

"Help! Help! Save me!"

It was the voice of a female in great terror and distress.

Mazaro ground a curse through his white teeth, and leaped to his feet, but Frank was on his feet quite as quickly.

Smack! Frank's arm had shot out, and his hard fist struck the Spaniard under the ear, sending the fellow flying through the air and up against the wall with terrible force. From the wall Mazaro dropped, limp and groaning, to the floor.

Like a flash, the nervy youth flung the table against the downcast wretch's companions, making them reel.

Then Frank leaped toward the stairs, up which he bounded like a deer.

"Where are you?" he cried. "I am here to help you! Call again!"

No answer.

Near the head of the stairs a light shone out through a broken panel in a door, and on this door Frank knew the blows he had heard must have fallen.

Within this room the boy fancied he could hear sounds of a desperate struggle.

Behind him the desperadoes were rallying, cursing hoarsely, and crying to each other. They were coming, and the lad on the stairs knew they would come armed to the teeth.

All the chivalry in his nature was aroused. His blood was leaping and tingling in his veins, and he felt able to cope with a hundred foes.

Straight toward the broken door he leaped, and his hand found the knob, but it refused to yield at his touch.

"Fast!" he panted. "Well, I'll try this!"

He hurled himself against the door, but it remained firm.

There were feet on the stairs; the desperadoes were coming.

At that moment he looked into the room through the break in the panel, and he saw a girl struggling with all her strength in the hands of a man. The man was trying to hold a hand over her mouth to keep her from crying out again, while a torrent of angry Spanish words poured in a hissing sound from his bearded lips.

As Frank looked the girl tore the fellow's hand from her lips, and her cry for help again rang out.

The wretch lifted his fist to strike her senseless, but the blow did not fall.

Frank was a remarkably good shot, and his revolver was in his hand. That hand was flung upward to the opening in the panel, and he fired into the room.

The burst of smoke kept him from seeing the result of the shot, but he heard a hoarse roar of pain from the man, and he knew he had not missed.

He had fired at the fellow's wrist, and the bullet had shattered it.

But now the ruffians who were coming furiously up the stairs demanded his attention.

"Halt!" he shouted. "Stop where you are, or I shall open fire on you!"

He could see them, and he saw the foremost lift his hand. Then there was a burst of flame before Frank's eyes, and he staggered backward, feeling a bullet near his cheek.

Not till that moment did he realize what a trap he was in, and how desperate was his situation.

"It is a fight for life!" he muttered, as he lifted his revolver.

The smell of burned powder was in his nostrils, the fire of battle gleamed from his eyes.

The weapon in Frank's hand spoke again, and once more he found his game, for the leading ruffian, having almost reached the head of the stairs, flung up his arms, with a gurgling sound, and toppled backward upon those who were following.

Down the stairs they all tumbled, falling in a heap at the bottom, where they struggled, squirmed, and shouted.

"So far everything is very serene!" half laughed the daring boy. "This has turned out to be a real lively night."

Frank was a lad who never deliberately sought danger for danger's sake, but when his blood was aroused, he entirely forgot to be afraid, and he felt a wild thrill of joy when in the greatest peril.

For the time, he had entirely forgotten the existence of Barney Mulloy, but now he remembered that the Irish lad had waited outside the cottage café.

"He has heard the rumpus," said Frank, aloud. "I wonder where Barney can be?"

"Whist, be aisy, me lad!" retorted the familiar voice of the Irish youth. "Oi'm wid yez to th' ind!"

Barney was close behind Frank!

"How in the world did you get here?" cried our hero, in great astonishment.

"Oi climbed the tray, me b'y."

"The tree? What tree?"

"Th' willy tray as shtands forninst th' corner av th' house, Frankie."

"But that does not explain how you came here at my side."

"There was a windy open, an' Oi shlipped in by th' windy."

"Well, you're a dandy, Barney!"

"An' ye're a birrud, Frankie. What koind av a muss hiv ye dhropped into now, Oi'd loike ter know?"

"A regular ruction. I heard a girl shout for help, and I knocked over two or three chaps, Mazaro included, on my way to her aid."

"Where is she now, b'y?"

"In here," said Frank, pointing through the broken panel. "She is the missing Queen of Flowers! There she is, Barney! See here!"

Then Frank obtained a fair look at the girl's face, staggered, clutched Barney, and shouted:

"Look! By heavens! It is not strange she knew me, for we both know her! She is Inza Burrage!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FIGHTING LADS.

While attending school at Fardale Military Academy, Frank had met and become acquainted with a charming girl by the name of Inza Burrage. They had been very friendly—more than friendly; in a boy and girl way, they were lovers.

After leaving Fardale and starting to travel, Frank had written to Inza, and she had answered. For a time the correspondence had continued, but, at last, Frank had failed to receive any answers to his letters. He wrote again and again, but never a line came from Inza, and he finally decided she had grown tired of him, and had taken this method of dropping him.

Frank was proud and sensitive, and he resolved to forget Inza. This was not easy, but he thought of her as little as possible, and never spoke of her to any one.

And now he had met her in this remarkable manner. Some fellow had written him from Fardale that Mr. Burrage had moved from the place, but no one seemed to know whither he had gone. Frank had not dreamed of seeing Inza in New Orleans, but she was the mysterious Queen of Flowers, and, for some reason, she was in trouble and peril.

Although dazed by his astonishing discovery, the boy quickly recovered, and he felt that he could battle with a hundred ruffians in the defense of the girl beyond the broken door.

Barney Mulloy seemed no less astonished than Frank.

"Be me soul! it is thot lassie!" he cried.

"Inza! Inza!" shouted Frank, through the broken panel.

She heard him.

"Frank! Frank! Save me!"

"I will!"

The promise was given with the utmost confidence.

At that moment, however, the ruffian whose wrist Frank had broken, leaped upon the girl and grasped her with his uninjured arm.

"*Carramba!*" he snarled. "You save-a her? Bah! Fool! You never git-a out with whole skin!"

"Drop her, you dog!" cried Frank, pointing his revolver at the fellow—"drop her, or I'll put a bullet through your head, instead of your wrist!"

"Bah! Shoot! You kill-a her!"

He held the struggling girl before him as a shield.

Like a raging lion, Frank tore at the panel.

The man with the girl swiftly moved back to a door at the farther side of the room. This door he had already unfastened and flung open.

"*Adios!*" he cried, derisively. "Some time I square wid you for my hand-a! *Adios!*"

"Th' spalpanes are comin' up th' shtairs again, Frankie!" cried Barney, in the ear of the desperate boy at the door.

Frank did not seem to hear; he was striving to break the stout panel so that he could force his way through the opening.

"Frank! Frank! they're coming up th' shtairs!"

"Let them come!"

"They'll make mince mate av us!"

"I must follow her!"

"Well, folly, av ye want to!" shouted the Irish lad. "Oi'm goin' to shtop th' gang!"

Crack! The panel gave. Crack! splinter! smash! Out came a long strip, which Frank flung upon the floor.

Barney caught it up and whirled toward the stairs.

The desperadoes were coming with a rush—they were well up the stairs. In another moment the leading ruffian would have reached the second floor.

"Get back, ye gossoons! Down, ye haythen! Take thot, ye bloody pirates!"

The strip of heavy wood in Barney's hands whirled through the air, and came down with a resounding crack on the head of the leader.

The fellows had not learned caution by the fate of the first man to climb the stairs, and they were following their second leader as close as possible.

Barney had a strong arm, and he struck the fellow with all his power. Well it was for the ruffian that the heavy wood was not very thick, else he would have had a broken head.

Back he toppled upon the one behind, and that one made a vain attempt to support him. The dead weight was too much, and the second fell, again sweeping the whole lot to the foot of the stairs.

"Hurro!" shouted the Irish boy, in wild delight. "This is th' koind av a picnic pwhat Oi admire! Come on, ye nagurs! It's Barney Mulloy ye're runnin' up against, an' begobs! he's good fer th' whole crowd av yez!"

At the foot of the stairs there was a writhing, wrangling, snarling mass of human beings; at the head of the stairs was a young Irishman who laughed and crowed and flourished the cudgel of wood in his hands.

Barney, feeling his blood leaping joyously in his veins, felt like singing, and so he began to warble a "fighting song," over and over inviting his enemies to come on.

In the meantime Frank had made an opening large enough to force his body through.

"Come on, Barney!" he cried, attracting the other boy's attention by a sharp blow.

"Pwhere?"

"In here—somewhere."

"Frankie, ye're muddled, an' Oi nivver saw yez so before."

"What do you mean?"

"Nivver a bit would it do for us both to go in there, fer th' craythers moight hiv us in a thrap."

"You're right, Barney. I will go. You stay here and hold the ruffians back. Here—take my revolver. You'll need it."

"G'wan wid yez! Quit yer foolin', Frankie! Oi hiv an illigant shillaly here, an' thot's all Oi nade, unliiss ye have two revolvers."

"This is the only one I have."

"Thin kape it, me b'y, fer ye'll nade it before ye save the lass, Oi think."

"I think you may be right, Barney. Here goes! Hold them back. I'll not desert you."

"It's nivver a bit Oi worry about thot, Frankie. G'wan!"

Through the panel Frank forced his way. As soon as he was within the room he ran for the door through which the ruffian had dragged Inza.

Frank knew that the fellow might be waiting just beyond the door, knife in hand, and he sprang through with his revolver held ready for instant use.

There was no light in the room, but the light from the lamp in the adjoining room shone in at the doorway.

Frank looked around, and, to his dismay, he could see no one.

"Are they gone?" he asked himself. "If so, whither?"

It was not long before he was convinced that the room was empty of any living being save himself.

The Spanish ruffian and the unfortunate girl had disappeared.

"Oh, confound the infernal luck!" raved the boy. "He has escaped with her! But I did my best, and I followed as soon as possible."

Then he remembered that he had promised Inza he would save her, and it wrung a groan from his lips.

"Which way have they gone?" he cried, beginning to look for a door that led from the room.

By this time he was accustomed to the dim light, and he saw a door. In a twinkling he had tried it, but found it was locked or bolted on the farther side.

"The fellow had little time and no hands to lock a door. He may not have gone this way. He must, for this is the only door to the room, save the one by which I entered. He went out this way, and I will follow!"

Retreating to the farther side of the room, Frank made a run and plunged against the door.

It was bolted on the farther side, and the shock snapped the iron bolt as if it had been a pipe stem.

Bang! Open flew the door, and Frank went reeling through, revolver in hand, somewhat dazed, but still determined and fierce as a young tiger.

At a glance he saw he was in a small room, with two doors standing open—the one he had just broken down and another. Through this other he leaped, and found himself in a long passage, at the farther end of which Barney Mulloy was still guarding the head of the stairs, once more singing the wild "fighting song."

Not a trace of the ruffian or the kidnaped girl could Frank see.

"Gone!" he palpitated, mystified and awe-stricken. "Gone—where?"

That was a question he could not answer for a moment, and then—

"The window in that room! It is the one by which Barney entered! It must be the one by which the wretch fled with Inza!"

Back into the room he had just left he leaped. Two bounds carried him to the window, against which brushed the branch of the old willow tree.

He looked out.

"There they are!"

The exultant words came in a panting whisper from his lips as he saw some dark figures on the ground beneath the tree. He was sure he saw a female form among them, and his ears did not deceive him, for he heard at last a smothered appeal for help.

Then two other forms rushed out of the shadows and fell upon the men beneath the tree, striking right and left!

There was a short, fierce struggle, a woman's shriek, the death groan of a stricken man, a pistol shot, and scattering forms.

Without pausing to measure the distance to the ground, Frank sprang over the window sill and dropped.

CHAPTER XXIV.

END OF THE SEARCH.

Like a cat, Frank alighted on his feet, and he was ready for anything the moment he struck the ground.

There was no longer any fighting beneath the tree. The struggling mass had melted to two dark figures, one of which was stretched on the ground, while the other bent over it.

Frank sprang forward and caught the kneeling one by the shoulder.

"What has become of her?" he demanded, fiercely.

The man looked up, astonished.

It was Colonel La Salle Vallier!

"Yo', sah?" he exclaimed.

"You?" cried Frank.

Then the boy recovered, again demanding:

"What has become of Miss Burrage? She was here a moment ago."

The colonel looked around in a dazed way, slowly saying:

"Yes, sah, she was here, fo' Mistah Raymon' heard her voice, and he rushed in to save her."

"Raymond? Where is he?"

"Here, sah."

The colonel motioned toward the silent form on the ground, and Frank bent forward to peer into the white, ghastly face.

It was, indeed, Rolf Raymond.

"Dead?" fluttered Frank.

"Dead!" replied Colonel Vallier.

"He was killed in the struggle?"

"He was stabbed at the ver' start, sah. The knife must have struck his heart."

"Merciful goodness!" gasped the boy, horrified. "And how came he here?"

"We were searching fo' Manuel Mazaro, sah. Mistah Raymon' did not trus' the rascal, and he believed Mazaro might know something about Miss Burrage. Mazaro is ready fo' anything, and he knew big money would be offered fo' the recovery of the young lady, so he must have kidnaped her. We knew where to find Mazaro, though he did not suppose so, and we came here. As we approached, we saw some figures beneath this tree. Then we heard a feminine cry fo' help, and we rushed in here, sah. That's all, except that Mistah Raymon' rushed to his death, and the rascals have escaped."

"They have escaped with the girl—carried her away!"

"But they will not dare keep her now, sah."

"Why not?"

"Because they are known, and the entire police of the city will be after them."

"What will they do with her?"

"I don't know, but I do not think they will harm her, sah."

"What was she to Rolf Raymond?"

"His affianced bride, sah."

"Well, she will not marry him now," said Frank; "but I am truly sorry that the fellow was killed in such a dastardly manner."

"So am I, sah," confessed the queer colonel. "He has been ver' valuable to me. It will be a long time before I find another like him."

Frank did not understand that remark then, but he did afterward, when he was told that Colonel Vallier was a professional card sharp, and had bled Rolf Raymond for many thousands of dollars. This explained the singular friendship between the sharp old rascal and the young man.

More than that, Frank afterward learned that Colonel Vallier was not a commissioned officer, had never been such, but had assumed the title.

In many ways the man tried to imitate the Southern gentleman of the old school, but, as he was not a gentleman at heart, he was a sad failure.

All at once Frank remembered Barney, and that he had promised to stand by the Irish lad.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "Barney Mulloy is in there with that gang of raging wolves!"

"Nivver a bit av it, Frankie," chirped a cheerful voice. "Oi am here."

Down from the tree swung the fighting Irish lad, dropping beside his comrade.

"Th' craythers didn't feel loike comin' up th' shtairs inny more," Barney explained. "They seemed to hiv enough sport fer wan avenin'. Somebody shouted somethin' to thim, an' away they wint out doors, so I took to lookin' fer yez, me b'y."

"And you found me?"

"Oi looked out av th' windy, an' hearrud yer voice. Thot's whoy Oi came down. Phat has happened out here, Oi dunno?"

Frank hastily explained.

"Well, it's the avil wan's own luck!" exclaimed Barney. "But av we shtay here, Frankie, it's pinched we'll be by the police as will be afther getting around boy and boy. We'd betther take a sneak."

"Inza——"

"She ain't here inny more, me lad, an' so ye moight as well go."

"You are right. Come on."

Swiftly and silently they slipped away, leaving Colonel Vallier with the dead youth.

Frank was feeling disgusted and desperate, and he expressed himself freely as they made their way along the streets.

"It is voile luck," admitted Barney; "but we did our bist, an' it's a jolly good foight we had. Frankie, we make a whole tame, wid a litthle yaller dog under th' waggin."

"Oh, I can't think of anything but Inza, Inza, Inza! She——"

"Frank!"

Out of a dark shadow timidly came a female figure.

With a cry of joy, Frank sprang forward, and clasped her in his arms, lifting her off her feet and covering her face, eyes and mouth with kisses, while he cried:

"Inza, girl! at last! at last! We fought like fiends to save you, and we thought we had failed. But now——"

"You did your best, Frank, but that dreadful wretch dragged me to the window and dropped me into the arms of a monster who was waiting below. I did not faint—I would not! I made up my mind that I would keep my senses and try to escape. The man jumped after me, and then a signal was given that brought the others from the building. They were going to wrap something about my head when I got my mouth free and cried out. After that I scarcely know what happened. There was fighting, and I caught a glimpse of the face of Rolf Raymond. How he came there I do not know. I felt myself free, and I ran, ran, ran, till I fell here from exhaustion, and here I lay till I heard your voice. I knew it, and I replied."

"Frankie, me b'y!" cried Barney, "it's a bit ago we were ravin' at our luck: It's givin' thanks we should be this minute."

"True, Barney, true! It is all right at last. Inza is safe, Rolf Raymond is dead, and——"

A cry broke from the lips of the girl.

"Rolf Raymond dead?" she exclaimed, wildly. "Are you sure?"

"Sure," replied Frank, coldly. "You will not marry him now."

"I should not have married him anyway."

"But you were affianced to him?"

"By my father—yes. My father and Roderick Raymond, who is a cripple and has not many more years to live, were schoolmates and friends in their younger days. Roderick Raymond has made a vast fortune, and in his old age he set his heart upon having his son marry the daughter of his former friend and partner. It seems that, when they first got married, father and Raymond declared, in case the child of one was a boy, and that of the other was a girl, that their children should marry. Rolf was Mr. Raymond's only son, as I am an only daughter. Believing himself ready to die, Roderick Raymond sent to my father and reminded him of their agreement. As you know, father is not very wealthy, and he is now an invalid. His mind is not strong, and he became convinced that it was his duty to see that I married Rolf Raymond. He set his mind on it, and all my pleadings were in vain. He brought me here to the South, and I saw Rolf. I disliked him

violently the moment my eyes rested on him, but he seemed to fall madly in love with me. He was fiercely jealous of me, and watched me as a dog watches its mistress. I could not escape him, and I was becoming entangled deeper and deeper when you appeared. I knew you, and I was determined to see you again—to ask you to save me. I took part in the parade to-night, and went to the ballroom. Rolf followed me about so that I became disgusted and slipped from the room, intending to return home alone. Barely had I left the room when a fellow whispered in my ear that he had been sent there by you—that I was to go with him, and he would take me to you. I entered a closed carriage, and I was brought to the place where you found me a captive in the hands of those ruffians."

Frank had listened with eager interest to this explanation, and it made everything clear.

"It was ordained by fate that we should find you there," he declared. "It was known the Queen of Flowers had disappeared, and we were searching for you. Something led us straight to that place. Rolf Raymond came there, also, and he came to his death. But, Inza, explain one thing—why didn't you answer my letters?"

"I answered every one I received. You stopped writing."

"I did not; but I received no answers."

"Then," cried the girl, "your letters must have been intercepted. You were constantly changing about. I did not know your address, so I could not ask for an explanation."

"Well, it has come out right at last. We'll find a carriage and take you home. To-morrow I will see you."

They reached Canal Street, and found a carriage.

Inza's invalid father was astounded when he saw Frank and Barney Mulloy appear with his daughter, and he was more than ever astounded and agitated when he knew what had happened.

But Inza was safe, and Rolf Raymond was dead.

It was a lively tale the boys related to Professor Scotch that night. The little man fairly gasped for breath as he listened.

"Well! well! well!" was all he could say.

In the morning the police had taken hold of the affair, and they were hot after the fellows who had killed Rolf Raymond. Frank and Barney were called on to tell their story, and were placed under surveillance.

But the cottage café was deserted, and the Spanish rascals were not captured. They disappeared from New Orleans, and, to this day, the law has never avenged the death of Roderick Raymond's only son.

The murder of his boy was too much for Raymond to endure, and he died of a broken heart on the day of the son's funeral. Knowing he was dying, he had a new will swiftly made, and all his wealth was left to his old friend Burrage.

Frank and Barney thoroughly enjoyed the rest of their stay in New Orleans. In the open carriage with them, at Frank's side, rode the "Queen of Flowers" as they went sight-seeing.

In the throng of spectators, with two detectives near at hand, they saw Colonel La Salle Vallier. He lifted his hat and bowed with the utmost courtesy.

"The auld chap is something of a daisy, after all, Frankie," laughed Barney. "Oi kinder admire th' spalpane."

"Ha, hum!" coughed Professor Scotch, at Barney's side. "He is a great duelist—a great duelist, but he quailed before my terrible eye—he was forced to apologize. Hum, ha!"

Frank leaned toward Inza.

"If anything happens when we are again separated that you should fail to receive my letters, you will not doubt me, will you?" he asked, in a whisper.

And she softly replied:

"No, Frank, but——"

"But what?"

"You—you must not forget Elsie Bellwood."

"I haven't heard from her in a long time," said Frank. And there the talk ended.

But Frank was to hear from his other girl friend soon and in a most unexpected manner.

THE MYSTERIOUS CANOE.

From New Orleans Frank, Barney and the professor journeyed to Florida.

Frank was anxious to see the Everglades and do some hunting.

Our hero was particularly anxious to shoot a golden heron, of which he had heard not a little.

One day a start was made in a canoe from a small settlement on the edge of the great Dismal Swamp, and on went our three friends deeper and deeper into the wilds.

At last the professor grew tired of the sameness of the journey.

"How much further into this wild swamp do you intend to go, Frank?" he asked.

"I am going till I get a shot at a golden heron."

"Nonsense! There is no golden heron."

"You think so?"

"I know it. The golden heron is a myth. White hunters have searched the remote fastnesses of the Florida swamps for a golden heron, but no such bird have they ever found. The Indians are the only ones to see golden herons."

"If the Indians can see them, white men may find them. I shall not be satisfied till I have shot one."

"Then you'll never be satisfied."

"Oh, I don't know about that, professor. I am something of an Indian myself. You know the Seminoles are honest and peaceable, and——"

"All Indians are liars. I would not take the word of a Seminole under any condition. Come, Frank, don't be foolish; let's turn round and go back. We may get bewildered on these winding waterways which twist here and there through swamps of cypress and rushes. We were foolish to come without a guide, but——"

"We could not obtain one until to-morrow, and I wished to come to-day."

"You may be sorry you did not wait."

"Now, you are getting scared, professor," laughed Frank, lifting his paddle from the water and laying it across the bow of the canoe. "I'll tell you what we'll do."

"All right."

"We'll leave it to Barney, who has not had a word to say on the matter. If he says go back, we'll go back."

Professor Scotch hesitated, scratched his fingers into his fiery beard, and then said:

"Well, I'll have to do as you boys say, anyway, so we'll leave it to Barney."

"All right," laughed Frank, once more. "What do you say, Barney, my boy?"

Barney Mulloy was in the stern of the canoe that had been creeping along one of the sluggish water courses that led through the cypress swamp and into the heart of the Everglades.

"Well, gintlemin," he said, "Oi've been so busy thrying to kape thrack av th' twists an' turruns we have been makin' thot Oi didn't moind mutch pwhat ye wur soaying. It wur something about turning back. Plaze repate it again."

So the matter was laid before him, and, when he had heard what Frank and the professor had to say, he declared:

"Fer mesilf it's nivver a bit do Oi care where we go ur pwhat we do, but, as long as we hiv come so fur, an' Frankie wants to go funder, Oi'd soay go on till he is sick av it an' reddy to turn back."

"There, professor!" cried Frank; "that settles it!"

"As I knew it would be settled," growled Professor Scotch, sulkily. "You boys combine against me every time. Well, I suppose I'll have to submit."

So the trio pushed on still farther into the great Dismal Swamp, a weird section of strange vegetable and animal life, where great black trees stood silent and grim, with Spanish moss dangling from their branches, bright-plumaged birds flashed across the opens, ugly snakes glided sinuously over the boggy land, and sleepy alligators slid from muddy banks and disappeared beneath the surface of the dead water.

The professor continued to grumble.

"If we should come upon one of these wonderful golden herons, Frank could not come within a hundred yards of it with that old bow and arrow," he said.

"Couldn't I?" retorted Frank. "Perhaps not, but I could make a bluff at it."

"I don't see why you won't use a gun."

"Well, there are two reasons. In the first place, in order to be sure of killing a heron with a shotgun I'd have to use fairly large shot, and that might injure the bird badly; in the second place, there might be two, and I'd not be able to bag more than one of them with a gun, as the report would scare the other. Then there is the possibility that I would miss with the first shot, and the heron would escape entirely. If I miss with an arrow, it is not likely the bird will be alarmed and take to flight, so I'll have another chance at it. Oh, there are some advantages in using the primitive bow and arrow."

"Bosh!" exploded Scotch. "You have a way of always making out a good case for yourself. You won't be beaten."

"Begobs! he is a hard b'y to bate, profissor," grinned Barney. "Av he wurn't, it's dead he'd been long ago."

"That's right, that's right," agreed Scotch, who admired Frank more than he wished to acknowledge. "He's lucky."

"It's not all luck, profissor," assured the Irish boy. "In minny cases it's pure nerve thot pulls him through."

"Well, there's a great deal of luck in it—of course there is."

"Oh, humor the professor, Barney," laughed Frank. "Perhaps he'll become better natured if you do."

They now came to a region of wild cypress woods, where the treetops were literally packed with old nests, made in the peculiar heron style. They were constructed of huge bristling piles of cross-laid sticks, not unlike brush heaps of a Western clearing.

Here for years, almost ages, different species of herons had built their nests in perfect safety.

As the canoe slowly and silently glided toward the "rookeries," white and blue herons were seen to rise from the reed-grass and fly across the opens in a stately manner, with their long necks folded against their breasts, and their legs projecting stiffly behind them.

"Pwoy don't yez be satisfoied wid a few av th' whoite wans, Frankie?" asked Barney, softly. "Shure, they're handsome enough."

"They're handsome," admitted Frank; "but a golden heron is worth a large sum as a curiosity, and I mean to have one."

"All roight, me b'y; have yer own way, lad."

"He'll do that, anyhow," mumbled Professor Scotch, gruffly.

They could now see long, soldier-like lines of herons stretched out along the reedy swales, standing still and solemn, like pickets on duty.

They were not particularly wary or wild, for they had not been hunted very much in the wild region which they inhabited.

Little green herons were plentiful, and they kept flying up before the canoe constantly, scaring the others, till Frank grew very impatient, declaring:

"Those little rascals will scare away a golden heron, if we are fortunate enough to come upon one. Confound them!"

"Let me shoot a few of th' varmints," urged Barney, reaching for one of the guns in the bottom of the canoe.

"Not much!" returned Frank, quickly. "Think what the report of a gun would do here. Keep still, Barney."

"All roight!" muttered the Irish lad, reluctantly relinquishing his hold on the gun. "Av ye soay kape still, kape still it is."

Frank instructed the professor to take in his paddle, and Barney was directed to hold the canoe close to the edge of the rushes. In this manner, with Frank kneeling in the prow, an arrow ready notched on the string, he could shoot with very little delay.

Beyond the heron rookery the waterway wound into the depths of a dark, forbidding region, where the Spanish moss hung thick, and the great trees leaned over the water.

They had glided past one side of the rookery and were near this dark opening when an exclamation of surprise came from Frank Merriwell's lips.

"Phat is it, me b'y?" asked Barney, quickly.

"A canoe."

"Phere?"

"See it yonder."

"Yes, Oi see it now. It's white."

"There must be other hunters near at hand," said the professor.

"The canoe is not drawn up to the bank," said Frank, in a puzzled way. "It seems to be floating at some distance from the shore."

"Perhaps it is moored out there."

"Why should it be moored in such a place? There are no tides here, and alligators are not liable to steal canoes."

"Do ye see inny soign av a camp, Frankie?"

"Not a sign of a camp or a human being. This is rather strange."

A strange feeling of wonder that swiftly changed to awe was creeping over them. The canoe was snowy white, and lay perfectly motionless on the still surface of the water. It was in the dark shadow beneath the trees.

"Perhaps the owner of the canoe is lying in the bottom," suggested the professor.

"We'll see about that," said Frank, putting down the bow and arrow and taking up a paddle. "Head straight for her, Barney."

With the very first stroke in that direction a most astonishing thing happened.

The white canoe seemed to swing slightly about, and then, with no visible occupant and no apparent motive power, it glided smoothly and gently toward the dark depths of the black forest!

"She's floating away from us!" cried the professor. "There must be a strong current there!"

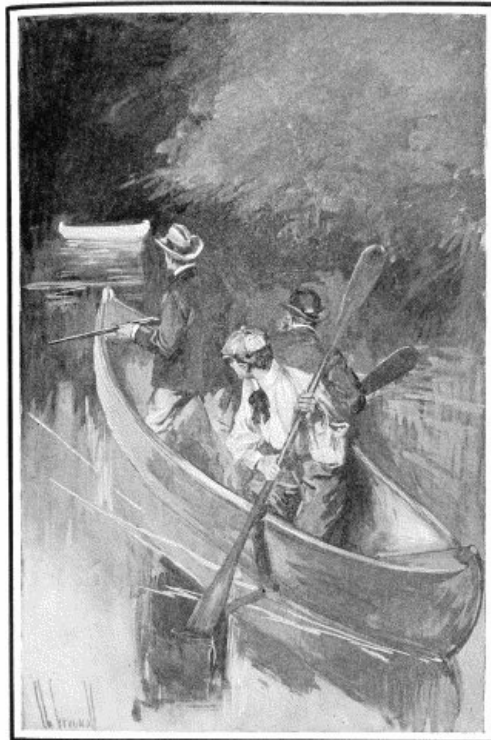
"Nivver a bit is she floating!" gasped Barney Mulloy. "Will ye look at her go! Begobs! Oi fale me hair shtandin' on me head!"

"She is not floating!" Frank said. "See—she gains speed! Look at the ripple that spreads from her prow!"

"But—but," spluttered Professor Scotch, "what is making her move—what is propelling her?"

"That's a mystery!" came from Frank, "but it's a mystery I mean to solve! Get out your paddle, professor. Keep straight after that canoe, Barney. We'll run her down and look her over."

Then a strange race began, canoe against canoe, the one in the lead apparently empty, the one pursuing containing three persons who were using all their strength and skill to overtake the empty craft.



"The white canoe had stopped, and was lying calmly on the inky surface of the shadowed water." (See page [147](#))

CHAPTER XXVI.

STILL MORE MYSTERIOUS.

"Pull!" panted Frank.

"Pull!" mumbled the professor.

"Pull!" snorted Barney, in disgust, great drops of perspiration rolling down his face. "As if we wurn't pullin'!"

"We're not gaining."

"The white canoe keeps just so far ahead."

"Begobs! it's not our fault at all, at all."

Indeed, no matter how hard they worked, no matter how fast they made the canoe fly through the water, they could not gain on the mysterious white canoe. The distance between the two canoes seemed to remain just the same, and the one in advance slipped through the water without a sound, following the winding water course beneath the dark trees and going deeper and deeper into the heart of the swamp.

Other water courses were passed, running away into unknown and unexplorable wilds. It grew darker and darker, and the feeling of awe and fear fell more heavily upon them.

At last, exhausted and discouraged, the professor stopped paddling, crying to his companions, in a husky voice:

"Stop, boys, stop! There is something supernatural about that fiendish boat! It is luring us to some frightful fate!"

"Nonsense, professor!" retorted Frank. "You are not superstitious—you have said so at least a score of times."

"That's all right," returned Scotch, shaking his head. "I do not take any stock in rappings, table tipplings, and that kind of stuff, but I will confess this is too much for me."

"Begobs! Oi don't wonder at thot," gurgled Barney Mulloy, wiping the great drops of perspiration from his forehead. "It's the divvil's own canoe, thot is sure!"

"Oh, it's simple enough!" declared Frank, nettled.

"Thin explain it fer me, me b'y—ixplain it."

"Oh, I won't say that I can explain it, for I do not pretend to understand it; but I'll wager that the mystery would be readily solved if we could overtake and examine that canoe."

"Mebbe so; but I think it nades a stameboat to overtake it."

Professor Scotch shook his head in a most solemn manner.

"Boys," he said, "in all my career I have never seen anything like this, and I shall never dare tell this adventure, for people in general would not believe it—they'd think I was lying."

"Without doubt," admitted Frank. "And, still I will wager that the explanation of the whole matter would seem very simple if we could overtake that canoe and examine it."

"Perhaps so."

"You speak as if you doubted it."

"Possibly I do."

"I am surprised at you, professor—I am more than surprised."

"I can't help it if you are, my boy."

"I am afraid your mind is beginning to weaken."

"Soay, Frankie," broke in Barney. "Oi loike fun as well as th' nixt wan, but, be jabbers! it's nivver a bit av it can Oi see in this!"

"See that infernal canoe?" cried the professor, pointing at the mystic craft. "It has stopped out there in the shadows."

"And seems to be waiting for us to pursue again."

"That's what it's doing."

"I'm ready!" exclaimed Frank.

"I am not," decisively declared Professor Scotch.

"Nayther am Oi!" almost shouted the Irish youth. "It's enough av this koind av business Oi've been in!"

"We'll turn about," said Scotch, grimly. "That canoe will lure us into this dismal swamp so far that we'll never find our way out. We'll turn about at once."

Frank laughed.

"All right," he said. "I suppose I'll have to give up, but I do dislike to leave without solving the mystery of that canoe."

"It may be thot we're so far in thot we can't foind our way out at all, at all," said the Irish lad.

"I'm afraid we'll not be able to get out before nightfall," confessed the professor. "I have no fancy for spending a night in this swamp."

Barney promptly expressed his dislike for such an adventure, but Frank was silent.

The canoe turned about, and they set about the task of retracing the water courses by which they had come far into the swamp.

It was not long before they came to a place where the courses divided. Frank was for following one, while both Barney and the professor insisted that the other was the right way.

Finally, Frank gave in to them, although it was against his better judgment, and he felt that he should not submit.

They had not proceeded far before, as they were passing round a bend, a cry of astonishment fell from Barney's lips.

"Howly shmoke!" he shouted. "Thot bates th' band!"

"What's the matter?" asked Frank and the professor, together.

"Thot whoite canoe!"

"What of it?"

"Look back! Th' thing is afther follying av us!"

They looked back, and, sure enough, there was the mysterious canoe, gliding after them, like a most uncanny thing!

"Well, I like that!" said Frank, in a tone that plainly indicated he did not like it. "This is very pleasant!"

"Pull, pull!" throbbed the professor, splashing his paddle into the water and very nearly upsetting them all. "Don't let the thing overtake us! Pull, pull!"

"Oi think it's a foine plan to be gettin' out av this," muttered Barney, in an agitated tone of voice.

"Steady, there, professor," called Frank, sharply. "What do you want to do—drown us all? Keep cool."

"It's coming!" fluttered the little man, wildly.

"Let it come. As long as we could not overtake it, let it overtake us. That is a very good scheme."

"Th' skame won't worruck, me b'y. Th' ould thing's shtopped."

It was true; the white canoe had stopped, and was lying calmly on the inky surface of the shadowed water.

"Well, I can't say that I like this," said Frank.

"And I scarcely think I like it more than you do," came from the professor.

"An' th' both av yez loike it as well as mesilf," put in the Irish youth.

"What are we to do?"

"Go on."

Go on they did, but the white canoe still followed, keeping at a distance.

"I can't stand this," declared Frank, as he picked up a rifle from the bottom of the canoe. "I wonder how lead will work on her?"

"Pwhat are yez goin' to do, me b'y?" cried Barney, in alarm.

"Shoot a few holes in that craft," was the deliberate answer. "Swing to the left, so that I may have a good chance."

"Don't shoot!" palpitated the professor.

"Don't shoot!" gurgled Barney.

"What is the matter with you?" demanded Frank, sharply. "You both appear like frightened children!"

"No telling what'll come of it if you shoot."

"I'll simply put a few holes through that canoe."

"It may be the destruction of us!"

"It may send us all to glory by th' farrust express."

"Nonsense! Don't be foolish! Swing her to the left, I say. I am going to shoot, and that settles it."

It was useless for them to urge him not to fire; he was determined, and nothing they could say would change his mind. The canoe drifted round to the left, and the rifle rose to Frank's shoulder.

Spang! The clear report rang out and echoed through the cypress forest.

The bullet tore through the white canoe, and the weird craft seemed to give a leap, like a wounded creature.

"Hit it!" cried Frank, triumphantly.

"Hit it!" echoed the professor, quivering with terror.

"Hit it!" groaned Barney Mulloy, his face white and his eyes staring. "May all the saints defend us!"

"Look!" shouted Frank. "She is turning about—she is going to leave us! But I'll put another bullet through her!"

Up the rifle came, but, just as he pressed the trigger, Professor Scotch pushed the weapon to one side, so the bullet did not pass within twenty feet of the white canoe.

"Why did you do that?" demanded Frank, angrily.

"I couldn't see you shoot into that canoe again," faltered the agitated professor. "It was too much—too much!"

"What do you mean by that?"

Professor Scotch shook his head. He could not explain, and he was ashamed of his agitation and fears.

"Well, you fellows lay over anything I ever went up against!" said Frank, in disgust. "I didn't suppose you could be so thoroughly childish."

"All right, Frank," came humbly from the professor's lips. "I can't help it, and I haven't a word to say."

"But I will take one more shot at that canoe!" vowed Frank.

"Not this day," chuckled Barney Mulloy. "She's gone!"

It was true. The mysterious canoe had vanished from view while they were speaking.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE EVERGLADES.

"Gone!"

"Disappeared!"

The exclamations came from Frank and Professor Scotch.

Barney's chuckle changed to a shiver, and his teeth chattered.

"Th' Ould B'y's in it!" he chatteringly declared.

"The Old Boy must have been in that canoe," agreed the professor.

Frank was puzzled and disappointed. He still refused to believe there was anything supernatural about the mysterious, white canoe, but he was forced to acknowledge to himself that the craft had done most amazing things.

"It simply slipped into some branch waterway while we were not looking," he said, speaking calmly, as if it were the most commonplace thing imaginable.

"Well, it's gone," said Scotch, as if greatly relieved. "Now, let's get out of this in a great hurry."

"I am for going back to see what has become of the white canoe," said Frank, with deliberate intent to make his companions squirm.

Barney and the professor raised a perfect howl of protest.

"Never!" shouted Scotch, nearly upsetting the boat in his excitement, and wildly flourishing his arms in the air.

"Nivver!" squealed the Irish lad. "Oi'll joomp overboard an' swim out av this before Oi'll go back!"

Frank laughed.

"You are most amusing," he declared. "I suppose I'll have to give in to you, as you are two to one."

"Come on," fluttered the professor; "let's be moving."

So Frank put down the rifle, and picked up his paddle, and they resumed their effort to get out of the swamp before nightfall.

But the afternoon was well advanced, and night was much nearer than they had thought, as they were soon to discover.

At last, Barney cried:

"Oi see loight enough ahead! We must be near out av th' woods."

Frank said nothing. For a long time he had been certain they were on the wrong course, but he hoped it would bring them out somewhere. He had noted the light that indicated they were soon to reach the termination of the cypress swamp, but he held his enthusiasm in check till he could be sure they had come out somewhere near where they had entered the dismal region.

Professor Scotch grew enthusiastic immediately.

"Ha!" he cried, punching Frank in the back. "What do you think now, young man? Do you mean to say that we don't know our business? What if we had accepted your way of getting out of the swamp! We'd been in there now, sir."

"Don't crow till you're out of the woods," advised Frank.

"Begobs! Oi belave he'd be plazed av we didn't get out at all, at all!" exclaimed Barney, somewhat touched.

In a short time they came to the termination of the cypress woods, but, to the surprise of Barney and the professor, the swamp, overgrown with tall rushes and reed-grass, continued, with the water course winding away through it.

"Pwhat th' ould boy does this mane?" cried the Irish lad.

"It means," said Frank, coolly, "that we have reached the Everglades."

"Th' Ivirglades? Well, pwhat do we want iv thim, Oi dunno?"

"They are one of the sights of Florida, Barney."

"It's soights enough I've seen alreddy. Oi'd loike ter git out av this."

"I knew you wouldn't get out this way, for we have not passed the rookeries of the herons, as you must remember."

"That's true," sighed the professor, dejectedly. "I hadn't thought of that. What can we do, boys?"

"Turn about, and retrace our steps," said Frank.

But Barney and the professor raised a vigorous protest.

"Nivver a bit will yez get me inther thot swamp again th' doay!" shouted the Irish lad, in a most decisive manner.

"If we go back, we'll not be able to get out before darkness comes on, and we'll have to spend the night in the swamp," said Scotch, excitedly. "I can't do that."

"Well, what do you propose to do?" asked Frank, quietly. "I don't seem to have anything to say in this matter. You are running it to suit yourselves."

They were undecided, but one thing was certain; they would not go back into the swamp. The white canoe was there, and the professor and the Irish lad did not care to see that again.

"Whoy not go on, Frankie?" asked Barney. "We're out av th' woods, an', by follyin' this strame, we ought to get out av th' Iverglades."

"What do you say, professor?" asked Frank, who was rather enjoying the adventure, although he did not fancy the idea of spending a night on the marsh.

"Go on—by all means, go on!" roared the little man.

"Go on, it is, then. We'll proceed to explore the Everglades in company with Professor Scotch, the noted scientist and daring adventurer. Go ahead!"

So they pushed onward into the Everglades, while the sun sank lower and lower, finally dropping beneath the horizon.

Night was coming on, and they were in the heart of the Florida Everglades!

The situation was far from pleasant.

Barney and the professor fell to growling at each other, and they kept it up while Frank smiled

and remained silent.

At length, Scotch took in his paddle in disgust, groaning:

"We're lost!"

"I am inclined to think so myself," admitted Frank, cheerfully.

"Well, who's to blame, Oi'd loike to know?" cried the Irish lad.

"You are!" roared the professor, like a wounded lion.

"G'wan wid yez!" exploded Barney. "It's yersilf thot is to blame! Frankie wanted to go the other woay, but ye said no."

"Me! me! me!" howled the professor. "Did I? You were the one! You insisted that this was the proper course to pursue! You are to blame for it all!"

"Profissor, ye're a little oulder thin Oi be, but av ye wur nigh me age, Oi'd inform ye thot ye didn't know how to spake th' truth."

"Do you mean to call me a liar, you impudent young rascal?"

"Not now, profissor; but I would av ye wur younger."

"It's all the same! It's an insult, sir!"

"Well, pwhat are yez goin' to do about it?"

"I'll make you swallow the words, you scoundrel!"

"Well, thot would be more av a male thin the rist av ye are loikely to get th' noight, so it is!"

"Come, come," laughed Frank; "this is no time nor place to quarrel."

"You're right, Frank; but this ungrateful young villain makes me very tired!"

"Careful, professor—slang."

"Excuse me, but you know human beings are influenced by their surroundings and associates. If I have——"

"Professor!" cried Frank, reproachfully. "You would not accuse me of having taught you to use slang?"

"Ah—ha—ahem! No, no—that is, you see—er—well, er, that Dutch boy was always saying something slangy."

"Hans?"

"Yes."

"Professor! professor! He's not here to defend himself."

"Oh, well! Oh, well! Ha! ha! ha! Quite a joke—quite a little joke, you know! You always appreciate a joke, Frank. You are full of fun yourself."

As under the circumstances there was nothing else to do, they finally paddled slowly forward, looking for a piece of dry land, where they could stop and camp for the night.

They approached a small cluster of trees, which rose above the rushes, and it was seen that they seemed to be growing on land that was fairly high and dry.

"We'll stop there," decided Frank. "It's not likely we'll find another place like that anywhere in the Everglades."

As they came nearer, they saw the trees seemed to be growing on an island, for the water course divided and ran on either side of them.

"Just the place for a camp!" cried Frank, delightedly. "This is really a very interesting and amusing adventure."

"It may be for you," groaned the professor; "but you forget that it is said to be possible for persons to lose themselves in the Everglades and never find their way out."

"On the contrary, I remember it quite well. In fact, it is said that, without a guide, the chances of finding a way out of the Everglades is small, indeed."

"Well, what do you feel so exuberant about?"

"Why, the possibility that we'll all perish in the Everglades adds zest to this adventure—makes it really interesting."

"Frank, you're a puzzle to me. You are cautious about running into danger of any sort, but, once in it, you seem to take a strange and unaccountable delight in the peril. The greater the danger, the happier you seem to feel."

"That's roight," nodded Barney.

"When I am not in danger, my good judgment tells me to take no chances; but when I get into it fairly, I know the only thing to be done is to make the best of it. I delight in adventure—I was born for it!"

A dismal sound came from the professor's throat.

"When your uncle died," said Scotch, "I thought him my friend. Although we had quarreled, I fancied the hatchet was buried. He made me your guardian, and I still believed he had died with nothing but friendly feelings toward me. But he knew you, and now I believe it was an act of malice toward me when he made me your guardian. And, to add to my sufferings, he decreed that I should travel with you. Asher Dow Merriwell deliberately plotted against my life! He knew the sort of a career you would lead me, and he died chuckling in contemplation of the misery and suffering you would inflict upon me! That man was a monster—an inhuman wretch!"

"Look there!" cried Barney, pointing toward the small, timbered island.

"What is it?"

"May Ould Nick floy away wid me av it ain't a house!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HUT ON THE ISLAND.

"A house?"

"A cabin!"

"A hut amid the trays."

In a little clearing on some rising ground amid the trees they could see the hut.

"Is it possible any one lives here?" exclaimed the professor.

"It looks as if some one stops here at times, at least," said Frank.

"Av this ain't a clear case av luck, Oi dunno mesilf!"

"We'll get the man who lives there to guide us out of the Everglades!" shouted the professor, in a relieved tone.

Then Frank cast a gloom over their spirits by saying:

"This may be a hunter's cabin, inhabited only at certain seasons of the year. Ten to one, there's no one living in it now."

"You'd be pleased if there wasn't!" almost snarled Professor Scotch. "You're a boy without a heart!"

Frank laughed softly.

"We'll soon find out if there's any one at home," he said, as the canoe ran up to the bank, and he took care to get out first.

As soon as Frank was out, the professor made a scramble to follow him. He rose to his feet, despite Barney's warning cry, and, a moment later, the cranky craft flipped bottom upward, with the swiftness of a flash of lightning.

The professor and the Irish lad disappeared beneath the surface of the water.

Barney's head popped up in a moment, and he stood upon his feet, with the water to his waist, uttering some very vigorous words.

Up came the professor, open flew his mouth, out spurted a stream of water, and then he wildly roared:

"Help! Save me! I can't swim! I'm drowning!"

Before either of the boys could say a word, he went under again.

"This is th' firrust toime Oi iver saw a man thot wanted to drown in thray fate av wather," said Barney.

Frank sat down on the dry ground, and shouted with laughter.

Up popped the professor a second time.

"Help!" he bellowed, after he had spurted another big stream of water from his mouth. "Will you see me perish before your very eyes? Save me, Frank!"

But Frank was laughing so heartily that he could not say a word, and the little man went down once more.

"Hivins! he really manes to drown!" said Barney, in disgust.

"Grab him!" gasped Frank. "Don't let him go down again. Oh, my! what a scrape! This beats our record!"

For the third time the professor's head appeared above the surface, and the professor's voice weakly called:

"Will no one save me? This is a plot to get me out of the way! Oh, Frank, Frank! I never thought this of you! Farewell! May you be happy when I am gone!"

"Stand up!" shouted Frank, seeing that the little man had actually resigned himself to drown. "Get your feet under you. The water is shallow there."

The professor stood up, and an expression of pain, surprise, and disgust settled on his face, as he thickly muttered:

"May I be kicked! And I've been under the water two-thirds of the time for the last hour! I've swallowed more than two barrels of this swamp-water, including, in all probability, a few dozen pollywogs, lizards, young alligators, and other delightful things! If the water wasn't so blamed dirty here, and I wasn't afraid of swallowing enough creatures to start an aquarium, I'd just lie down and refuse to make another effort to get up."

Then he waded out, the look on his face causing Frank to double up with merriment, while even the wretched Barney smiled.

Barney would have waded out, but Frank said:

"Don't attempt to land without those guns, old man. They're somewhere on the bottom, and we want them."

So Barney was forced to plunge under the surface and feel around till he had fished up the rifles and the shotgun.

Frank had taken care of his bow and arrows, the latter being in a quiver at his back, and the paddles had not floated away.

After a time, everything was recovered, the canoe was drawn out and tipped bottom upward, and the trio moved toward the cabin, Frank leading, and the professor staggering along behind.

Reaching the cabin, Frank rapped loudly on the door.

No answer.

Once more he knocked, and then, as there was no reply, he pushed the door open, and entered.

The cabin was not occupied by any living being, but a glance showed the trio that some one had been there not many hours before, for the embers of a fire still glowed dimly on the open hearth of flat stones.

There were two rooms, the door between them being open, so the little party could look into the second.

The first room seemed to be the principal room of the hut, while the other was a bedroom. They could see the bed through the open doorway.

There were chairs, a table, a couch, and other things, for the most part rude, home-made stuff, and still every piece showed that the person who constructed it had skill and taste.

Around the walls were hung various tin pans and dishes, all polished bright and clean.

What surprised them the most was the wire screens in the windows, a screen door that swung inward, and a mosquito-bar canopy over the bed and the couch.

"By Jove!" cried Frank; "the person who lives here is prepared to protect himself against mosquitoes and black flies."

"It would be impossible to live here in the summer," gravely declared Professor Scotch, forgetting his own misery for the moment. "The pests would drive a man crazy."

"Oh, I don't know about that," returned Frank. "If a man knew how to defend himself against them he might get along all right. They can't be worse than the mosquitoes of Alaska in the warm months. Up there the Indians get along all right, even though mosquitoes have been known to kill a bear."

"Pwhat's thot?" gurgled Barney. "Kill a bear? Oh, Frankie, me b'y, Oi nivver thought that av you!"

"It's true," affirmed Professor Scotch. "Sometimes bears, lured by hunger, will come down into the lowlands, where mosquitoes will attack them. They will stand up on their hind legs and strike at the little pests with their forward paws. Sometimes a bear will do this till he is exhausted and falls. Then the mosquitoes finish him."

"That's a harrud yarn to belave, profissor; but it goes av you soay so," said Barney, thinking it best to smooth over the late unpleasantness.

"Up there," said Frank, "the Indians smear their faces and hands with some kind of sticky stuff that keeps the mosquitoes from reaching their flesh. In that way they get along very well."

But they had something to talk about besides the Indians of Alaska, for the surprises around them furnished topics for conversation.

Exploring the place, they found it well stocked with provisions, which caused them all to feel delighted.

"I'm actually glad we came!" laughed Frank. "This is fun galore."

"It will be all right if we are able to get out of the scrape," said Scotch.

Barney built a fire, while Frank prepared to make bread and cook supper, having found everything necessary for the accomplishment of the task.

The professor stripped off his outer garments, wrung the water out of them, and hung them up before the fire to dry.

His example was followed by the Irish boy.

They made themselves as comfortable as possible, and night came on, finding them in a much better frame of mind than they had expected to be.

Frank succeeded in baking some bread in the stone oven. He found coffee, and a pot bubbled on the coals, sending out an odor that made the trio feel ravenous.

There were candles in abundance, and two of them were lighted. Then, when everything was ready, they sat down to the table and enjoyed a supper that put them in the best of moods.

The door of the hut was left open, and the light shone out upon the overturned canoe and the dark water beyond.

After supper they cleaned and dried the rifles and shotgun.

"By jingoes!" laughed Frank; "this is a regular picnic! I'm glad we took the wrong course, and came here!"

"You may change your tune before we get out," said the professor, whose trousers were dry, and who was now feeling of his coat to see how that was coming on.

"Don't croak, profissor," advised Barney. "You're th' firrust mon Oi iver saw thot wuz bound ter drown himsilf in thray fate av wather. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Oh, laugh, laugh," snapped the little man, fiercely. "I'll get even with you for that some time! What fools boys are!"

After supper they lay around and took things easy. Barney and Frank told stories till it was time to go to bed, and they finally turned in, first having barred the door and made sure the windows were securely fastened.

They soon slept, but they were not to rest quietly through the night. Other mysterious things were soon to follow those of the day.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WILD NIGHT IN THE SWAMP.

Clang! clang! clang!

"Fire!"

"Turn out!"

The boys leaped to their feet, and the professor came tearing out of the bedroom, ran into the table, which he overturned with a great clatter of dishes, reeled backward, and sat down heavily on the floor, where he rubbed his eyes, and muttered:

"I thought that fire engine was going to run me down before I could get out of the way."

"Fire engine!" cried Frank Merriwell. "Who ever heard of a fire engine in the heart of the Florida Everglades?"

"Oi herrud th' gong," declared Barney.

"So did I," asserted the professor.

"I heard something that sounded like a fire gong," admitted Frank.

"Pwhat was it, Oi dunno?"

"It seemed to come from beneath the head of the bed in there," said Scotch.

"An' Oi thought I herrud it under me couch out here," gurgled Barney.

"We will light a candle, and look around," said Frank.

A candle was lighted, and they looked for the cause of the midnight alarm, but they found nothing that explained the mystery.

"Whist!" hissed the Irish boy. "It's afther gettin' away from here we'd better be, mark me worrud."

"What makes you think that?" demanded Frank, sharply.

"It's spooks there be around this place, ur Oi'm mistaken!"

"Oh, I've heard enough about spooks! It's getting tiresome."

The professor was silent, but he shook his head in a very mysterious manner, as if he thought a great many things he did not care to speak about.

They had been thoroughly awakened, but, after a time, failing to discover what had aroused them, they decided to return to bed.

Five minutes after they lay down, Frank and the professor were brought to their feet by a wild howl and a thud. They rushed out of the bedroom, and nearly fell over Barney, who was lying in the middle of the floor, at least eight feet from the couch.

"What is the matter with you?" cried Frank, astonished.

"Oi was touched!" palpitated the Irish lad, thickly.

"Touched?"

"Thot's pwhat!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oi wur jist beginning to get slapy whin something grabbed me an' threw me clan out here in th' middle av th' room."

"Oh, say! what are you trying to make us believe!"

"Oi'll swear to it, Frankie—Oi'll swear on a stack av Bibles."

"You dreamed it, Barney; that's what's the matter."

"Nivver a drame, me b'y, fer Oi wasn't aslape at all, at all."

"But you may have been asleep, for you say you were beginning to get sleepy. There isn't anything here to grab you."

"Oi dunno about thot, Frankie. Oi'm incloined to belave th' Ould B'y's around, so Oi am."

"Oh, this is tiresome! Go back to bed, and keep still."

"Nivver a bit will Oi troy to slape on thot couch again th' noight, me b'y. Oi'll shtay roight here on th' flure."

"Sleep where you like, but keep still. That's all."

Frank was somewhat nettled by these frequent interruptions of his rest, and he was more than tempted to give Barney cause to believe the hut was really haunted, for he was an expert ventriloquist, and he could have indulged in a great deal of sport with the Irish boy.

But other things were soon to take up their attention. While they were talking a strange humming arose on every side and seemed to fill the entire hut. At first, it was like a swarm of bees, but it grew louder and louder till it threatened to swell into a roar.

Professor Scotch was nearly frightened out of his wits.

"It is the end of everything!" he shrieked, making a wild dash for the door, which he flung wide open.

But the professor did not rush out of the cabin. Instead, he flung up his hands, staggered backward, and nearly fell to the floor.

"The white canoe!" he faintly gasped, clutching at empty air for support.

Frank sprang forward, catching and steadying the professor.

"The white canoe—where?"

"Out there!"

Sure enough, on the dark surface of the water, directly in front of the hut, lay the mysterious

canoe.

And now this singular craft was illuminated from stem to stern by a soft, white light that showed its outlines plainly.

"Sint Patherick presarve us!" panted Barney Mulloy.

"I am getting tired of being chased around by a canoe!" said Frank, in disgust, as he hastily sought one of the rifles.

"Don't shoot!" entreated the professor, in great alarm.

"Av yer do, our goose is cooked!" fluttered Barney.

Frank threw a fresh cartridge into the rifle, and turned toward the open door, his mind fully made up.

And then, to the profound amazement of all three, seated in the canoe there seemed to be an old man, with white hair and long, white beard. The soft, white light seemed to come from every part of his person, as it came from the canoe.

Frank Merriwell paused, with the rifle partly lifted.

"It's th' spook himsilf!" gasped Barney, covering his face with his hands, and clinging to the professor.

"That's right!" faintly said Scotch. "For mercy's sake, don't shoot, Frank! We're lost if you do!"

Frank was startled and astonished, but he was determined not to lose his nerve, no matter what happened.

The man in the canoe seemed to be looking directly toward the cabin. He slowly lifted one hand, and pointed away across the Everglades, at the same time motioning with the other hand, as if for them to go in that direction.

"I'll just send a bullet over his head, to see what he thinks of it," said Frank, softly, lifting the rifle.

Then another startling thing happened.

Canoe and man disappeared in the twinkling of an eye!

The trio in the hut gasped and rubbed their eyes.

"Gone!" cried Frank.

"Vanished!" panted the professor.

"An' now Oi suppose ye'll say it wur no ghost?" gurgled Barney.

It was extremely dark beneath the shadow of the cypress trees, and not a sign of the mysterious canoe could they see.

"It is evident he did not care to have me send a bullet whizzing past his ears," laughed Frank, who did not seem in the least disturbed.

"What are your nerves made of?" demanded Professor Scotch, in a shaking tone of voice. "They must be iron!"

"Hark!"

Frank's hand fell on the professor's arm, and the three listened intently, hearing something that gave them no little surprise.

From far away through the night came the sound of hoarse voices singing a wild, doleful song.

"Hamlet's ghost!" ejaculated the professor.

"Pwhat the Ould Nick does thot mane?" cried Barney.

"Hark!" Frank again cautioned. "Let's see if we can understand the words they are singing. Be still."

"We sailed away from Gloucester Bay,
And the wind was in the west, yo ho!
And her cargo was some New England rum;
Our grog it was made of the best, yo ho!"

"A sailor's song," decided Frank, "and those are sailors who are singing. We are not alone in the Everglades."

"They're all drunk," declared the professor. "You can tell that by the sound of their voices. Drunken men are dangerous."

"They're a blamed soight betther than none, fer it's loikely they know th' way out av this blissed swamp," said Barney.

"They may bub-bub-be pup-pup-pup-pirates!" chattered the professor.

"What sticks me," said Frank, "is how a party of sailors ever made their way in here, for we are miles upon miles from the coast. Here is another mystery."

"Are ye fer takin' a look at th' loikes av thim, Frankie?"

"Certainly, and that without delay. Come, professor."

"Never!"

"What do you mean?"

"I am not going near those ruffianly and bloodthirsty pirates."

"Then you may stay here with the spooks, while Barney and I go."

This was altogether too much for the professor, and, when he found they really intended to go, he gave in.

Frank loaded the rifles and the shotgun, and took along his bow and arrows, even though Barney made sport of him for bothering with the last.

They slipped the canoe into the water, and, directed by Frank, the professor succeeded in getting in without upsetting the frail affair.

"Oi hope we won't run inther the ghost," uttered the Irish boy.

"The sound of that singing comes from the direction in which the old man seemed to point," said Frank.

This was true, as they all remembered.

The singing continued, sometimes sinking to a low, droning sound, sometimes rising to a wild wail that sounded weirdly over the marshland.

"Ready," said Frank, and the canoe slipped silently over the dark surface of the water course.

The singing ceased after a time, but they were still guided by the sound of wrangling voices.

"They are quarreling!" exclaimed Frank, softly.

"This is tut-tut-terrible!" stuttered the professor.

Suddenly the sound of a pistol shot came over the rushes, followed by a feminine shriek of pain or terror!

CHAPTER XXX.

FRANK'S SHOT.

Frank and his two companions were profoundly astonished. As soon as he could recover, Frank asked:

"Did you hear that?"

"Av course we hearrud it!" returned Barney, excitedly.

"It sounded very much like the voice of a woman or girl," said Professor Scotch, who was so amazed that he forgot for the moment that he was scared.

"That's what it was," declared Frank; "and it means that our aid is needed in that quarter at once."

"Be careful! be cautious!" warned the professor. "There's no telling what kind of a gang we may run into."

"To thunder with thot!" grated Barney Mulloy, quivering with eagerness. "There's a female in nade av hilp."

"Go ahead!" directed Frank, giving utterance to his old maxim.

The professor was too agitated to handle a paddle, so the task of propelling the canoe fell to the boys, who sent it skimming over the water, Frank watching out for snags.

In a moment the water course swept round to the left, and they soon saw the light of a fire gleaming through the rushes.

The sounds of a conflict continued, telling them that the quarrel was still on, and aiding them in forming their course.

In a moment they came in full view of the camp-fire, by the light of which they saw several

struggling, swaying figures.

Frank's keen eyes seemed to take in everything at one sweeping glance.

Six men and a girl were revealed by the light of the fire. Five of the men were engaged in a fierce battle, while the sixth was bound, in a standing position, to the trunk of a tree.

The girl, with her hands bound behind her back, was standing near the man who was tied to the tree, and the firelight fell fairly on the faces of man and girl.

A low exclamation of the utmost astonishment broke from Frank's lips.

"It can't be—it is an impossibility!" he said.

"Pwhat is it, me b'y?" quickly demanded Barney.

"The man—the girl! Look, Barney! do you know them?"

"Oi dunno."

"Well, I know! There is no mistake. That is Captain Justin Bellwood, whose vessel was lost in the storm off Fardale coast! I am certain of it!"

"An' th' girrul is——"

"Elsie Bellwood, his daughter!"

"Th' wan you saved from th' foire, Frankie?"

"As sure as fate!"

"It can't be possible!" fluttered Professor Scotch. "Captain Bellwood has a new vessel, and he would not be here. You must be mistaken, Frank."

"Not on your life! That is Captain Bellwood and his daughter. There is no mistake, professor."

"But how——"

"There has been some kind of trouble, and they are captives—that is plain enough. Those men are sailors—Captain Bellwood's sailors! It's likely there has been a mutiny. We must save them."

"How can it be done?"

"We must land while those ruffians are fighting. We are well armed. If we can get ashore, we'll set the captain free, and I fancy we'll be able to hold our own with those ruffians, desperate wretches though they are."

"Wait!" advised the timid professor. "Perhaps they will kill each other, and then our part will be easy."

Frank was not for waiting, but, at that moment, something happened that caused him to change his plan immediately.

The fighting ruffians were using knives in a deadly way, and one man, bleeding from many wounds, fell exhausted to the ground. Another, who seemed to be this one's comrade, tore himself from the other three, leaped to the girl, caught her in his arms, and held her in front of him, so that her body shielded his. Then, pointing a revolver over her shoulder, he snarled:

"Come on, and I'll bore the three of ye! You can't shoot me, Gage, unless you kill ther gal!"

The youngest one of the party, a mere boy, but a fellow with the air of a desperado, stepped to the front, saying swiftly:

"If you don't drop that girl, Jagers, you'll leave your carcass in this swamp! That is business, my hearty."

Frank clapped a hand over his mouth to keep from uttering a great shout of amazement. The next moment he panted:

"This is fate! Look, Barney! by the eternal skies, that is Leslie Gage, my worst enemy at Fardale Academy, and the fellow who ran away to keep from being expelled. It was reported that he had gone to sea."

"Ye're roight, Frankie," agreed the no less excited Irish lad. "It's thot skunk, an' no mistake!"

"It is Leslie Gage," agreed the professor. "He was ever a bad boy, but I did not think he would come to this."

"An' Oi always thought he would come to some bad ind. It wur thot spalpane thot troied to run Frank through with a sharpened foil wan toime whin they wur fencing. He had black murder in his hearrut thin, an' it's not loikely th' whilp has grown inny betther since."

"Keep still," whispered Frank. "Let's hear what is said."

The man with the girl laughed defiantly, retorting:

"You talk big, Gage, but it won't work with me. I hold the best hand just at present, and you'll

have to come to terms. Keep back!"

"You don't dare shoot," returned the young desperado, as he took still another step toward the sailor.

In a moment the man placed the muzzle of the revolver against the temple of the helpless girl, fiercely declaring:

"If you come another inch, I'll blow her brains out!"

"The dastard!" grated Frank. "Oh, the wretch! Wait. I will fix him, or my name is not Merriwell!"

He drew an arrow from the quiver, and fitted the notch to the bow-string. His nerves were steady, and he was determined. He waited till the man had removed the muzzle of the weapon from the girl's temple, and then he lifted the bow.

Barney and the professor caught their breath. They longed to check Frank, but dared not speak for fear of causing him to waver and send the arrow at the girl.

The bow was bent, the line was taut, the arrow was drawn to the head, and then——

Twang! The arrow sped through the air, but it was too dark for them to follow its flight with their eyes. With their hearts in their mouths, they awaited the result.

Of a sudden, the ruffian uttered a cry of pain, released his hold on the girl, and fell heavily to the ground.

The firelight showed the arrow sticking in his shoulder.

"Ugh!" grunted a voice close beside the canoe. "Very good shot for a white boy. Not many could do that."

The trio turned in amazement and alarm, and, within three feet of them, they saw a shadowy canoe that contained a shadowy figure. There was but one person in the strange canoe, and he immediately added:

"There is no need to fear Socato, the Seminole, for he will not harm you. He is the friend of all good white men."

It was an Indian, a Seminole, belonging to the remnant of the once great nation that peopled the Florida peninsula. Frank realized this in a moment, and, knowing the Seminoles were harmless when well treated, felt no further alarm.

The Indian had paddled with the utmost silence to their side, while they were watching what was taking place on shore.

The arrow had produced consternation in the camp. The fellow who was wounded tried to draw it from his shoulder, groaning:

"This is not a fair deal! Give me a fair show, and I'll fight you all!"

"Where did it come from?" asked Gage, in dismay.

The two canoes were beyond the circle of firelight, so they could not be seen from the shore.

Gage's two companions were overcome with terror.

"This swamp is full of Indians!" one of them cried. "We've been attacked by a band of savages!"

Gage spoke a few words in a low tone, and then sprang over the prostrate form of the man who had been stricken down by the arrow, grasped the girl, and retreated into the darkness. His companions also scudded swiftly beyond the firelight, leaving Captain Bellwood still bound to the tree, while one man lay dead on the ground, and another had an arrow in his shoulder.

Close to Frank's ear the voice of Socato the Seminole sounded:

"Light bother them. They git in the dark and see us from the shore. Then they shoot this way some."

"Jupiter and Mars!" gasped Professor Scotch, "I don't care to stay here, and have them shoot at me!"

"White boys want to save girl?" asked Socato, swiftly. "They pay to get her free? What say?"

"Of course we will pay," hastily answered Frank. "Can you aid us in saving her? If you can, you shall be——"

"Socato save her. White man and two boys go back to cabin of Great White Phantom. Stay there, and Socato come with the girl."

"Begorra! Oi don't loike thot," declared Barney. "Oi'd loike to take a hand in th' rescue mesilf."

"Socato can do better alone," asserted the Seminole. "Trust me."

But Frank was not inclined to desert Elsie Bellwood in her hour of trouble, and he said:

"Socato, you must take me with you. Professor, you and Barney go back to the hut, and stay there till we come."

The Indian hesitated, and then said:

"If white boy can shoot so well with the bow and arrow, he may not be in the way. I will take him, if he can step from one canoe to the other without upsetting either."

"That's easy," said Frank, as he deliberately and safely accomplished the feat.

CHAPTER XXXI.

YOUNG IN YEARS ONLY.

"Well done, white boy," complimented the strange Indian.

"Pass me one of those rifles," requested Frank.

"White boy better leave rifle; take bow and arrows," advised Socato. "Rifle make noise; bow and arrow make no noise."

"All right; what you say goes. Return to the hut, Barney, and stay there till we show up."

"But th' spook——"

"Hang the spook! We'll know where to find you, if you go there."

"The Great White Phantom will not harm those who offer him no harm," declared the Indian.

"I am not so afraid of spooks as I am of—— Jumping Jupiter!"

There was a flash of fire from the darkness on shore, the report of a gun, and a bullet whirred through the air, cutting the professor's speech short, and causing him to duck down into the canoe.

"Those fellows have located us," said Frank, swiftly. "We must get away immediately. Remember, wait at the hut."

Socato's paddle dropped without a sound into the water, and the canoe slid away into the night.

The professor and Barney lost no time in moving, and it was well they did so, for, a few seconds later, another shot came from the shore, and the bullet skipped along the water just where the canoes had been.

Frank trusted everything to Socato, even though he had never seen or heard of the Seminole before. Something about the voice of the Indian convinced the boy that he was honest, for all that his darkness was such that Frank could not see his face and did not know how he looked.

The Indian sent the canoe through the water with a speed and silence that was a revelation to Frank Merriwell. The paddle made no sound, and it seemed that the prow of the canoe scarcely raised a ripple, for all that they were gliding along so swiftly.

"Where are you going?" whispered Frank, observing that they were leaving the camp-fire astern.

"White boy trust Socato?"

"If I didn't, I shouldn't be here. Of course, I do."

"Then keep cool. Socato take him round to place where we can come up behind bad white men. We try to fool 'um."

"Good!"

The light of the camp-fire died out, and then, a few moments later, another camp-fire seemed to glow across a strip of low land.

"See it?" whispered the Indian, with caution.

"Yes. What party is camped there—friends of yours, Socato?"

"Not much!"

"Who, then?"

"That same fire."

"Same fire as which?"

"One bad white men build."

Frank was astonished.

"Oh, say! how is that? We left that fire behind us, Socato."

"And we have come round by the water till it is before us again."

This was true, but the darkness had been so intense that Frank did not see how their course was changing.

"I see how you mean to come up behind them," said the boy. "You are going to land and cross to their camp."

"That right. They won't look for us that way."

"I reckon not."

Soon the rushes closed in on either side, and the Indian sent the canoe twisting in and out amid their tall stalks like a creeping panther. He seemed to know every inch of the way, and followed it as well as if it were broad noonday.

Frank's admiration for the fellow grew with each moment, and he felt that he could, indeed, trust Socato.

"If we save that girl and the old man, you shall be well paid for the job," declared the boy, feeling that it was well to dangle a reward before the Indian's mental vision.

"It is good," was the whispered retort. "Socato is poor."

In a few moments they crept through the rushes till the canoe lay close to a bank, and the Indian directed Frank to get out.

The camp-fire could not be seen from that position, but the boy well knew it was not far away.

Taking his bow, with the quiver of arrows slung to his back, the lad left the canoe, being followed immediately by the Seminole, who lifted the prow of the frail craft out upon the bank, and then led the way.

Passing round a thick mass of reeds, they soon reached a position where they could see the camp-fire and the moving forms of the sailors. Just as they reached this position, Leslie Gage was seen to dash up to the fire and kick the burning brands in various directions.

"He has done that so that the firelight might not reveal them to us," thought Frank. "They still believe us near, although they know not where we are."

Crouching and creeping, Socato led the way, and Frank followed closely, wondering what scheme the Indian could have in his head, yet trusting everything to his sagacity.

In a short time they were near enough to hear the conversation of the bewildered and alarmed sailors. The men were certain a band of savages were close at hand, for they did not dream that the arrow which had dropped Jagers was fired by the hand of a white person.

"The sooner we get away from here, the better it will be for us," declared Leslie Gage.

"We'll have to get away in the boats," said a grizzled villainous-looking, one-eyed old sailor, who was known as Ben Bowsprit.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake!" gasped the third sailor, who was a negro, called Black Tom; "how's we gwine to run right out dar whar de critter am dat fired de arrer inter Jack Jagers?"

"The 'critter' doesn't seem to be there any longer," assured Gage. "Those two shots must have frightened him away."

"That's right," agreed Bowsprit. "This has been an unlucky stop fer us, mates. Tomlinson is dead, an' Jagers——"

"I ain't dead, but I'm bleedin', bleedin', bleedin'!" moaned the fellow who had been hit by Frank's arrow. "There's a big tear in my shoulder, an' I'm afeared I've made my last cruise."

"It serves you right," came harshly from the boy leader of the ruffianly crew. "Tomlinson attempted to set himself up as head of this crew—as captain over me. You backed him. All the time, you knew I was the leader in every move we have made."

"And a pretty pass you have led us to!" whined the wounded wretch. "Where's the money you said the captain had stored away? Where's the reward we'd receive for the captain alive and well? We turned mutineers at your instigation, and what have we made of it? We've set the law agin' us, an' here we are. The *Bonny Elsie* has gone up in smoke——"

"Through the carelessness of a lot of drunken fools!" snarled Gage. "She should not have been burned. But for that, we wouldn't be here now, hiding from officers of the law."

"Well, here we are," growled Ben Bowsprit, "an' shiver my timbers if we seem able to get out of this howlin' swamp! The more we try, the more we seem ter git lost."

"Fo' goodness, be yo' gwine to stan' roun' an' chin, an' chin, an' chin?" demanded Black Tom.

"The fire's out, and we can't be seen," spoke Gage, swiftly, in a low tone. "Get the boats ready. You two are to take the old man in one; I'll take the girl in the other."

"It's the gal you've cared fer all the time," cried Jagers, madly. "It was for her you led us into

this scrape."

"Shut up!"

"I won't! You can't make me shut up, Gage."

"Well, you'll have a chance to talk to yourself and Tomlinson before long. Tomlinson will be jolly company."

"You've killed him!" accused the wounded man. "I saw you strike the blow, and I'll swear to that, my hearty!"

"It's not likely you'll be given a chance to swear to it, Jagers. I may have killed him, but it was in self-defense. He was doing his best to get his knife into me."

"Yes, we was tryin' to finish you," admitted Jagers. "With you out of the way, Tomlinson would have been cap'n, and I first mate. You've kept your eyes on the gal all the time. I don't believe you thought the cap'n had money at all. It was to get the gal you led us into this business. She'd snubbed you—said she despised you, and you made up your mind to carry her off against her will."

"If that was my game, you must confess I succeeded very well. But I can't waste more time talking to you. Get the boats ready, boys. I will take the smaller. Put Cap'n Bellwood in the larger, and look out for him."

The two sailors obeyed his orders. Boy though he was, Gage had resolved to become a leader of men, and he had succeeded.

The girl, quite overcome, was prostrate at the feet of her father, who was bound to the cypress tree.

There was a look of pain and despair on the face of the old captain. His heart bled as he looked down at his wretched daughter, and he groaned:

"Merciful Heaven! what will become of her? It were better that she should die than remain in the power of that young villain!"

"What are you muttering about, old man?" coarsely demanded Gage, as he bent to lift the girl. "You seem to be muttering to yourself the greater part of the time."

"You wretch! you young monster!" grated the old shipmaster. "Do you think you can escape the retribution that pursues all such dastardly creatures as you?"

"Oh, you make me tired! I have found out that the goody-good people do not always come out on top in this world. Besides that, it's too late for me to turn back now. I started wrong at school, and I have been going wrong ever since. It's natural for me; I can't help it."

"Spare my child!"

"Oh, don't worry about her. I'll take care of her."

"If you harm her, may the wrath of Heaven fall on your head!"

"Let it go at that. I will be very tender and considerate with her. Come, Elsie."

He attempted to lift her to her feet, but she drew from him, shuddering and screaming wildly:

"Don't touch me!"

"Now, don't be a little fool!" he said, harshly. "You make me sick with your tantrums! Come on, now."

But she screamed the louder, seeming to stand in the utmost terror of him.

With a savage exclamation, Gage tore off his coat and wrapped it about the girl's head so that her cries were smothered.

"Perhaps that will keep you still a bit!" he snapped, catching her up in his arms, and bearing her to the smaller boat, in which he carefully placed her.

She did not faint. As her hands were bound behind her, she could not remove the coat from about her head, and she sat as he placed her, with it enveloping her nearly to the waist.

"Is everything ready?" asked Gage. "Where are all the guns? Somebody take Tomlinson's weapons. Let Jagers have his. He may need them when we are gone."

"Don't leave me here to die alone!" piteously pleaded the wounded sailor. "I'm pretty well gone now, but I don't want to be left here alone!"

Gage left the small boat for a moment, and approached the spot where the pleading wretch lay.

"Jagers," he said, "it's the fate you deserve. You agreed to stand by me, but you went back on your oath, and tried to kill me."

"And now you're going to leave me here to bleed to death or starve?"

"Why shouldn't I? The tables are turned on you, my fine fellow."

"Well, I'm sure you won't leave me."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"Why won't I?"

"This is why!"

Jaggers flung up his hand, from which a spout of flame seemed to leap, and the report of a pistol sounded over the marsh.

Leslie Gage fell in a heap to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MYSTERIOUS TRANSFORMATION.

"Ha! ha! ha!" wildly laughed the wounded sailor. "That time he did not escape! Leave me to die, would he? Well, he is dead already, for I shot him through the brain!"

"That's where you are mistaken, Jaggers," said the cool voice of the boyish leader of the mutineers. "I saw your move, saw the revolver, and dropped in time to avoid the bullet."

Gage sprang to his feet.

A snarl of baffled fury came from the lips of the wounded sailor.

"The foul fiend protects you!" he cried. "See if you can dodge this bullet!"

He would have fired again, but Gage leaped forward in the darkness, kicked swiftly and accurately, and sent the revolver spinning from the man's hand.

"You have settled your fate!" hissed the boy, madly. "I did mean to have you taken away, and I was talking to torment you. Now you will stay here—and die like a dog!"

He turned from Jaggers, and hurried back to the boat, in which that muffled figure silently sat.

"Are you ready, boys?" he called.

Captain Bellwood had been released from the tree, and marched to the other boat, in which he now sat, bound and helpless.

"All ready," was the answer.

"All right; go ahead."

They pushed off, settled into their seats, and began rowing.

Gage was not long in following, but he wondered at the silence of the girl who sat in the stern. It could not be that she had fainted, for she remained in an upright position.

"Which way, cap?" asked one of the men.

"Any way to get out of this," was the answer. "We will find another place to camp, but I want to get away from this spot."

Not a sound came from beneath the muffled coat.

"It must be close," thought Gage. "I wonder if she can breathe all right. I wish she would do something."

At last, finding he could keep up with his companions without trouble, and knowing he would have very little difficulty in overtaking them, Gage drew in his oars and slipped back toward the muffled figure in the stern.

"Elsie," he said, softly.

No answer; no move.

"Miss Bellwood."

Still no answer.

"You must not think too hard of me, Miss Bellwood," he said, pleadingly. "I would not harm you for anything. I love you far too much for that, Elsie."

He could have sworn that the sound which came from the muffling folds of the coat was like a smothered laugh, but he knew she was not laughing at him.

"I have been wicked and desperate," he went on; "but I was driven to the life I have led. Fate has been against me all along. When I shipped on your father's vessel it was because I had seen you and knew you were to be along on the cruise. I loved you at first sight, and I vowed that I would reform and do better if you loved me in return, Elsie."

He was speaking swiftly in a low tone, and his voice betrayed his earnestness. He passed an arm around the muffled figure, feeling it quiver within his grasp, and then he continued:

"You did not take kindly to me, but I persisted. Then you repulsed me—told me you despised me, and that made me desperate. I swore I would have you, Elsie. Then came the mutiny and the burning of the vessel. Now we are here, and you are with me. Elsie, you know not how I love you! I have become an outcast, an outlaw—all for your sake! Elsie, dear Elsie! can't you learn to love me? I will do anything for you—anything!"

Again a sound came from beneath the coat. He was sure she was sobbing. It must be that he was beginning to break down that icy barrier. She realized her position, and she would be reasonable.

"Elsie—little sweetheart!"

He began to remove the muffling coat.

"Do not scream, Elsie—do not draw away, darling. Say that you will love me a little—just a little!"

He pulled the coat away, and something came out of the folds and touched cold and chilling against his forehead.

It was the muzzle of a revolver!

"Keep still!" commanded a voice that was full of chuckling laughter. "If you chirp, I'll have to blow the roof of your head off, Gage!"

Leslie Gage caught his breath and nearly collapsed into the bottom of the boat. Indeed, he would have fallen had not a strong hand fastened on his collar and held him.

It was not Elsie Bellwood!

"I don't want to shoot you, Gage," whispered the cool voice. "I don't feel like that, even though you did attempt to take my life once or twice in the past. You have made me very good natured within the past few moments. How you did love me! How gently you murmured, 'Do not draw away, darling; say that you love me a little—just a little!' Ha! ha! ha! Really, Gage, you gave me such amusement that I am more than satisfied with this little adventure."

"That voice—I know it!" grated Gage, through set teeth. "Still, I can't place you."

"Indeed, you are forgetful, Gage. But it is rather dark, and I don't suppose you expected to see me here. We last met at Fardale."

"Fardale?"

"Yes."

"And you are—Frank Merriwell!"

Gage would have shouted the name in his amazement, but Frank's fingers suddenly closed on the fellow's throat and held back the sound in a great measure.

"Now you have guessed it," chuckled Frank. "Oh, Gage! I can forgive you for the past since you have provided me with so much amusement to-night. How you urged me to learn to love you! But that's too much, Gage; I can never learn to do that."

Leslie ground his teeth, but he was still overcome with unutterable amazement and wonder. That Frank Merriwell, whom he hated, should appear there at night in the wilds of the Florida Everglades was like a miracle.

What had become of Elsie Bellwood? Had some magic of that wild and dreary region changed her into Frank Merriwell?

Little wonder that Gage was dazed and helpless.

"How in the name of the Evil One did you come here?" he finally asked, recovering slightly from his stupor.

Frank laughed softly once more. It was the same old merry, boyish laugh that Gage had heard so often at Fardale, and it filled him with intense anger, as it had in the days of old.

"I know you did not expect to see me," murmured Frank, still laughing. "I assure you that the Evil One had nothing to do with my appearance here."

"It was trickery—magic! I left her in the boat a few moments. What became of her? How did you take her place?"

"I will let you speculate over that question for a while, my fine fellow. In the meantime, I fancy it will be a good idea to tie you up so you will not make any trouble. Remember I have a revolver handy, and I promise that I'll use it if you kick up a row."

At this moment, one of the sailors in the other boat called:

"Hello, there, Mr. Gage! where are you?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GAGE TAKES A TURN.

Gage was tempted to shout for help, but the muzzle of the cold weapon that touched his forehead froze his tongue to silence.

"Hello! Ahoy, there, cap'n! Where are you?"

Ben Bowsprit was growing impatient and wondering why Leslie did not answer. It had occurred to the old tar that it was possible the boy had deserted them.

The voice of Black Tom was heard to say:

"He oughter be right near by us, Ben. 'Smighty strange dat feller don' seem to answer nohow."

"Shiver my timbers!" roared Bowsprit. "We'll pull back, my hearty, and take a look for our gay cap'n."

They were coming back, and Gage was still unbound, although a captive in Frank Merriwell's clutch.

Frank thought swiftly. There would not be enough time to bind Gage and get away. Something must be done to prevent the two sailors from turning about and rowing back.

"Gage," whispered Frank, swiftly, "you must answer them. Say, it's all right, boys; I'm coming right along."

Gage hesitated, the longing to shout for help again grasping him.

"Do as I told you!" hissed Frank, and the muzzle of the revolver seemed to bore into Gage's forehead, as if the bullet longed to seek his brain.

With a mental curse on the black luck, Gage uttered the words as his captor had ordered, although they seemed to come chokingly from his throat.

"Well, what are ye doing back there so long?" demanded Bowsprit.

"Tell them you're making love," chuckled Frank, who seemed to be hugely enjoying the affair, to the unspeakable rage of his captive. "Ask them if they don't intend to give you a show at all."

Gage did as directed, causing Bowsprit to laugh hoarsely.

"Oh, you're a sly dog!" cackled the old sailor, in the darkness. "But this is a poor time to spend in love-makin', cap'n. Wait till we git settled down ag'in. Tom an' me'll agree not ter watch ye."

"Say, all right; go on," instructed Frank, and Gage did so.

In a few seconds, the sound of oars were heard, indicating that the sailors were obeying instructions.

At that moment, while Frank was listening to this sound, Gage believed his opportunity had arrived, and, being utterly desperate, the young rascal knocked aside Frank's hand, gave a wild shout, leaped to his feet, and plunged headlong into the water.

It was done swiftly—too swiftly for Frank to shoot, if he had intended such a thing. But Frank Merriwell had no desire to shoot his former schoolmate, even though Leslie Gage had become a hardened and desperate criminal, and so, having broken away, the youthful leader of the mutineers stood in no danger of being harmed.

Frank and Socato had been close at hand when Gage placed Elsie Bellwood in the boat, and barely was the girl left alone before she was removed by the Seminole, in whose arms she lay limp and unconscious, having swooned at last.

Then it was that a desire to capture Gage and a wild longing to give the fellow a paralyzing surprise seized upon Frank.

"Socato," he whispered, "I am going to trust you to take that girl to the hut where my friends are to be found. Remember that you shall be well paid; I give you my word of honor as to that. See that no harm comes to her."

"All right," returned the Indian. "What white boy mean to do?"

"Have a little racket on my own hook," was the reply. "If I lose my bearings and can't find the hut, I will fire five shots into the air from my revolver. Have one of my friends answer in a similar manner."

"It shall be done."

"Give me that coat. All right. Now skip with the girl."

Frank took the coat; stepped into the boat, watched till Gage was approaching, and then muffled his head, sitting in the place where Elsie had been left.

In the meantime, the Seminole was bearing the girl swiftly and silently away.

Thus it came about that Gage made love to Frank Merriwell, instead of the fair captive he believed was muffled by the coat.

When Gage plunged into the water, the small boat rocked and came near upsetting, but did not go over.

But the fellow's cry and the splash had brought the sailors to a halt, and they soon called back:

"What's the matter? What has happened?"

"I rather fancy it will be a good plan to make myself scarce in this particular locality," muttered Frank.

Gage swam under water for some distance, and then, coming to the surface, he shouted to the men in the leading boat:

"Bowsprit, Black Tom, help! Turn back quickly! There is an enemy here, but he is alone! We can capture him, boys! Be lively about it!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Frank, merrily. "You will have a fine time catching me. You have given me great amusement, Gage. I assure you that I have been highly entertained by your company, and hereafter I shall consider you an adept in the gentle art of making love."

"Laugh!" fiercely shouted Gage from the water. "You are having your turn now, but mine will soon come!"

"I have heard you talk like that before, Gage. It does not seem that you have yet learned 'the way of the transgressor is hard.'"

"You'll learn better than to meddle with me! I have longed to meet you again, Frank Merriwell, and I tell you now that one of us will not leave this swamp alive!"

"This is not the first time you have made a promise that you were not able to keep. Before I leave you, I have this to say: If Captain Bellwood is harmed in the least, if he is not set at liberty with very little delay, I'll never rest till you have received the punishment which your crimes merit."

Frank could hear the sailors rowing back, and he felt for the oars, having no doubt that he would be able to escape them with ease, aided by the darkness.

Then came a surprise for him.

When Gage stopped rowing to make love to the supposed Elsie he had left the oars in the rowlocks, drawing them in and laying them across the boat. In the violent rocking of the boat when the fellow leaped overboard one of the oars had been lost.

Frank was left with a single oar, and his enemies were bearing down upon him with great swiftness.

"I wonder if there's a chance to scull this boat?" he coolly speculated, as he hastened to the stern and made a swift examination.

To his satisfaction and relief, he found there was, and the remaining oar was quickly put to use.

Even then Frank felt confident that he would be able to avoid his enemies in the darkness that lay deep and dense upon the great swamp. He could hear them rowing, and he managed to skulk the light boat along without making much noise.

He did not mind that Gage had escaped; in fact, he was relieved to get rid of the fellow, although it had been his intention to hold him as hostage for Captain Bellwood.

It was the desire for adventure that had led Frank into the affair, and, now that it was over so far as surprising Gage was concerned, he was satisfied to get away quietly.

He could hear the sailors calling Gage, who answered from the water, and he knew they would stop to pick the fellow up, which would give our hero a still better show of getting away.

All this took place, and Frank was so well hidden by the darkness that there was not one chance in a thousand of being troubled by the ruffianly crew when another astonishing thing happened.

From a point amid the tall rushes a powerful white light gleamed out and fell full and fair upon the small boat and its single occupant, revealing Frank as plainly as if by the glare of midday sunlight.

"Great Scott!" gasped the astonished boy. "What is the meaning of this, I would like to know?"

He was so astonished that he nearly dropped the oar.

The sailors were astonished, but the light showed them distinctly, and Gage snarled.

"Give me your pistol, Bowsprit! Be lively!"

He snatched the weapon from the old tar's hand, took hasty aim, and fired.

Frank Merriwell was seen to fling up his arms and fall heavily into the bottom of the boat!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FEARFUL FATE.

"Got him!" grated the triumphant young rascal, flourishing the revolver. "That's the time I fixed him!"

The mysterious light vanished in the twinkling of an eye, but it had shone long enough for Gage to do his dastardly work.

The sailors were alarmed by the light, and wished to row away; but Gage raved at them, ordering them to pull down toward the spot where the other boat lay.

After a time, the men recovered enough to do as directed, and the smaller boat was soon found, rocking lightly on the surface.

Running alongside, Gage reached over into the small boat, and his hand found the boy who was stretched in the bottom.

"Here he is!" cried the young rascal, gleefully. "I'll bet anything I put the bullet straight through his heart!"

And then, as if his own words had brought a sense of it all to him, he suddenly shuddered with horror, faintly muttering:

"That was murder!"

The horror grew upon him rapidly, and he began to wonder that he had felt delight when he saw Frank Merriwell fall. The shooting had been the impulse of the moment, and, now that it was done and he realized what it meant, he would have given much to recall that bullet.

"Never mind," he thought. "I swore that one of us should not leave this swamp alive, and my oath will not be broken. I hated Frank Merriwell the first time I saw him, and I have hated him ever since. Now he is out of my way, and he will never cross my path again."

There was a slight stir in the small boat, followed by something like a gasping moan.

"He don't seem to be dead yet, cap'n," said Ben Bowsprit. "I guess your aim wasn't as good as you thought."

That nettled Gage.

"Oh, I don't think he'll recover very fast," said the youthful rascal, harshly.

He rose and stepped over into the smaller boat.

"Give me some matches," he ordered. "I want to take a look at the chap. He must make a beautiful corpse."

"You'll find I'm not dead yet!" returned a weak voice, and Frank Merriwell sat up and grappled with Gage.

A snarl of fury came from the lips of the boy desperado.

"So I didn't finish you! Well, you'll not get away!"

"You'll have to fight before you finish me!" panted Frank.

But Merriwell seemed weak, and Gage did not find it difficult to handle the lad at whom he had shot. He forced Frank down into the bottom of the boat, and then called to his companions:

"Give me some of that line. I'll make him fast."

A piece of rope was handed to him, and Black Tom stepped into the boat to aid him. Between them, they succeeded in making Frank fast, for the boy's struggles were weak, at best.

"Now it is my turn!" cried Leslie, gloatingly. "At Fardale Frank Merriwell triumphed. He disgraced me, and I was forced to fly from the school."

"You disgraced yourself," declared the defiant captive. "You cheated at cards—you fleeced your schoolmates."

"And you exposed the trick! Oh, yes, I was rather flip with the papers, and I should not have been detected but for you, Merriwell. When I was exposed, I knew I would be shunned by all the

fellows in school, and so I ran away. But I did not forget who brought the disgrace about, and I knew we should meet some time, Merriwell. We did meet. How you came here I do not know, and why my bullet did not kill you is more than I can understand."

"It would have killed me but for a locket and picture in my pocket," returned Frank. "It struck the locket, and that saved me; but the shock robbed me of strength—it must have robbed me of consciousness for a moment."

"It would have been just as well for you if the locket had not stopped the bullet," declared Gage, fiercely.

"By that I presume you mean that you intend to murder me anyway?"

"I have sworn that one of us shall never leave this swamp alive."

"Go ahead, Gage," came coolly from the lips of the captive. "Luck seems to have turned your way. Make the most of it while you have an opportunity."

"We can't spend time in gabbing here," came nervously from Bowsprit. "Let's get away immediately."

"Yes," put in Black Tom; "fo' de Lawd's sake, le's get away before dat light shine some mo'!"

"That's right," said the old tar. "Some things happen in this swamp that no human being can account for."

Gage was ready enough to get away, and they were soon pulling onward again, with Frank Merriwell, bound and helpless, in the bottom of the smaller boat.

For nearly an hour they rowed, and then they succeeded in finding some dry, solid land where they could camp beneath the tall, black trees.

They were so overcome with alarm that they did not venture to build a fire, for all that Gage was shivering in his wet clothes.

Leslie was still puzzling over Frank Merriwell's astonishing appearance, and he tried to question Frank concerning it, but he could obtain but little satisfaction from the boy he hated.

The night passed, and morning came.

Away to the west stretched the Everglades, while to the north and the east lay the dismal cypress swamps.

The party seemed quite alone in the heart of the desolate region.

Leslie started out to explore the strip of elevated land upon which they had passed the night, and he found it stretched back into the woods, where lay great stagnant pools of water and where grew all kinds of strange plants and vines.

Gage had been from the camp about thirty minutes when he came running back, his face pale, and a fierce look in his eyes.

"I have heard of it!" he kept muttering. "I have heard of it! I have heard of it!"

"Avast there!" cried Bowsprit, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "What are you muttering over? What is it you have heard about, my hearty?"

"The serpent vine," answered Gage, wildly.

"What is the serpent vine?"

"You shall see. I did not believe there was such a thing, but it tangled my feet, it tried to twine about my legs, and I saw the little red flowers opening and shutting like the lips of devils."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake! de boss hab gone stark, starin' mad!" cried Black Tom, staring at Leslie with bulging eyes.

"Not much!" shouted Leslie, hoarsely. "But I have thought of a way to dispose of Frank Merriwell. I will feed him to the serpent vine! Ah, that will be revenge!"

Frank had listened to all this, and he noted that Gage actually seemed like a maniac.

Captain Bellwood, securely bound, was near Frank, to whom he now spoke:

"God pity you, my lad! He was bad enough before, but he seems to have gone mad. He will murder you!"

"Well, if that's to be the end of me, I'll have to take my medicine," came grimly from the lips of the undaunted boy captive.

"My child?" entreated the captain, anxiously. "What became of her? Can you tell me? Where is she now?"

"She is safe, I believe. She is with friends of mine, and they will fight for her as long as they are able to draw a breath."

"Thank Heaven! Now I care not if these wretches murder me!"

"I scarcely think they will murder you, captain. They have nothing in particular against you; but Gage hates me most bitterly."

"That's right!" snarled Leslie, who had overheard Frank's last words. "I do hate you, and my hatred seems to have increased tenfold since last night. I have been thinking—thinking how you have baffled me at every turn whenever we have come together. I have decided that you are my evil genius, and that I shall never have any luck as long as you live. I shall keep my oath. One of us will not leave this swamp alive, and you will be that one!"

"Go ahead with the funeral," said Frank, stoutly. "If you have made up your mind to murder me, I can't help myself; but one thing is sure—you'll not hear me beg."

"Wait till you know what your fate is to be. Boys, set his feet free, and then follow me, with him between you."

The cords which held Frank's feet were released, and he was lifted to a standing position. Then he was marched along after Gage, who led the way.

"Good-by," Frank called back.

Into the woods he was marched, and finally Gage came to a halt, motioning for the others to stop.

"Look!" he cried, pointing; "there is the serpent vine!"

On the ground before them, lay a mass of greenish vines, blossoming over with a dark red flower. Harmless enough they looked, but, as Gage drew a little nearer, they suddenly seemed to come to life, and they began reaching toward his feet, twisting, squirming, undulating like a mass of serpents.

"There!" shouted Leslie—"there is the vine that feeds on flesh and blood! See—see how it reached for my feet! It longs to grasp me, to draw me into its folds, to twine about my body, my neck, to strangle me!"

The sailors shuddered and drew back, while Frank Merriwell's face was very pale.

"It did fasten upon me," Gage continued. "If I had not been ready and quick with my knife, it would have drawn me into its deadly embrace. I managed to cut myself free and escape."

Then he turned to Frank, and the dancing light in his eyes was not a light of sanity.

"Merriwell," he said, "the serpent vine will end your life, and you'll never bother me any more!"

He leaped forward and clutched the helpless captive, screaming:

"Thus I keep my promise!"

And he flung Frank headlong into the clutch of the writhing vine!

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SERPENT VINE.

With his hands bound behind his back, unable to help himself, Frank reeled forward into the embrace of the deadly vine, each branch of which was twisting, curling, squirming like the arms of an octopus.

He nearly plunged forward upon his face, but managed to recover and keep on his feet.

He felt the vine whip about his legs and fasten there tenaciously, felt it twist and twine and crawl like a mass of serpents, and he knew he was in the grasp of the frightful plant which till that hour he had ever believed a creation of some romancer's feverish fancy.

Frank did not cry out. A great horror seemed to come upon him and benumb his body and his senses.

He could feel the horrid vines climbing and coiling about him, and he was helpless to struggle and tear them away. He knew they were mounting to his neck, where they would curl about his throat and choke the breath of life from his body.

It was a fearful fate—a terrible death. And there seemed no possible way of escaping.

Higher and higher climbed the vine, swaying and squirming, the blood-red flowers opening and closing like lips of a vampire that thirsted for his blood.

A look of horror was frozen on Frank's face. His eyes bulged from his head, and his lips were drawn back from his teeth. He did not cry out, he did not seem to breathe, but he appeared to be turned to stone in the grasp of the deadly plant.

It was a dreadful sight, and the two sailors, rough and wicked men though they were, were

overcome by the spectacle. Shuddering and gasping, they turned away.

For the first time, Gage seemed to fully realize what he had done. He covered his eyes with his hand and staggered backward, uttering a low, groaning sound.

Merriwell's staring eyes seemed fastened straight upon him with that fearful stare, and the thought flashed through the mind of the wretched boy that he should never forget those eyes.

"They will haunt me as long as I live!" he panted. "Why did I do it? Why did I do it?"

Already he was seized by the pangs of remorse.

Once more he looked at Frank, and once more those staring eyes turned his blood to ice water.

Then, uttering shriek after shriek, Gage turned and fled through the swamp, plunging through marshy places and jungles, falling, scrambling up, leaping, staggering, gasping for breath, feeling those staring eyes at his back, feeling that they would pursue him to his doom.

Scarcely less agitated and overcome, Bowsprit and the negro followed, and Frank Merriwell was abandoned to his fate.

Frank longed for the use of his hands to tear away those fiendish vines. It was a horrible thing to stand and let them creep up, up, up, till they encircled his throat and strangled him to death.

Through his mind flashed a picture of himself as he would stand there with the vines drawing tighter and tighter about his throat and his face growing blacker and blacker, his tongue hanging out, his eyes starting from their sockets.

He came near shrieking for help, but the thought that the cry must reach the ears of Leslie Gage kept it back, enabled him to choke it down.

He had declared that Gage should not hear him beg for mercy or aid. Not even the serpent vine and all its horrors could make him forget that vow.

The little red flowers were getting nearer and nearer to his face, and they were fluttering with eagerness. He felt a sucking, drawing, stinging sensation on one of his wrists, and he believed one of those fiendish vampire mouths had fastened there.

He swayed his body, he tried to move his feet, but he seemed rooted to the ground. He did not have the strength to drag himself from that fatal spot and from the grasp of the vine.

It seemed that hours passed. His senses were in a maze, and the whole world was reeling and romping around him. The trees became a band of giant demons, winking, blinking, grinning at him, flourishing their arms in the air, and dancing gleefully on every side to the sound of wild music that came from far away in the sky.

Then a smaller demon darted out from amid the trees, rushed at him, clutched him, slashed, slashed, slashed on every side of him, dragged at his collar, and panted in his ear:

"White boy fight—try to git away! His hands are free."

Was it a dream—was it an hallucination? No! his hands were free! He tore at the clinging vines, he fought with all his remaining strength, he struggled to get away from those clinging things.

All the while that other figure was slashing and cutting with something bright, while the vine writhed and hissed like serpents in agony.

How it was accomplished Frank could never tell, but he felt himself dragged free of the serpent vine, dragged beyond its deadly touch, and he knew it was no dream that he was free!

A black mist hung before his eyes, but he looked through it and faintly murmured:

"Socato, you have saved me!"

"Yes, white boy," replied the voice of the Seminole, "I found you just in time. A few moments more and you be a dead one."

"That is true, Socato—that is true! I owe you my very life! I can never pay you for what you have done!"

In truth the Indian had appeared barely in time to rescue Frank from the vine, and it had been a desperate and exhausting battle. In another minute the vine would have accomplished its work.

"I hear white boy cry out, and I see him run from this way," explained the Seminole. "He look scared very much. Sailor men follow, and then I come to see what scare them so. I find you."

"It was Providence, Socato. You knew how to fight the vine—how to cut it with your knife, and so you saved me."

"We must git 'way from here soon as can," declared the Indian. "Bad white men may not come back, and they may come back. They may want to see what has happen to white boy."

Frank knew this was true, but for some time he was not able to get upon his feet and walk. At length the Indian assisted him, and, leaning on Socato's shoulder, he made his way along.

Avoiding the place where the sailors were camped, the Seminole proceeded directly to the spot where his canoe was hidden. Frank got in, and Socato took the paddle, sending the light craft skimming over the water.

Straight to the strange hut where Frank and his companions had stopped the previous night they made their way.

The sun was shining into the heart of the great Dismal Swamp, and Elsie Bellwood was at the door to greet Frank Merriwell.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RIGHT OR WRONG.

Elsie held out both hands, and there was a welcome light in her eyes. It seemed to Frank that she was far prettier than when he had last seen her in Fardale.

"Frank, I am so glad to see you!"

He caught her hands and held them, looking into her eyes. The color came into her cheeks, and then she noted his rumpled appearance, saw that he was very pale, and cried:

"What is it, Frank? You are hurt? You are so pale!"

Socato grunted in a knowing way, but said nothing.

"It is nothing, Miss Bellwood," assured the boy. "I have been through a little adventure, that's all. I am not harmed."

He felt her fingers trembling in his clasp, and an electric thrill ran over him. He remembered that at their last parting she had said it were far better they should never meet again; but fate had thrown them together, and now—what?

He longed to draw her to him, to kiss her, to tell her how happy he was at finding her, but he restrained the impulse.

Then the voice of Barney Mulloy called from within the hut:

"Phwat ye goin' to do me b'y—shtand out there th' rist av th' doay? Whoy don't yez come in, Oi dunno?"

"Come in, Frank—come in," cried Professor Scotch. "We have been worried to death over you. Thought you were lost in the Everglades, or had fallen into the hands of the enemy."

"Your second thought was correct," smiled Frank, as he entered the hut, with Elsie at his side.

"Phwat's thot?" shouted the Irish boy, in astonishment. "Ye don't mane to say thim spalpanes caught yez?"

"That's what they did, and they came near cooking me, too."

Frank then related the adventures that had befallen him since he started out on his own hook to give Leslie Gage a surprise. He told how Gage had made love to him in the boat, and Barney shrieked with laughter. Then he related what followed, and how his life had been saved by the locket he carried, and the professor groaned with dismay. Following this, he related his capture by Gage and how the young desperado flung him, with his hands bound, into the clutch of the serpent vine.

The narrative first amused and then thrilled his listeners. Finally they were horrified and appalled by the peril through which he had passed.

"It's Satan's own scum thot Gage is!" grated Barney, fiercely. "Iver let me get a crack at th' loike av him and see phwat will happen to th' whilp!"

"I hate and despise him!" declared Elsie. "He is a monster!"

Then Frank explained how he had been saved by Socato, and the Seminole found himself the hero of the hour.

"Soc, ould b'y," cried Barney, "thot wur th' bist job ye iver did, an' Oi'm proud av yez! Ye'll niver lose anything by thot thrick, ayther."

"Not much!" roared the little professor, wiping his eyes. "Man, give me your hand!"

Then the Seminole had his hand shaken in a manner and with a heartiness that astonished him greatly.

"That was nothing," he declared, "Socato hates the snake vine—fight it any time. Don't make so much row."

When all had been told and the party had recovered from the excitement into which they had

been thrown, Barney announced that breakfast was waiting.

Elsie, for all of her happiness at meeting Frank, was so troubled about her father that she could eat very little.

Socato ate hastily, and then announced that he would go out and see what he could do about rescuing Captain Bellwood.

Barney wished to go with the Seminole, but Socato declared that he could do much better alone, and hurriedly departed.

Then Frank did his best to cheer Elsie, telling her that everything was sure to come out all right, as the Indian could be trusted to outwit the desperadoes and rescue the captain.

Seeing Frank and Elsie much together, Barney drew the professor aside, and whispered:

"It's a bit av a walk we'd better take in th' open air, Oi think."

"But I don't need a walk," protested the little man.

"Yis ye do, profissor," declared the Irish boy, soberly. "A man av your studios habits nivver takes ixercise enough."

"But I do not care to expose myself outdoors."

"Phwat's th' matther wid out dures, Oi dunno?"

"It's dangerous."

"How?"

"There's danger that Gage and his gang will appear."

"Phwat av they do? We can get back here ahead av thim, fer we won't go fur enough to be cut off."

"Then the exercise will not be beneficial, and I will remain here."

"Profissor, yer head is a bit thick. Can't ye take a hint, ur is it a kick ye nade, Oi dunno?"

"Young man, be careful what kind of language you use to me!"

"Oi'm spakin' United States, profissor; no Irishmon wauld iver spake English av he could hilp it."

"But such talk of thick heads and kicks—to me, sir, to me!"

"Well, Oi don't want to give yez a kick, but ye nade it. Ye can't see thot it's alone a bit Frank an' th' littlre girrul would loike to be."

"Why should they wish to be alone?"

"Oh, soay! did ye iver think ye'd loike to be alone wid a pretty swate girrul, profissor? Come on, now, before Oi pick ye up an' lug ye out."

So Barney finally induced the professor to leave the hut, but the little man remained close at hand, ready to bolt in through the wide open door the instant there was the least sign of danger.

Left to themselves, Frank and Elsie chatted, talking over many things of mutual interest. They sat very near together, and more and more Frank felt the magnetism of the girl's winning ways and tender eyes. He drew nearer and nearer, and, finally, although neither knew how it happened, their hands met, their fingers interlocked, and then he was saying swiftly, earnestly:

"Elsie, you cannot know how often I have thought of you since you left me at Fardale. There was something wrong about that parting, Elsie, for you refused to let me know where you were going, refused to write to me, expressed a wish that we might never meet again."

She caught her breath. Her head was bowed, and her cheeks were very pale.

"All the while," she softly said, "away down in my heart was a hope I could not kill—a hope that we might meet again some day, Frank."

"And we have met!" he cried, exultantly. "When we have to part again, Elsie, you will not leave me as you did before? You will let me write to you? You will write to me occasionally?"

"Would it be right?"

She was looking straight into his eyes now, her face was near his, and the temptation was too great for his impulsive nature to resist. In a moment his arm was about her neck, and he had kissed her.

"Right!" he cried. "I do not know! Oh, we cannot always be right!"

She quickly released herself from his hold and sprang to her feet, the warm blood flushing her cheeks.

"We cannot always be right," she admitted; "but we should be right when we can. Frank, Inza Burrage befriended me. She thinks more of you than any one else in the wide world. Do not

forget Inza!"

He lifted his hand to a round hole in his coat where a bullet from Leslie Gage's revolver had cut through, and beneath it he felt the ruined and shattered locket that held Inza's picture.

"I will not forget!" he said, his voice far from steady.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FRANK'S MERCY.

The forenoon passed, and the afternoon was well advanced, but still Socato the Seminole did not return.

But late in the afternoon a boat and a number of canoes appeared. In the boat was Leslie Gage and the two sailors, Black Tom and Bowsprit. The canoes were filled with Indians.

"Great shnakes av Ireland!" cried Barney Mulloy, amazed. "Phwat th' dickens does this mane, Oi dunno?"

"It means trouble," said Frank, quickly. "Have the rifles ready, and be prepared for hot work."

"Indians!" gurgled Professor Scotch. "We're all dead and scalped!"

"Those must be Seminoles," said Frank. "It is scarcely likely that they are very dangerous."

The boat containing the three white persons ran boldly up to the shore, and Leslie Gage landed. Advancing a short distance toward the hut, the door of which was securely closed, he cried:

"Hello in there!"

"Talk with him, Barney," Frank swiftly directed. "The fellow does not know I am alive, and I do not wish him to know it just now."

So Barney returned:

"Hello, yersilf, an' see how ye loike it."

"You people are in a bad trap," declared Gage, with a threatening air. "Look," and he motioned toward the water, where the canoes containing the Indians were lying, "these are my backers. There are twenty of them, and I have but to say the word to have them attack this hut and tear it to the ground."

"Well, Oi dunno about thot," coolly retorted the Irish lad. "We moight have something to say in thot case. It's arrumed we are, an' we know how to use our goons, me foine birrud."

"If you were to fire a shot at one of these Indians it would mean the death of you all."

"Is thot so? Well, we are arrumed with Winchester repeaters, an' it moight make the death av thim all av we began shootin'."

"They do not look very dangerous," said Frank. "I'll wager something Gage has hired the fellows to come here and make a show in order to scare us into submitting. The chances are the Indians will not fight at all."

"You're not fools," said Gage, "and you will not do anything that means the same as signing your death warrant. If you will come to reason, we'll have no trouble. We want that girl, Miss Bellwood, and we will have her. If you do not——"

He stopped suddenly, for there was a great shouting from the Indians.

"The phantom! the phantom!" they cried, in tones that betokened the greatest terror.

Then they took to flight, paddling as if their very lives depended on it.

At the same time, the mysterious white canoe, still apparently without an occupant, was seen coming swiftly toward them, gliding lightly over the water in a most unaccountable manner.

Exclamations of astonishment broke from the two sailors, and Leslie Gage stared at the singular craft in profound astonishment.

When the attention of the crowd was on the remarkable sight, Frank unfastened the door and before Gage was aware of it, our hero was right upon him.

"You are my prisoner, Gage!" Frank shouted, pointing a revolver at the fellow. "Surrender!"

Gage saw the boy he believed he had destroyed, uttered a wild shriek, threw up his hands, and fell in a senseless heap to the ground.

Frank swiftly lifted the fellow, and then ran into the cabin with him, placing him on the couch.

The two sailors did not pursue. In fact, they seemed almost as badly scared as the Indians, and

they got away in their boat, rowing as if for their very lives, soon passing from sight.

"Well, begobs!" exclaimed Barney Mulloy; "this is phwat Oi call a ragion av wonders. It's ivery doay and almost ivery hour something happens to astonish ye."

Gage was made secure, so he could not get away when he recovered from the swoon into which he seemed to have fallen.

A short time after, Socato was seen returning, but he was alone in his canoe.

"He has not found my father—my poor father!" cried Elsie, in distress. "Those terrible men will kill my father!"

"Wait!" advised Frank. "Let's hear what he has to say. I have great confidence in Socato."

"The bad white men leave their captive alone," said Socato, "and I should have set him free, but the great white phantom came, and then the white captive disappeared."

"What's that?" cried Frank, in astonishment. "Make it plain, Socato. Whom do you mean by the great white phantom?"

"The one who owns the canoe that goes alone—the one who built this house and lives here sometimes. Every one fears him. My people say he is a phantom, for he can appear and disappear as he likes, and he commands the powers of light and darkness. Socato knew that the bad white man had hired a hunting party of my people to come here and appear before the house to frighten you, but he knew you would not be frightened, and the bad men could not get my people to aid them in a fight. Socato also knew that the great white phantom sent his canoe to scare my people away, but he does not know what the great white phantom has done with the man who was a prisoner."

"Well, it is possible the great white phantom will explain a few things we do not understand," said Frank, "for here he comes in his canoe."

"And father—my father is with him in the canoe!" screamed Elsie Bellwood, in delight.

It was true. The white canoe was approaching, still gliding noiselessly over the water, without any apparent power of propulsion, and in it were seated two men. One had a long white beard and a profusion of white hair. He was dressed entirely in white, and sat in the stern of the canoe. The other was Captain Justin Bellwood, quite unharmed, and looking very much at his ease.

The little party flocked to the shore to greet the captain, who waved his hand and called reassuringly to Elsie. As soon as the canoe touched and came to a rest, he stepped out and clasped his daughter in his arms, saying, fervently:

"Heaven be thanked! we have come through many dangers, and we are free at last! Neither of us has been harmed, and we will soon be out of this fearful swamp."

The man with the white hair and beard stepped ashore and stood regarding the girl intently, paying no heed to the others. Captain Bellwood turned to him, saying:

"William, this is my daughter, of whom I told you. Elsie, this is your Uncle William, who disappeared many years ago, and has never been heard from since till he set me free to-day, after I was abandoned by those wretches who dragged us here."

"My uncle?" cried the girl, wonderingly. "How can that be? You said Uncle William was dead."

"And so I believed, but he still lives. Professor Scotch, I think we had the pleasure of meeting in Fardale. Permit me to introduce you to William Bellwood, one of the most celebrated electricians living to-day."

As he said this, Captain Bellwood made a swift motion which his brother did not see. He touched his forehead, and the signal signified that William Bellwood was not right in his mind. This the professor saw was true when he shook hands with the man, for there was the light of madness in the eyes of the hermit.

"My brother," continued Captain Bellwood, "has explained that he came here to these wilds to continue his study of electricity alone and undisturbed. He took means to keep other people from bothering him. This canoe, which contains a lower compartment and a hidden propeller, driven by electricity, was his invention. He has arrangements whereby he can use a powerful search-light at night, and—"

"That search-light came near being the death of me," said Frank. "He turned it on me last night just in time to show me to my enemy."

"He has many other contrivances," Captain Bellwood went on. "He has explained that, by means of electricity, he can make his canoe or himself glow with a white light in the darkest night."

"Begorra! we've seen him glow!" shouted Barney.

"And he also states that he has wires connecting various batteries in yonder hut, so that he can frighten away superstitious hunters who otherwise might take possession of the hut and give him trouble."

"Whoop!" shouted Barney. "Thot iexplains th' foire-allarum an' th' power thot throwed me inther th' middle av th' flure! Oi nivver hearrud th' bate av it!"

"It is wonderful, wonderful!" gasped Professor Scotch.

At this moment, a series of wild shrieks came from the hut, startling them all.

"It is Gage," said Frank. "He seems to be badly frightened."

They hurried toward the hut, Frank leading. Gage was still on the couch, and he shrieked still louder when he saw Frank; an expression of the greatest terror coming to his face.

"Take him away! Take him away!" screamed the wretched fellow. "He is dead! I killed him! Don't let him touch me!"

Then he began to rave incoherently, sometimes frothing at the mouth.

"He is mad!" cried Professor Scotch.

"It is retribution!" came solemnly from Frank's lips.

Two days later a party of eight persons emerged from the wilds of the great Dismal Swamp and reached a small settlement. They were Frank Merriwell, Barney Mulloy, Professor Scotch, Leslie Gage, Captain Bellwood and his brother William, Socato the Seminole, and last, but far from least, Elsie Bellwood.

"What shall be done with Gage?" asked Professor Scotch.

"He shall be given shelter and medical treatment," declared Frank; "and I will see that all the bills are paid."

"Thot's the only thing Oi have against ye, me b'y. Ye wur always letting up on yer inemies at Fardale, an' ye shtill kape on doin' av it."

"If I continue to do so, I shall have nothing to trouble my conscience."

Frank did take care of Gage and see that he was given the best medical aid that money could procure, and, as a result, the fellow was saved from a madhouse, for he finally recovered. He seemed to appreciate the mercy shown him by his enemy, for he wrote a letter to Frank that was filled with entreaties for forgiveness and promised to try to lead a different life in the future.

"That," said Frank, "is my reward for being merciful to an enemy."

If Jack Jagers did not perish in the Everglades, he disappeared. Ben Bowsprit and Black Tom also vanished, and it is possible that they left their bones in the great Dismal Swamp.

William Bellwood, so long a hermit in the wilds of Florida, seemed glad to leave that region.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN THE MOUNTAINS AGAIN.

Leaving their friends in Florida, Frank, Barney and the professor next moved northward toward Tennessee, Frank wishing to see some of the battlegrounds of the Civil War.

The boys planned a brief tour afoot and were soon on their way among the Great Smoky Mountains.

Professor Scotch had no heart for a "tour afoot" through the mountains, and so he had stopped at Knoxville, where the boys were to join him again in two or three weeks, by the end of which period he was quite sure they would have enough of tramping.

Frank and Barney were making the journey from Gibson's Gap to Cranston's Cove, which was said to be a distance of twelve miles, but they were willing to admit that those mountain miles were most disgustingly long.

They had paused to rest, midway in the afternoon, where the road curved around a spur of the mountain. Below them opened a vista of valleys and "coves," hemmed in by wild, turbulent-appearing masses of mountains, some of which were barren and bleak, seamed with black chasms, above which threateningly hung grimly beetling crags, and some of which were robed in dense wildernesses of pine, veiling their faces, keeping them thus forever a changeless mystery.

From their eyrie position it seemed that they could toss a pebble into Lost Creek, which wound through the valley below, meandered for miles amid the ranges, tunneling an unknown channel beneath the rock-ribbed mountains, and came out again—where?

Both boys had been silent and awe-stricken, gazing wonderingly on the impressive scene and thinking of their adventures in New Orleans and in Florida, when a faint cry seemed to float upward from the depths of the valley.

"Help!"

They listened, and some moments passed in silence, save for the peeping cry of a bird in a thicket near at hand.

"Begorra! Oi belave it wur imagination, Frankie," said the Irish lad, at last.

"I do not think so," declared Frank, with a shake of his head. "It was a human voice, and if we were to shout it might be— There it is again!"

There could be no doubt this time, for they both heard the cry distinctly.

"It comes from below," said Frank, quickly.

"Roight, me lad," nodded Barney. "Some wan is in difficulty down there, and' it's mesilf thot don't moind givin' thim a lift."

Getting a firm hold on a scrub bush, Frank leaned out over the verge and looked down into the valley.

"I can see her!" he cried. "Look, Barney—look down there amid those rocks just below the little waterfall."

"Oi see, Frankie."

"See the flutter of a dress?"

"Oi do."

"She is waving something at us."

"Sure, me b'y."

"She has seen us, and is signaling for us to come down."

"And we'll go."

"Instanter, as they say out West."

The boys were soon hurrying down the mountain road, a bend of which quickly carried them beyond view of the person near the waterfall.

It was nearly an hour later when Frank and Barney approached the little waterfall, having left the road and followed the course of the stream.

"Is she there, Frankie?" anxiously asked Barney, who was behind.

"Can't tell yet," was the reply. "Will be able to see in a minute, and then— She is there, sure as fate!"

In another moment they came out in full view of a girl of eighteen or nineteen, who was standing facing the waterfall, her back toward a great rock, a home-made fishing pole at her feet.

The girl was dressed in homespun, the skirt being short and reaching but a little below the knees, and a calico sunbonnet was thrust half off her head.

Frank paused, with a low exclamation of admiration, for the girl made a most strikingly beautiful picture, and Frank had an eye for beauty.

Nearly all the mountain girls the boys had seen were stolid and flat-appearing, some were tall and lank, but this girl possessed a figure that seemed perfect in every detail.

Her hair was bright auburn, brilliant and rich in tint, the shade that is highly esteemed in civilization, but is considered a defect by the mountain folk. Frank thought it the most beautiful hair he had ever seen.

Her eyes were brown and luminous, and the color of health showed through the tan upon her cheeks. Her parted lips showed white, even teeth, and the mouth was most delicately shaped.

"Hivvins!" gasped Barney, at Frank's shoulder. "Phwat have we struck, Oi dunno?"

Then the girl cried, her voice full of impatience:

"You-uns has shorely been long enough in gittin' har!"

Frank staggered a bit, for he had scarcely expected to hear the uncouth mountain dialect from such lips as those but he quickly recovered, lifted his hat with the greatest gallantry, and said:

"I assure you, miss, that we came as swiftly as we could."

"Ye're strangers. Ef you-uns had been maounting boys, you'd been har in less'n half ther time."

"I presume that is true; but, you see, we did not know the shortest way, and we were not sure you wanted us."

"Wal, what did you 'low I whooped at ye fur ef I didn't want ye? I nighly split my throat a-hollerin' at ye before ye h'ard me at all."

Frank was growing more and more dismayed, for he had never before met a strange girl who was quite like this, and he knew not what to say.

"Now that we have arrived," he bowed, "we shall be happy to be of any possible service to you."

"Dunno ez I want ye now," she returned, with a toss of her head.

"Howly shmoke!" gurgled Barney, at Frank's ear. "It's a doaisy she is, me b'y!"

Frank resolved to take another tack, and so he advanced, saying boldly and resolutely:

"Now that you have called us down here, I don't see how you are going to get rid of us. You want something of us, and we'll not leave you till we find out what it is."

The girl did not appear in the least alarmed. Instead of that, she laughed, and that laugh was like the ripple of falling water.

"Wal, now you're talkin'!" she cried, with something like a flash of admiration. "Mebbe you-uns has got some backbone arter all. I like backbone."

"I have not looked at mine for so long that I am not sure what condition it is in, but I know I have one."

"An' muscle?"

"A little."

"Then move this rock har that hez caught my foot an' holds it. That's what I wanted o' you-uns."

She lifted her skirt a bit, and, for the first time, they saw that her ankle had been caught between two large rocks, where she was held fast.

"Kinder slomped in thar when I war fishin'," she explained, "an' ther big rock dropped over thar an' cotched me fast when I tried ter pull out. That war nigh two hour ago, 'cordin' ter ther sun."

"And you have been standing like that ever since?" cried Frank, in dismay. "Lively, Barney—get hold here! Great Scott! we must have her out of that in a hurry!"

"Thot's phwat we will, ur we'll turrun th' ould mountain over!" shouted the Irish lad, as he flew to the aid of his friend.

The girl looked surprised and pleased, and then she said:

"You-uns ain't goin' ter move that rock so easy, fer it's hefty."

"But your ankle—it must have crushed your ankle."

"I 'low not. Ye see it couldn't pinch harder ef it tried, fer them rocks ain't built so they kin git nigher together; but it's jest made a reg'ler trap so I can't pull my foot out."

It was no easy thing for the boys to get hold of the rock in a way to exert their strength, but they finally succeeded, and then Frank gave the word, and they strained to move it. It started reluctantly, as if loath to give up its fair captive, but they moved it more and more, and she was able to draw her foot out. Then, when she was free, they let go, and the rock fell back with a grating crash against the other.

"You-uns have done purty fair fer boys," said the girl, with a saucy twinkle in her brown eyes. "S'pose I'll have ter thank ye, fer I mought a stood har consider'bul longer ef 'tadn't bin fer ye. Who be ye, anyhow? an' whar be ye goin'?"

Frank introduced himself, and then presented Barney, after which he explained how they happened to be in the Great Smoky Mountains.

She watched him closely as he spoke, noting every expression, as if a sudden suspicion had come upon her, and she was trying to settle a doubt in her mind.

When Frank had finished, the girl said:

"Never heard o' two boys from ther big cities 'way off yander comin' har ter tromp through ther maountings jest fer ther fun o' seein' ther scenery an' ther folks. I s'pose we're kinder curi's 'pearin' critters ter city folks, an' you-uns may be har ter cotch one o' us an' put us in a cage fer exhibition."

She uttered the words in a way that brought a flush to Frank's cheeks, and he hastened to protest, halting in confusion when he tried to speak her name, which he did not know as yet.

A ripple of sunshine seemed to break over her face, and she laughed outright, swiftly saying:

"Don't you-uns mind me. I'm p'izen rough, but I don't mean half I say. I kin see you is honest an' squar, though somebody else mought think by yer way that ye warn't. My name's Kate Kenyon, an' I live down toward ther cove. I don't feel like fishin' arter this, an' ef you-uns is goin' that way, I'll go 'long with ye."

She picked up her pole, hooked up the line, and prepared to accompany them.

They were pleased to have her as a companion. Indeed, Frank was more than pleased, for he saw

in this girl a singular character. Illiterate though she seemed, she was pretty, vivacious, and so bright that it was plain education and refinement would make her most fascinating and brilliant.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FRANK AND KATE.

The boys did not get to Cranston's Cove that night, for Kate Kenyon invited them to stop and take supper at her home, and they did so.

Kate's home was much like the rough cabins of other mountain folks, except that flowering vines had been trained to run up the sides and over the door, while two large bushes were loaded with roses in front of the house.

Kate's mother was in the doorway as they approached. She was a tall, angular woman, with a stolid, expressionless face.

"Har, mammy, is some fellers I brung ter see ye," said this girl. "This un is Mr. Merriwell, an' that un is Mr. Mulloy."

The boys lifted their hats, and bowed to the woman as if she were a society queen. She nodded and stared.

"What be you-uns doin' 'round these parts?" she asked, pointedly.

Frank explained, seeing a look of suspicion and distrust deepening in her face as he spoke.

"Huah!" she grunted, when he had finished. "An' what do you-uns want o' me?"

"Your daughter invited us to call and take supper," said Frank, coolly.

"I ain't uster cookin' flip-flaps fer city chaps, an' I don't b'lieve you kin eat the kind o' fodder we-uns is uster."

The boys hastened to assure her that they would be delighted to eat the plainest of food, and their eagerness brought a merry laugh from the lips of the girl.

"You-uns is consid'ble amusin'," she said. "You is powerful perlite. I asked 'em to come, mammy. It's no more'n fair pay fer what they done fer me."

Then she explained how she had been caught and held by the rocks, and how the boys had seen her from the mountain road and come to her rescue.

The mother's face did not soften a bit as she listened, but, when Kate had finished, she said:

"They're yore comp'ny. Ask 'em in."

So the boys were asked into the cabin, and Kate herself prepared supper.

It was a plain meal, but Frank noticed that everything looked neat and clean about the house, and both lads relished the coarse food. Indeed, Barney afterward declared that the corn bread was better than the finest cake he had ever tasted.

Frank was particularly happy at the table, and the merry stories he told kept Kate laughing, and, once or twice, brought a grim smile to the face of the woman.

After supper they went out in front of the cabin, where they could look up at the wild mass of mountains, the peaks of which were illumined by the rays of the setting sun.

Mrs. Kenyon filled and lighted a cob pipe. She sat and puffed away, staring straight ahead in a blank manner.

Just how it happened Frank himself could not have told, but Barney fell to talking to the woman in his whimsical way, while Frank and Kate wandered away a short distance, and sat on some stones which had been arranged as a bench in a little nook near Lost Creek. From this position they could hear Barney's rich brogue and jolly laugh as he recounted some amusing yarn, and, when the wind was right, a smell of the black pipe would be wafted to them.

"Do you know," said Frank, "this spot is so wild and picturesque that it fascinates me. I should like to stop here two or three days and rest."

"Better not," said the girl, shortly.

"Why?" asked the boy, in surprise.

"Wal, it mought not be healthy."

"What do you mean?"

"You might be token fer revenue."

"For revenue? I do not understand."

"I wonder ef you air so ignerent, or be you jest makin' it?"

"Honestly and truly, I do not understand you."

"Wal, I kinder 'low you-uns is all right, but thar's others might not think so. S'pose you know what moonshine is?"

"Yes; it is illicitly distilled whiskey."

She nodded.

"That's right. Wal, ther revenues say thar's moonshine made round these parts. They come round ev'ry little while to spy an' cotch ther folks that makes it."

"By revenues you mean the officers of the government?"

"Wal, they may be officers, but they're a diffrunt kind than Jock Hawkins."

"Who is Jock Hawkins?"

"He's ther sheriff down to ther cove. Jock Hawkins knows better'n to come snoopin' 'round, an' he's down on revenues ther same as ther rest o' us is."

"Then you do not like the revenue officers?"

"Like 'em!" cried the girl, starting up, her eyes seeming to blaze in the dusky twilight. "I hate 'em wuss'n pizen! An' I've got good cause fer hatin' 'em."

The boy saw he had touched a tender spot, and he would have turned the conversation in another channel, but she was started, and she went on swiftly:

"What right has ther gover'ment to take away anybody's honest means o' earnin' a livin'? What right has ther gover'ment to send spies up har ter peek an' pry an' report on a man as is makin' a little moonshine ter sell that he may be able ter git bread an' drink fer his fam'ly? What right has ther gover'ment ter make outlaws an' crim'nals o' men as wouldn't steal a cent that didn't b'long ter them if they was starvin'?"

Frank knew well enough the feeling of most mountain folks toward the revenue officers, and he knew it was a useless task to attempt to show them where they were in the wrong.

Kate went on, passionately.

"Yes, I has good right to hate ther revenues, an' I do! Didn't they pester my pore old daddy fer makin' moonshine! Didn't they hunt him through ther maountings fer weeks, an' keep him hidin' like a dog! An' didn't they git him cornered at last in Bent Coin's old cabin, an' when he refused ter come out an' surrender, an' kep' 'em off with his gun, didn't they shoot him so he died three days arter in my arms! Hate 'em! Wal, I've got good reason ter hate 'em!"

Kate was wildly excited, although she held her voice down, as if she did not wish her mother to hear what she was saying. Frank was sitting so near that he felt her arm quivering against his.

"Hate 'em!" continued the girl. "I has more than that to hate 'em fer! Whar is my brother Rufe, ther best boy that ever drored a breath? Ther revenues come fer him, an' they got him. Thar war a trial, an' they proved ez he'd been consarned in makin' moonshine. He war convicted, an' he's servin' his time. Hate 'em! Wal, thar's nuthin' I hate wuss on this earth!"

"You have had hard luck," said Frank, by way of saying something. "It's lucky for us that we're not revenues."

"Yer right thar," she nodded. "I didn't know but ye war at first, but I changed my mind later."

"Why?"

"Wal, ye're young, an' you-uns both has honest faces. Revenues is sneaks. They show it in their faces."

"I don't suppose they have been able to check the making of moonshine—that is, not to any extent?"

She laughed harshly.

"Wal, I judge not! Did ye ever hear o' Muriel?"

"Who is he?"

"A moonshiner."

"What of him?"

"He makes more whiskey in a week than all ther others in this region afore him made in a month."

"He must be smarter than the others before him."

"Wal, he's not afeared o' ther revenues, an' he's a mystery to ther men ez works fer him right along."

"A mystery?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"None o' them has seen his face, an' they don't know Who he is. They ain't been able to find out."

"And they have tried?"

"Wal, Con Bean war shot through ther shoulder fer follerin' Muriel, an' Bink Mower got it in ther leg fer ther same trick."

"I rather admire this Muriel," laughed Frank. "He may be in unlawful business, but he seems to be a dandy."

"He keeps five stills runnin' all ther time, an' he has a way o' gittin' ther stuff out o' ther maountings an' disposin' of it. But I'm talkin' too much, as Wade would say."

"Who is Wade?"

"He's Wade Miller, a partic'lar friend o' our'n sence Rufe war taken by ther revenues. Wade has been good to mammy an' me."

"I don't blame him. If I lived near, I might try to bother Wade somewhat."

She glanced at him swiftly. It was now duskish, but he was so near that he could see her eyes through the twilight.

"I dunno what you-uns means," she said, slowly, her voice falling. "Wade would be powerful bad to bother. He's ugly sometimes, an' he's jellus o' me."

"Then Wade is paying attention to you?"

"Wal, he's tryin' ter, but I don't jes' snuggle ter him ther way I might ef I liked him right. Thar's something about him, ez I don't edzac'ly like."

"That makes it rather one-sided, and makes me think all the more that I should try to bother him if I lived near. Do you know, Miss Kenyon, that you are an exceptionally pretty girl?"

"Go 'long! You can't stuff me! Why, I've got red hair!"

"Hair that would make you the envy of a society belle. It is the handsomest hair I ever saw."

"Now you're makin' fun o' me, an' I don't like that."

She drew away as if offended, and he leaned toward her, eager to convince her of his sincerity.

"Indeed, I am doing nothing of the sort," he protested. "The moment I saw you to-day I was struck by the beauty of your hair. But that is not the only beautiful feature about you, Miss Kenyon. Your mouth is a perfect Cupid's bow, and your teeth are like pearls, while you have a figure that is graceful and exquisite."

She caught her breath.

"Never nobody talked to me like that afore," she murmured. "Round har they jes' say, 'Kate, you'd be a rippin' good looker ef it warn't fer that red hair o' yourn.' An' they've said it so much that I've come to hate my hair wuss'n pizen."

"Your hair is your crowning beauty. It is magnificent!"

"Say!" she whispered, drawing toward him.

"What?"

"I kinder take to you."

Her hand found his, and they were sitting very near together.

"I took to you up by ther fall ter-day," she went on, in a low tone. "Now, don't you git skeered, fer I'm not goin' to be foolish, an' I know I'm not book-learned an' refined, same ez your city gals. We kin be friends, can't we?"

Frank had begun to regret his openly expressed admiration, but now he said:

"To be sure we can be friends, Miss Kenyon."

"Partic'ler friends?"

"I am sure I shall esteem your friendship very highly."

"Wall, partic'ler friends don't call each other miss an' mister. I'll agree ter call you Frank, ef you'll call me Kate."

Frank hesitated.

"I am going away to-morrow," he thought. "It won't do any harm."

"Is it a go?" she asked.

"It is a go," he answered.

"Frank!"

"Kate!"

A fierce exclamation close at hand, the cracking of a twig, a heavy step, and then a panther-like figure leaped out of the dusk, and flung itself upon Frank.



"Kate grasped the assailant by the collar, and with astonishing strength, pulled him off the prostrate lad." (See page [218](#))

CHAPTER XL.

A JEALOUS LOVER.

The attack was so sudden and fierce that the boy was hurled to the ground before he could make a move to protect himself.

"You shall not have her!" hissed a voice in his ear.

A hand fastened on his throat, pinning him fast. The man's knee crushed into his stomach, depriving him of breath. The man's other hand snatched out something, and lifted it aloft.

A knife was poised above Frank's heart, and in another moment the blade would have been buried to the hilt in the lad's bosom.

Without uttering a sound, Kate Kenyon grasped the wrist of the murderous-minded man, gave it a wrench with all her strength, which was not slight, and forced him to drop the knife.

"You don't murder anybody, Wade Miller!" she panted.

"I'll choke ther life outen him!" snarled the fellow, as he tried to fasten both hands on Frank's throat.

By this time the boy had recovered from the surprise and shock, and he was ready to fight for his life.

Kate grasped the assailant by the collar, and, with astonishing strength, pulled him off the prostrate lad.

In the twinkling of an eye, Frank came to his feet, and he was ready for a new assault.

Snarling and growling like a mad dog, the man scrambled up and lunged toward the boy, trying to grasp him.

Frank was a skillful boxer, and now his skill came into play, for he dodged under the man's right arm, whirled like a cat, and struck the fellow behind the ear.

Spat! sounded the blow, sending the assailant staggering, and Frank followed it up by leaping after him and striking him again, the second blow having the force of the lad's strength and the weight of his body.

It seemed that the man was literally knocked "spinning," and he did not stop till he landed in the creek.

"Wal," exclaimed the girl, "I 'low you kin take keer o' yerself now!"

"I rather think so," came coolly from the boy. "He caught me foul, and I did not have a show at first."

"Look out fer his gun."

"I will. Who is he?"

"Wade Miller."

Frank whistled. It was a case of jealousy, and he had aroused the worst passions of the man who admired Kate Kenyon. Miller came scrambling and snorting from the water, and Barney Mulloy rushed toward the spot, crying:

"Pwhat's th' row, Frankie, me b'y? Do ye nade inny av me hilp?"

"I think not. So far, I am all right, thanks to Miss Kenyon."

"An' you kin fight!" breathed the mountain maid, in sincere admiration. "I didn't s'pose city chaps knowed how ter fight."

"Some do," laughed Frank, keeping his eyes on Miller.

"I'll have his life!" panted the man, springing toward Frank, and then halting suddenly, and throwing up his hand.

"Look out!" screamed the girl. "He's got a pistol!"

Frank knew this well enough, and he was expecting just such a move, so it happened that the words had scarcely left the girl's lips when the revolver was sent flying from Wade Miller's hand.

The boy had leaped forward, and, with one skillful kick, disarmed his foe by knocking the weapon out of his hand.

Miller seemed dazed for a moment, and then he started for Frank, once more grinding his teeth.

"Oh, let me take a hand in this!" cried Barney Mulloy, who was eager for a fight. "Me blud is gittin' shtagnant."

"Keep away!" ordered Frank. "I can look out for myself."

"I'll kill ye! I'll kill ye!" snarled the infuriated man.

"Well, you have tried that trick twice, but I do not see that you have succeeded to any great extent."

"I'll hammer yer life out o' yer carcass with my bare hands!"

"Possibly that will not be such a very easy trick to do."

The boy's coolness seemed to add to the fury of his assailant, and the man made another rush, which was easily avoided by Frank, who struck Miller a stinging blow.

"You'd better stop, Wade," advised the girl. "He-uns is too much fer you-uns, an' that's plain enough."

"Oh, I'll show ye—I'll show ye!"

There was no longer any reason in the man's head, and Frank saw that he must subdue the fellow some way. Miller was determined to grapple with the boy, and Frank felt that he would find the mountaineer had the strength of an ox, for which reason he must keep clear of those grasping hands.

For some moments Frank had all he could do to avoid Miller, who seemed to have grown stolid to the lad's blows. At last, Frank darted in, caught the man behind, lifted him over one hip, and dashed him headlong to the ground.

Miller lay still, stunned.

"Wal, that's the beatenest I ever saw!" cried Kate Kenyon, whose admiration for Frank now knew no bounds. "You-uns is jes' a terror!"

Barney laughed.

"Whoy, that's fun fer Frankie," he declared.

Miller groaned, and sat up, lifting his hands to his head, and looking about him in a dazed way.

"What's happened ter me?" he asked, speaking thickly.

"Ye run ag'in' a fighter this time, Wade," said the girl. "He done ye, an' you-uns is ther bully o' these parts!"

"It was an accident," mumbled the man. "I couldn't see ther critter well, an' so he kinder got——"

"That won't go, Wade," half laughed the girl. "He done you fa'r an' squar', an' it's no us' ter squawk."

"An' ye're laffin' 'bout it, be ye, Kate? Wal, I ain't done with him."

The girl became serious instantly.

"Better let him erlone, Wade. You-uns has made fool enough o' yerself. Ye tried ter kill me, an'——"

"What I saw made me do it!" grated the man. "He war makin' love ter ye, Kate—an' you-uns liked it!"

"Wal, Wade Miller, what is that ter you-uns?" she haughtily demanded. "He has a right ter make love ter me ef he wants ter."

"Oh, yes, he has a right, but his throat'll be slit before long, mark what I say!"

"Ef anything o' that kind happens, Wade Miller, I'll know who done it, an' I swa'r I'll never rest till I prove it agin' ye."

"I don't keer, Kate," muttered the man, getting on his feet and standing there sulkily before them. "Ef I can't hev ye, I sw'ar no other critter shall!"

"Be keerful, Wade Miller! I've stood all I kin from you, an' from now on I don't stan' no more. Arter this you-uns an' me-uns ain't even friends."

He fell back a step, as if he had been struck a blow, and then he hoarsely returned:

"All right, Kate. But I'll stick ter my oath. I ain't ter be thrown aside so easy. As fer them city chaps, ther maountings ain't big enough ter hold them an' me. Wade Miller has some power, an' I wouldn't give a snap for their lives. The Black Caps don't take ter strangers much, an' they know them critters is hyar. I'm goin' now, but that don't need ter mean that I'll stay away fer long."

He turned, and, having picked up his revolver, strode away into the darkness, quickly disappearing.

Kate's trembling hand fell on Frank's arm, and she panted into his ear:

"You-uns must git out o' ther maountings quick as you kin, fer Wade Miller means what he says, an' he'll kill ye ef you stay hyar!"

CHAPTER XLI.

FACING DEATH.

Frank Merriwell's blood was aroused, and he did not feel like letting Wade Miller drive him like a hunted dog from the mountains.

"By this time I should think you would have confidence in my ability to take care of myself against this man Miller," he said, somewhat testily.

"Yo're ther best fighter I ever saw, but that won't 'mount ter anything agin' ther power Miller will set on yer. He's pop-ler, is Wade Miller, an' he'll have ther hull maountings ter back him."

"I shall not run for Miller and all his friends. Right is right, and I have as good right here as he."

"Hang me!" cried Kate, admiringly; "hang me ef I don't like you-uns' pluck. You may find that you'll need a friend afore yo're done with Wade. Ef ye do—wal, mebbe Kate Kenyon won't be fur off."

"Thank you," said Frank. "It is a good thing to know I shall have one friend in the mountains."

"Huah!" grunted a voice, and Mrs. Kenyon was seen stolidly standing in the dusk. "Mebbe you-uns will find my Kate ther best friend ye could have. Come, gal, it's time ter g'win."

So they entered the cabin, and Barney found an opportunity to whisper to Frank:

"She's a corker, me b'y! an' Oi think she's shtuck on yez. Betther be careful, lad. It's dangerous."

"Don't worry," returned Frank.

Shortly after entering the house, Mrs. Kenyon declared she was tired, and intended to go to bed.

She apologized for the bed she had to give the boys, but they assured her that they were accustomed to sleeping anywhere, and that the bed would be a positive luxury.

"Such slick-tongued chaps I never did see before," declared the old woman. "They don't seem stuck up an' lofty, like most city fellers. Really, they make me feel right to home in my own house!"

She said this in a whimsical way that surprised Frank, who fancied Mrs. Kenyon had no sense of humor.

Kate bade them good-night, and they retired, which they were glad to do, as they were tired from the tramp of the day.

Frank was awakened by a sharp shake, and his first thought was of danger, but his hand did not reach the revolver he had placed beneath the pillow, for he felt something cold against his temple, and heard a voice hiss:

"Be easy, you-uns! Ef ye make a jowl, yo're ter be shot!"

Barney was awakened at the same time, and the boys found they were in the clutches of strong men. The little room seemed filled with men, and the lads instantly realized they were in a bad scrape.

Through the small window sifted the white moonlight, showing that every man wore a black, pointed cap and hood, which reached to his shoulders. In this hood arrangement great holes were cut for the eyes, and some had slits cut for their mouths.

"The Black Caps!" was the thought that flashed through Frank's mind.

The revolvers pressed against the heads of the boys kept them from defending themselves or making an outcry. They were forced to get up and dress, after which they were passed through the open window, like bundles, their hands having been tied behind them.

Other black-hooded men were outside, and horses were near at hand.

"Great Scott!" thought Frank Merriwell. "We are in for it! We should have been ready for them."

But when he thought how tired they had been, he did not wonder that both had slept soundly while the men slipped into the house by the window, which had been readily and noiselessly removed.

It did not take the men long to get out as they had entered. Then Frank and Barney were placed on horses, being tied there securely, and the party was soon ready to move.

They rode away, and the horses' feet gave out no sound, which explained why they had not aroused anybody within the cabin.

The hoofs of the animals were muffled.

Frank wondered what Kate Kenyon would think when morning came and she found her guests gone.

"She will believe we rose in the night, and ran away. I hate to have her believe me a coward."

Then he fell to wondering what the men would do with himself and Barney.

"We are harmless travelers. They will not dare to do anything more than run us out of this part of the country."

Although he told himself this, he was far from feeling sure that the men would do nothing else. He had heard of the desperate deeds perpetrated by the widely known "White Caps," and it was not likely that the Black Caps were any less desperate and reckless.

As they were leaving the vicinity of the cabin, one of the horses neighed loudly, causing the leader of the party to utter an exclamation of anger.

"Ef that 'rousts ther gal, she's li'bul ter be arter us in a hurry," one of the men observed.

The party hurried forward, soon passing from view of the cabin, and entering the shadow that lay blackly in the depths of the valley.

They rode about a mile, and then they came to a halt at a command from the leader, and Frank noticed with alarm that they had stopped beneath a large tree, with wide-spreading branches.

"This looks bad for us, old man," he whispered to Barney.

"Thot's pwhat it does, Frankie," admitted the Irish lad. "Oi fale throuble coming this way."

The horsemen formed a circle about the captives, moving at a signal from the leader, who did not seem inclined to waste words.

"Brothers o' ther Black Caps," said the leader, "what is ther fate we-uns gives ter revenues?"

"Death!"

Every man in the circle uttered the word, and they spoke all together. It sounded dismal and

blood-chilling.

"Right," bowed the leader. "Now, why are we assembled ter-night?"

"Ter dispose o' spies," chorused the Black Caps.

"Where are they?"

"Thar!"

Each one of the black-hooded band extended a hand and pointed straight at the captive boys.

"How shall they be disposed uv?" asked the leader.

"They shall be hanged," solemnly said the men.

"Good!" cried the leader, as if well satisfied. "Produce ther rope."

In a moment one of the men brought forth a rope. This was long enough to serve for both boys, and it was quickly cut in two pieces, while skillful hands proceeded to form nooses.

"Frankie," said Barney Mulloy, sadly, "we're done for."

"It looks that way," Frank was forced to admit.

"Oi wouldn't moind so much," said the Irish lad, ruefully, "av we could kick th' booket foighting fer our loives; but it is a bit harrud ter go under widout a chance to lift a hand."

"That's right," cried Frank, as he strained fiercely at the cords which held his hands behind his back. "It is the death of a criminal, and I object to it."

The leader of the Black Caps rode close to the boys, leaned forward in his saddle, and hissed in Frank's ear:

"It's my turn now!"

"And you mean to murder us?" demanded Frank, passionately.

"Not murder," answered the man. "We-uns is goin' ter put two revenues out o' ther way, that's all!"

"It's murder," cried Frank, in a ringing tone. "You know we are not revenue spies! Men, we appeal to you. We can prove that we are what we claim to be—two boys who are tramping through the mountains for pleasure. Will you kill us without giving us a chance to prove our innocence?"

The leader laughed harshly.

"It's ther same ol' whine," he said. "Ther revenues alwus cry baby when they're caught. You-uns can't fool us, an' we ain't got time ter waste with ye. Git reddy, boys!"

About the boys' necks the fatal ropes were quickly adjusted.

"Stop!" Frank commanded. "If you murder us, you will find you have not killed two friendless boys. We have friends—powerful friends—who will follow this matter up—who will investigate it. You will be hunted down and punished for the crime. You will not be allowed to escape!"

Again the leader laughed.

"Pore fool!" he sneered. "Do you-uns think ye're stronger an' more po'erful than ther United States Gover'ment? Huah! Ther United States loses her spies, an' she can't tell who disposed o' 'em. We won't be worried by all yore friends."

He made another movement, and the rope ends were flung over a limb that was strong enough to bear both lads.

Hope was dying within Frank Merriwell's breast. At last he had reached the end of his adventurous life, which had been short and turbulent. He must die here amid these wild mountains, which flung themselves up against the moonlit sky, and the only friend to be with him at the end was the faithful friend who must die at his side.

Frank's blood ran cold and sluggish in his veins. The spring night had seemed warm and sweet, filled with the droning of insects; but now there was a bitter chill in the air, and the white moonlight seemed to take on a crimson tinge, as of blood.

The boy's nature rebelled against the thought of meeting death in such a manner. It was spring-time amid the mountains; with him it was the spring-time of life. He had enjoyed the beautiful world, and felt strong and brave to face anything that might come; but this he had not reckoned on, and it was something to cause the stoutest heart to shake.

Over the eastern mountains, craggy, wild, barren or pine-clad, the gibbous moon swung higher and higher. The heavens were full of stars, and every star seemed to be an eye that was watching to witness the consummation of the tragedy down there in that little valley, through which Lost Creek flowed on to its unknown destination.

How still it was!

The silence was broken by a sound that made every black-hooded man start and listen.

Sweet and mellow and musical, from afar through the peaceful night, came the clear notes of a bugle.

Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta-ra-tar! Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta-ra-tar!

A fierce exclamation broke from the lips of the leader of the Black Caps, and he grated:

"Muriel, by ther livin' gods! He's comin' hyar! Quick, boys—finish this job, an' git!"

"Stop, Wade Miller!" cried Frank, commandingly. "If that is Muriel, wait for him—let him pronounce our fate. He is the chief of you all, and he shall say if we are revenue spies."

"Bah! You-uns know too much, fer ye've called my name! That settles ye! Ye must hang anyway, now!"

Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta-ra-tar!

From much nearer, came the sound of the bugle, awakening hundreds of mellow echoes, which were flung from crag to crag till it seemed that the mountains were alive with buglers.

The clatter of a horse's iron-shod feet could be heard, telling that the rider was coming like the wind down the valley.

"Cut free ther feet o' ther pris'ners!" panted the leader of the Black Caps. "Work quick! Muriel will be here in a few shakes, an' we-uns must be done. All ready thar! Up with 'em!"

The fatal moment had arrived!

CHAPTER XLII.

MURIEL.

Ta-ra-tar! Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta-ra-tar!

Through the misty moonlight a coal-black horse, bearing a rider who once more awakens the clamoring echoes with his bugle, comes tearing at a mad gallop.

"Up with 'em!" repeats Wade Miller, fiercely, as the black-hooded men seem to hesitate.

The ropes tighten.

"Stop!"

One of the men utters the command, and his companions hesitate.

"Muriel is death on revernues," says the one who had spoken, "an' thar ain't any reason why we-uns shouldn't wait fer him."

"That's so."

More than half the men agree with the one who has interrupted the execution, filling Wade Miller with unutterable rage.

"Fools!" snarled the chief ruffian of the party. "I am leadin' you-uns now, an' ye've gotter do ez I say. I order ye ter string them critters up!"

Nearer and nearer came the clattering hoof-beats.

"Av we can have wan minute more!" breathed Barney Mulloy.

"Half a minute will do," returned Frank.

"We refuse ter obey ye now," boldly spoke the man who had commanded his companions to stop. "Muriel has signaled ter us, an' he means fer us ter wait till he-uns arrives."

"Wait!" howled Miller. "They sha'n't escape!"

He snatched out a revolver, pointed it straight at Frank's breast, and fired!

Just as the desperate ruffian was pulling the trigger, the man nearest him struck up his hand, and the bullet passed through Frank's hat, knocking it to the ground.

Miller was furious as a maniac, but, at this moment, the black horse and the dashing rider burst in upon the scene, plunged straight through the circle, halting at the side of the imperiled lads, the horse being flung upon its haunches.

"Wal, what be you-uns doin'?" demands a clear, ringing voice. "What work is this, that I don't know erbout?"

The men were silent. Wade Miller cowered before the chief of the moonshiners, trying to hide the

revolver.

Muriel's eyes, gleaming through the twin holes of the mask he wore, found Miller, and the clear voice cried:

"You-uns has been lettin' this critter lead ye inter somethin'! An' it's fair warnin' I gave him ter keep clear o' meddlin' with my business."

The boys gazed at the moonshiner chief in amazement, for Muriel looked no more than a boy as he sat there on his black horse, and his voice seemed the voice of a boy instead of that of a man. Yet it was plain that he governed these desperate ruffians of the mountains with a hand of iron, and they feared him.

"We-uns war 'bout ter hang two revernues," explained Miller.

Muriel looked at the boys.

"Revernues?" he said, doubtfully. "How long sence ther gover'ment has been sendin' boys hyar ter spy on us?"

"They know what happens ter ther men they send," muttered Miller.

"Wal, 'tain't like they'd be sendin' boys arter men failed."

"That's ther way they hope ter fool us."

"An' how do you know them-uns is revernues?"

"We jest s'picions it."

"An' you-uns war hangin' 'em on s'picion, 'thout lettin' me know?"

"We never knows whar ter find ye, Muriel."

"That is nary excuse, fer ef you-uns had held them-uns a day I'd knowed it. It looks like you-uns war in a monstr'us hurry."

"It war he-uns," declared one of the black hoods, pointing to Miller. "He-uns war in ther hurry."

"We don't gener'ly waste much time in dinkerin' 'roun' with anybody we-uns thinks is revernues," said Miller.

"Wal, we ain't got ther record o' killin' innercent boys, an' we don't begin now. Take ther ropes off their necks."

Two men hastened to obey the order, while Miller sat and grated his teeth. As this was being done, Muriel asked:

"What war you-uns doin' with that revolver when I come? I heard ye shoot, an' I saw ther flash. Who did you-uns shoot at?"

Miller stammered and stuttered till Muriel repeated the question, his voice cold and hard, despite its boyish caliber.

"Wal," said Wade, reluctantly, "I'll have ter tell yer. I shot at he-uns," and he pointed at Frank.

"I thought so," was all Muriel said.

When the ropes were removed from the necks of the boys, Muriel directed that their feet be tied again, and their eyes blindfolded.

These orders were attended to with great swiftness, and then the moonshiner chief said:

"Follow!"

Out they rode from beneath the tree, and away through the misty moonlight.

Frank and Barney could not see, but they felt well satisfied with their lot, for they had been saved from death for the time being, and, somehow, they felt that Muriel did not mean to harm them.

"Frank," whispered Barney, "are yez there?"

"Here," replied Frank, close at hand.

"It's dead lucky we are to be livin', me b'y."

"You are quite correct, Barney. I feel like singing a song of praise and thanksgiving. But we're not out of the woods yet."

"Thot Muriel is a dandy, Frankie! Oi'm shtuck on his stoyle."

"He is no more than a boy. I wonder how he happened to appear at such an opportune moment?"

"Nivver a bit do Oi know, but it's moighty lucky fer us thot he did."

Frank fell to speculating over the providential appearance of the moonshiner chief. It was plain that Muriel must have known that something was happening, and he had signaled with the bugle

to the Black Caps. In all probability, other executions had taken place beneath that very tree, for the young chief came there direct, without hesitation.

For nearly an hour they seemed to ride through the night, and then they halted. The boys were removed from the horses and compelled to march into some kind of a building.

After some moments, their hands were freed, and, tearing away the blindfolds, they found themselves in a low, square room, with no windows, and a single door.

With his back to the door, stood Muriel.

The light of a swinging oil lamp illumined the room.

Muriel leaned gracefully against the door, his arms folded, and his eyes gleaming where the lamplight shone on them through the twin holes in the sable mask.

The other moonshiners had disappeared, and the boys were alone in that room with the chief of the mountain desperadoes.

There was something strikingly cool and self-reliant in Muriel's manner—something that caused Frank to think that the fellow, young as he was, feared nothing on the face of the earth.

At the same time there was no air of bravado or insolence about that graceful pose and the quiet manner in which he was regarding them. Instead of that, the moonshiner was a living interrogation point, everything about him seeming to speak the question that fell from his lips.

"Are you-uns revernues?"

"Why do you ask us?" Frank quickly counter questioned. "You must know that we will lie if we are, and so you will hear our denial anyway. That can give you little satisfaction."

"Look hyar—she tol' me fair an' squar' that you-uns warn't revernues, but I dunno how she could tell."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

Frank fancied that he knew, but he put the question, and Muriel answered:

"Ther gal that saved yore lives by comin' ter me an' tellin' me ther boys had taken you outer her mammy's house."

"Kate Kenyon?"

"Yes."

"God bless her! She did save our lives, for if you had been one minute later you would not have arrived in time. Dear girl! I'll not forget her!"

Muriel moved uneasily, and he did not seem pleased by Frank's words, although his face could not be seen. It was some moments before he spoke, but his voice was strangely cold and hard when he did so.

"It's well enough fer you-uns ter remember her, but ye'd best take car' how ye speak o' her. She's got friends in ther maountings—true friends."

Frank was startled, and he felt the hot blood rush to his face. Then, in a moment, he cried:

"Friends! Well, she has no truer friends than the boys she saved to-night! I hope you will not misconstrue our words, Mr. Muriel."

A sound like a smothered laugh came from behind that baffling mask, and Muriel said:

"Yo're hot-blooded. I war simply warnin' you-uns in advance, that's all. I thought it war best."

"It was quite unnecessary. We esteem Miss Kenyon too highly to say anything that can give a friend of hers just cause to strike against us."

"Wal, city chaps are light o' tongue, an' they're apt ter think that ev'ry maounting girl is a fool ef she don't have book learnin'. Some city chaps make their boast how easy they kin 'mash' such gals. Anything like that would count agin' you-uns."

Frank was holding himself in check with an effort.

"It is plain you do not know us, and you have greatly misjudged us. We are not in the mountains to make 'mashes,' and we are not the kind to boast of our conquests."

"Thot's right, me jool!" growled Barney, whose temper was started a bit. "An' it's mesilf thot loikes to be suspected av such a thing. It shtirs me foighting blud."

The Irish lad clinched his fist, and felt of his muscle, moving his forearm up and down, and scowling blackly at the cool chief of moonshiners, as if longing to thump the fellow.

This seemed to amuse Muriel, but still he persisted in further arousing the lads by saying, insinuatingly:

"I war led ter b'lieve that Kate war ruther interested in you-uns by her manner. Thar don't no

maounting gal take so much trouble over strangers fer nothin'!"

Frank bit his lip, and Barney looked blacker than ever. It seemed that Muriel was trying to draw them into a trap of some sort, and they were growing suspicious. Had this young leader of mountain ruffians rescued them that he might find just cause or good excuse to put them out of the way?

The boys were silent, and Muriel forced a laugh.

"Wal, ye won't talk about that, an' so we'll go onter somethin' else. I judge you-uns know yo're in a po'erful bad scrape?"

"We have good reasons to think so."

"Begorra! we have thot!" exclaimed Barney, feeling of his neck, and making a wry face, as if troubled by an unpleasant recollection.

"It is a scrape that you-uns may not be able ter git out of easy," Muriel said. "I war able ter save yer from bein' hung 'thout any show at all, but ye're not much better off now."

"If you were powerful enough to save us in the first place, you should be able to get us out of the scrape entirely."

"You-uns don't know all about it. Moonshiners have laws an' regulations, an' even ther leader must stan' by them."

Frank was still troubled by the unpleasant suspicion that Muriel was their enemy, after all that had happened. He felt that they must guard their tongues, for there was no telling what expression the fellow might distort and turn against them.

Seeing neither of the lads was going to speak, Muriel went on:

"Yes, moonshiners have laws and regulations. Ther boys came nigh breakin' one o' ther laws by hangin' you-uns ter-night 'thout givin' ye a show."

"Then we are to have a fair deal?" eagerly cried Frank.

"Ez fair ez anybody gits," assured Muriel, tossing back a lock of his coal-black hair, which he wore long enough to fall to the collar of his coat. "Ain't that all ye kin ask?"

"I don't know. That depends on what kind of a deal it is."

"Wall, ye'll be given yore choice."

"We demand a fair trial. If it is proven that we are revenue spies, we'll have to take our medicine. But if it is not proven, we demand immediate release."

"Take my advice; don't demand anything o' ther Black Caps. Ther more ye demand, ther less ye git."

"We have a right to demand a fair deal."

"Right don't count in this case; it is might that holds ther fort. You-uns stirred up a tiger ag'in' ye when you made Wade Miller mad. It's a slim show that ye escape ef we-uns lets yer go instanter. He'd foller yer, an' he'd finish yer somewhar."

"We will take our chances on that. We have taken care of ourselves so far, and we think we can continue to do so. All we ask is that we be set at liberty and given our weapons."

"An' ye'd be found with yer throats cut within ten miles o' hyar."

"That would not be your fault."

"Wal, 'cordin' to our rules, ye can't be released onless ther vote ur ther card sez so."

"The vote or the cards? What do you mean by that?"

"Wal, it's like this: Ef it's put ter vote, one black bean condemns you-uns ter death, an' ev'ry man votes black ur white, as he chooses. I don't judge you-uns care ter take yer chances that way?"

"Howly Sint Patherick!" gurgled Barney Mulloy. "Oi sh'u'd soay not! Ixchuse us from thot, me hearty!"

"That would be as bad as murder!" exclaimed Frank. "There would be one vote against us—one black bean thrown, at least."

Muriel nodded.

"I judge you-uns is right."

"Pwhat av th' carruds?"

"Yes, what of them?"

"Two men will be chosen, one ter hold a pack o' cards, and one to draw a card from them. Ef ther card is red, it lets you-uns off, fer it means life; ef it is black, it cooks yer, fer it means death."

The boys were silent, dumfounded, appalled.

It was a lottery of life and death.

Muriel stood watching them, and Frank fancied that his eyes were gleaming with satisfaction. The boy began to believe he had mistaken the character of this astonishing youth; Muriel might be even worse than his older companions, for he might be one who delighted in torturing his victims.

Frank threw back his head, defiance and scorn written on his handsome face.

"It is a clean case of murder, at best!" he cried, his voice ringing out clearly. "We deserve a fair trial—we demand it!"

"Wal," drawled the boy moonshiner, "I warned you-uns that ther more yer demanded, ther less yer got. Ye seem ter fergit that."

"We're in fur it, Frankie, me b'y!" groaned Barney.

"If we had our revolvers, we'd give them a stiff fight for it!" grated Frank, fiercely. "They would not murder us till a few of them had eaten lead!"

Muriel seemed to nod with satisfaction.

"You-uns has stuff, an' when I tell yer that ye'll have ter sta' ter vote ur take chances with ther cards, I don't judge you'll hesitate. It's one ur t'other."

"Then, make it the cards," said Frank, hoarsely. "That will give us an even show, if the draw is a fair one."

"I'll see ter that," assured Muriel. "It shall be fair."

Without another word, he turned and swiftly slipped out of the room. They heard him bar the door, and then they stood looking into each other's faces, speechless for a few moments.

"It's a toss-up, Barney," Frank finally observed.

"Thot's pwhat it is, an' th' woay our luck is runnin' Oi think it's a case av heads they win an' tails we lose."

"It looks that way," admitted Frank. "But there is no way out of it. We'll have to grin and bear it."

"Pwhat do yez think av thot Muriel?"

"He's an enigma."

"Worse than thot, me b'y—he's a cat's cradle toied in a hundred an' sivintane knots."

"It is impossible to tell whether he is friendly or whether he is the worst foe we have in these mountains."

"Oi wonder how Kate Kenyon knew where to foind him so quick?"

"I have thought of that. She must have found him in a very short time after we were taken from the cabin."

"An' she diskivered thot we hed been taken away moighty soon afther we wur gone, me b'y. Thot is sure."

"Remember one of the horses neighed. It may have aroused Kate and her mother, and caused them to investigate."

"Loikely thot wur th' case, fer it's not mesilf thot would think she'd kape shtill an' let ther spalpanes drag us away av she knew it."

"No; I believe her utterly fearless, and it is plain that Wade Miller is not the only one in love with her."

"Who ilse?"

"Muriel."

"Mebbe ye're roight, Frankie."

"It strikes me that way. The fellow tried to lead me into a trap—tried to get me to boast of a mash on her. I could see his eyes gleam with jealousy. In her eagerness to save us—to have him aid her in the work—she must have led him to suspect that one of us had been making love to her."

Barney whistled a bit, and then he shyly said:

"Oi wunder av wan of us didn't do a bit av thot?"

"Not I," protested Frank. "We talked in a friendly manner—in fact, she promised to be a friend to me. I may have expressed admiration for her hair, or something of the sort, but I vow I did not make love to her."

"Well, me b'y, ye have a thrick av gettin' all th' girruls shtuck on yez av ye look at thim, so ye

didn't nade ter make love."

"It's not my fault, Barney."

"It's nivver a fault at all, at all, me lad. Oi wish Oi wur built th' soame woay, but it's littlle oice I cut wid th' girruls. This south av Oireland brogue thot Oi foind mesilf unable to shake counts against me a bit, Oi belave."

"I should think Miller and Muriel would clash."

"It's plain enough that Miller is afraid av Muriel."

"And Muriel intends to keep him thus. I fancy it was a good thing for us that Kate Kenyon suspected Wade Miller of having a hand in our capture, and told Muriel that we had been carried off by him, for I fancy that is exactly what happened. Muriel was angry with Miller, and he seized the opportunity to call the fellow down. But for that, he might not have made such a hustle to save us."

"Thin we should be thankful thot Muriel an' Miller do not love ache ither."

The boys continued to discuss the situation for some time, and then they fell to examining the room in which they were imprisoned. It did not seem to have a window anywhere, and the single door appeared to be the only means of entering or leaving the place.

"There's little show of escaping from this room," said Frank.

"Roight ye are," nodded Barney. "This wur built to kape iverything safe thot came in here."

A few minutes later there was a sound at the door, and Muriel came in, with two of the Black Caps at his heels.

"Ther boys have agreed ter give ye ther chance o' ther cards," said the boy moonshiner. "An' yo're goin' ter have a fair an' squar' deal."

"We will have to submit," said Frank, quietly.

"You will have ter let ther boys bind yer hands afore ye leave this room," said Muriel.

The men each held the end of a stout rope, and the boys were forced to submit to the inconvenience of having their hands bound behind them. Barney protested, but Frank kept silent, knowing it was useless to say anything.

When their hands were tied, Muriel said:

"Follow."

He led the way, while Frank came next, with Barney shuffling sulkily along at his heels. The two men came last.

They passed through a dark room and entered another room, which was lighted by three oil lamps. The room was well filled with the black-hooded moonshiners, who were standing in a grim and silent circle, with their backs against the walls.

Into the center of this circle, the boys were marched. The door closed, and Muriel addressed the Black Caps.

"It is not often that we-uns gives our captives ther choice uv ther cards or ther vote, but we have agreed ter do so in this case, with only one objectin', an' he war induced ter change his mind. Now we mean ter have this fair an' squar', an' I call on ev'ry man present ter watch out an' see that it is. Ther men has been serlected, one ter hold ther cards an' one ter draw. Let them step forrud."

Two of the Black Caps stepped out, and Frank started a bit, for he believed one of them was Wade Miller.

A pack of cards was produced, and Muriel shuffled them with a skill that told of experience, after which he handed them to one of the men.

Miller was to draw!

Frank watched every move, determined to detect the fraud if possible, should there be any fraud.

An awed hush seemed to settle over the room.

The men who wore the black hoods leaned forward a little, every one of them watching to see what card should be drawn from the pack.

Barney Mulloy caught his breath with a gasping sound, and then was silent, standing stiff and straight.

Muriel was as alert as a panther, and his eyes gleamed through the holes in his mask like twin stars.

The man who received the pack from Muriel stepped forward, and Miller reached out his hand to draw.

Then Frank suddenly cried:

"Wait! That we may be satisfied we are having a fair show in this matter, why not permit one of us to shuffle those cards?"

Quick as a flash of light, Muriel's hand fell on the wrist of the man who held the cards, and his clear voice rang out:

"Stop! Unbind his hands. He shall shuffle."

Frank's hands were unbound, and he was given the cards. He shuffled them, but he did not handle them with more skill than had Muriel. He "shook them up" thoroughly, and then passed them back to the man who was to hold them.

"Bind him!"

Muriel's order was swiftly obeyed, and Frank was again helpless.

"Draw!"

The cards were extended. Wade Miller reached out, and quickly made the draw, holding the fateful card up for all to see.

It was the ace of spades!

CHAPTER XLIII.

SAVED!

"Death!"

From beneath the black hoods sounded the terrible word, as the man beheld the black card which was exposed to view.

The boys were doomed!

Frank's heart dropped like a stone into the depths of his bosom, but no sound came from his lips.

Barney Mulloy showed an equal amount of nerve. Indeed, the Irish lad laughed recklessly as he cried:

"It's nivver a show we had at all, at all, Frankie. Th' snakes had it fixed fer us all th' toime."

"Hold on thar!"

The words came from Muriel, and the boy chief of the moonshiners made a spring and a grab, snatching the card from Miller's hand.

"Look hyar!" he cried. "This won't do! Let's give ther critters a fair show."

"Do you mean ter say they didn't have a fair show?" demanded Wade Miller, fiercely. "Do you say that I cheated?"

"Not knowin' it," answered Muriel. "But ther draw warn't fair, jes' ther same."

"Warn't fair!" snarled Miller, furiously. "Why not?"

"Because two cards war drawed!" rang out the voice of the masked youth. "Look—hyar they be! One is ther ace o' spades, an' ther other is ther nine o' hearts."

Exclamations of astonishment came from all sides, and a ray of hope shot into Frank Merriwell's heart.

"Did I draw two cards?" muttered Miller, as if surprised. "Wal, what o' that? Ther black card war ther one exposed, an' that settles what'll be done with ther spies."

"It don't settle it!" declared Muriel, promptly. "Them boys is goin' ter have a squar' show."

It was with the greatest difficulty that Miller held himself in check. His hands were clinched, and Frank fancied that he longed to spring upon Muriel.

The boy chief was very cool as he took the pack of cards from the hand of the man who had held them.

"Release one of the prisoners," was his command. "The cards shall be shuffled again."

Once more Frank's hands were freed, and again the cards were given him to shuffle. He mixed them deftly, without saying a word, and gave them back to Muriel. Then his hands were tied, and he awaited the second drawing.

"Be careful an' not get two cards this time," warned Muriel as he faced Miller. "This draw settles ther business fer them-uns."

The cards were given to the man who was to hold them, and Miller stepped forward to draw.

Again the suspense became great, again the men leaned forward to see the card that should be pulled from the pack; again the hearts of the captives stood still.

Miller hesitated. He seemed to feel that the tide had turned against him. For a moment he was tempted to refuse to draw, and then, with a muttered exclamation, he pulled a card from the pack and held it up to view. Then, with a bitter cry of baffled rage, he flung it madly to the floor.

It was the queen of hearts!

Each man in the room seemed to draw a deep breath. It was plain that some were disappointed, and some were well satisfied.

"That settles it!" said Muriel, calmly. "They-uns won't be put out o' ther way ter-night."

"Settles it!" snarled Miller, furious with disappointment. "It war settled afore! I claim that ther first draw counts."

"An' I claim that it don't," returned the youthful moonshiner, without lifting his voice in the least. "You-uns all agreed ter ther second draw, an' that lets them off."

"Oh, you have worked it slick!" grated the disappointed Black Cap. "But them critters ain't out o' ther maountings yit!"

"By that yer mean—jes' what?"

"They're not liable ter git out alive."

"Ef they-uns is killed, I'll know whar ter look fer ther one as war at ther bottom o' ther job—an' I'll look!"

Muriel did not bluster, and he did not speak above an ordinary tone, but it was plain that he meant every word.

"Wal," muttered Miller, "what do ye mean ter do with them critters—turn 'em out, an' let 'em bring ther officers down on us?"

"No. I'm goin' ter keep 'em till they kin be escorted out o' ther maountings. Thar ain't time ter-night, fer it's gittin' toward mornin'. Ter-morrer night it can be done."

Miller said no more. He seemed to know it was useless to make further talk, but Frank and Barney knew that they were not yet out of danger.

The boys seemed as cool as any one in the room, for all of the deadly peril they had passed through, and Muriel nodded in a satisfied way when he had looked them over.

"Come," he said, in a low tone, "you-uns will have ter go back ter ther room whar ye war a bit ago."

They were willing to go back, and it was with no small amount of relief that they allowed themselves to be escorted to the apartment.

Muriel dismissed the two guards, and then he set the hands of the boys free.

"Thar ye are," he said. "Yo're all right fer now."

"Thanks to you," bowed Frank. "I want to make an apology."

"Fer what?"

"Suspecting you of double-dealing."

"You-uns did suspect me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It looked that way once. It seemed that you had saved us from being hanged, but that you intended to finish us here."

"Ef that war my scheme, why did I take ther trouble ter save ye at all?"

"It looked as if you did so to please Miss Kenyon. You had saved us, and then, if the men disposed of us in the regular manner, you would not be to blame."

Muriel shook back his long, black hair, and his manner showed that he was angry. He did not feel at all pleased to know his sincerity had been doubted.

"Wal," he said, slowly, "ef it hadn't been fer me you-uns would be gone coons now."

"Begobs! we know thot!" exclaimed Barney.

"You-uns know I saved ye, but ye don't know how I done it."

There was something of bitterness and reproach in the voice of the youthful moonshiner. He

continued:

"I done that fer you I never done before fer no man. I wouldn't a done it fer myself!"

Frank wondered what the strange youth could mean.

"Do you-uns want ter know what I done?" asked Muriel.

"Yes."

"I cheated."

"Cheated?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"When I snatched ther first card drawn from ther hand o' ther man what drawed it. It war ther ace o' spades, an' it condemned yer ter die."

"But there were two cards drawn."

"No! Thar war one card drawed, an' that war all!"

"But—but you showed two!"

Muriel nodded.

"That war whar I cheated," he said, simply. "I had ther red card in my hand ready ter do ther trick ef a black card war drawed. In that way I knowed I could give yer two shows ter escape death."

The boys were astounded by this revelation, but they did not doubt that Muriel spoke the truth. His manner showed that he was not telling a falsehood.

And this strange boy—this remarkable leader of moonshiners—had done such a thing to save them!

More than ever, they marveled at the fellow.

Once more Muriel's arms were folded over his breast, and he was leaning gracefully against the door, his eyes watching their faces.

For several moments both boys were stricken dumb with wonder and surprise. Frank was not a little confused, thinking as he did how he had misunderstood this mysterious youth. Even now Frank could not understand him. It seemed most unaccountable that he should do such a thing for two lads who were utter strangers to him.

A sound like a bitter laugh came from behind the sable mask, and Muriel flung out one hand, with an impatient gesture.

"I know what you-uns is thinkin' of," declared the young moonshiner. "Ye wonder why I done so. Wal, I don't jes' know myself, but I promised Kate ter do my best fer ye."

"You have kept your promise!" cried Frank, "kept it nobly! Muriel, you may be a moonshiner, you may be the leader of the Black Caps, but I am proud to know you! I believe you are white all the way through!"

"Thar!" exclaimed the youth, with a show of satisfaction, "that makes me feel better. But it war Kate as done it, an' she's ther one ter thank; but it ain't likely you-uns'll ever see her ag'in."

"Then, tell her," said Frank, swiftly, "tell her for us that we are very thankful—tell her we shall not forget her. I'll never forget her."

Muriel moved uneasily. He seemed about to speak, and then checked himself.

"You will tell her?" said Frank, appealingly.

"I'll tell her," nodded Muriel, his voice sounding a bit strange. "Is that all you-uns want me ter tell her?"

"Tell her I would give much to see her again," came swiftly from Frank's lips. "She's promised to be my friend, and right well has she kept that promise."

"That's all?" questioned the boy moonshiner.

"That is all."

"Then I'll have ter leave you-uns now. Take it as easy as yer kin. Breakfast will be brought ter ye, and when another night comes, a guard will go with yer out o' ther maountings. Good-by."

He was going.

"Wait!" cried Frank. "Will you shake hands before you go?"

He held out a hand, and Muriel seemed to hesitate. After a few moments, the masked lad shook

his head, and, without another word, left the room.

"Begorra!" cried Barney, scratching his head, "thot felly is worse than Oi thought! Oi don't know so much about him now as Oi did bafore Oi met him at all, at all!"

The boys were given much food for conversation. They made themselves as comfortable as possible, and talked over the thrilling events of the night.

"If Kate Kenyon had not told me that her brother was serving time as a convict, I should think this Muriel must be her brother," said Frank.

"Av he's not her brither, it's badly shtuck on her he must be, Oi dunno," observed Barney. "An' av he be shtuck on her, pwhoy don't he git enter th' collar av thot Miller?"

That was a question Frank could not answer. Finally, when they had tired of talking, the boys lay down and tried to sleep.

Frank was beginning to doze when his ears seemed to detect a slight rustling in that very room, and his eyes flew open in a twinkling. He started up, a cry of wonder surging to his lips, and being smothered there.

Kate Kenyon stood within ten feet of him!

As Frank started up, the girl swiftly placed a finger on her lips, warning him to be silent.

Frank sprang to his feet, and Barney Mulloy sat up, rubbing his eyes and beginning to speak.

"Pwhat's th' matter now, me b'y? Are yez— Howly shmoke!"

Barney clasped both hands over his mouth, having caught the warning gestures from Frank and the girl. Still the exclamation had escaped his lips, although it was not uttered loudly.

Swiftly Kate Kenyon flitted across the room, listening with her ear to the door to hear any sound beyond. After some moments, she seemed satisfied that the moonshiners had not been aroused by anything that had happened within that room, and she came back, standing close to Frank, and whispering:

"Ef you-uns will trust me, I judge I kin git yer out o' this scrape."

"Trust you!" exclaimed Frank, softly, as he caught her hand. "We have you to thank for our lives! Kate—your pardon!—Miss Kenyon, how can we ever repay you?"

"Don't stop ter talk 'bout that now," she said, with chilling roughness. "Ef you-uns want ter live, an' yer want ter git erway frum Wade Miller, git reddy ter foller me."

"We are ready."

"Begorra! we're waitin'!"

"But how are we to leave this room? How did you enter?"

She silently pointed to a dark opening in the corner, and they saw that a small trapdoor was standing open.

"We kin git out that way," she said.

The boys wondered why they had not discovered the door when they examined the place, but there was no time for investigation.

Kate Kenyon flitted lightly toward the opening. Pausing beside it, she pointed downward, saying:

"Go ahead; I'll foller and close ther door."

The boys did not hesitate, for they placed perfect confidence in the girl now. Barney dropped down in advance, and his feet found some rude stone steps. In a moment he had disappeared, and then Frank followed.

As lightly as a fairy, Kate Kenyon dropped through the opening, closing the door behind her.

The boys found themselves in absolute darkness, in some sort of a narrow, underground place, and there they paused, awaiting their guide.

She came in a moment. Her hand touched Frank as she slipped past, and he caught the perfume of wild flowers. To him she was like a beautiful wild flower growing in a wilderness of weeds. The touch of their hands was electric.

"Come."

The boys heard the word, and they moved slowly forward through the darkness, now and then feeling dank walls on either hand.

For a considerable distance they went on in this way, and then the passage seemed to widen out, and they felt that they had entered a cave.

"Keep close ter me," directed the girl.

"Here, give me your hands. Now you-uns can't git astray."

At last a strange smell came to their nostrils, seemingly on the wings of a light breath of air.

"What is that?" asked Frank.

"Ther mill whar ther moonshine is made."

"Oh!"

Now the boys recognized the smell.

Still she led them on through the darkness. Never for a moment did she hesitate; she seemed to have the eyes of an owl.

All at once they heard the sound of gently running water.

"Is there a stream near?" asked Frank.

"Lost Creek runs through har," answered the girl.

"Lost Creek? Why, we are still underground."

"An' Lost Creek runs underground. Have ye fergot that?"

So the mysterious stream flowed through this cavern, and the cave was near one of the illicit distilleries.

Frank cared to know no more, for he did not believe it was healthy to know too much about the makers of moonshine.

It was not long before they approached the mouth of the cave. They saw the opening before them, and then, of a sudden, a dark figure arose there—the figure of a man with a gun in his hands!

CHAPTER XLIV.

FRANK'S SUSPICION.

"It's all right."

Kate uttered the words, and the boys began to recover from their alarm, as she did not hesitate in the least.

"Who is it?" asked Frank.

"Dummy."

"Who is Dummy?"

"A cousin o' mine. He'll do anything fer me. I put him thar ter watch out while I war in hyar."

They went forward. Of a sudden, Kate struck a match, holding it so the light shone on her face, and the figure at the mouth of the cave was seen to wave its hand and vanish.

"Ther coast is clear," assured the girl. "But it's gittin' right nigh mornin', an' we-uns must hustle away from hyar afore it is light. We won't lose any time."

The boys were well satisfied to get away as quickly as possible.

They passed out of the dark cavern into the cool, sweet air of a spring morning, for the gray of dawn was beginning to dispel the darkness, and the birds were twittering from the thickets.

The phantom of a moon was in the sky, hanging low down and half-inverted as if spilling a spectral glamour over the ghostly mists which lay deep in Lost Creek Valley.

The sweet breath of flowers and of the woods was in the morning air, and from some cabin afar on the side of a distant mountain a wakeful watchdog barked till the crags reverberated with his clamoring.

"Thar's somethin' stirrin' at 'Bize Wiley's, ur his dorg wouldn't be kickin' up all that racket," observed Kate Kenyon. "He lives by ther road that comes over from Bildow's Crossroads. Folks comin' inter ther maountings from down below travel that way."

The boys looked around for the mute who had been guarding the mouth of the cave, but they saw nothing of him. He had slipped away into the bushes which grew thick all around the opening.

"Come on," said the girl, after seeming strangely interested in the barking of the dog. "We'll git ter ther old mill as soon as we kin. Foller me, an' be ready ter scrouch ther instant anything is seen."

Now that they could see her, she led them forward at a swift pace, which astonished them both.

She did not run, but she seemed to skim over the ground, and she took advantage of every bit of cover till they entered some deep, lowland pines.

Through this strip of woods she swiftly led them, and they came near to Lost Creek, where it flowed down in the dismal valley.

There they found the ruins of an old mill, the moss-covered water-wheel forever silent, the roof sagging and falling in, the windows broken out by mischievous boys, the whole presenting a most melancholy and deserted appearance.

The road that had led to the mill from the main highway was overgrown with weeds. Later it would be filled with thistles and burdocks. Wild sassafras grew along the roadside.

"That's whar you-uns must hide ter-day," said Kate, motioning toward the mill.

"Why should we hide?" exclaimed Frank. "We are not criminals, nor are we revenue spies. I do not fancy the idea of hiding like a hunted dog."

"It's better ter be a live dorg than a dead lion. Ef you-uns'll take my advice, you'll come inter ther mill thar, an' ye'll keep thar all day, an' keep mighty quiet. I know ye're nervy, but thar ain't no good in bein' foolish. It'll be known that you-uns have escaped, an' then Wade Miller will scour ther country. Ef he come on yer——"

"Give us our arms, and we'll be ready to meet Mr. Miller."

"But yer wouldn't meet him alone; thar'd be others with him, an' you-uns wouldn't have no sorter show."

Kate finally succeeded in convincing the boys that she spoke the truth, and they agreed to remain quietly in the old mill.

She led them into the mill, which was dank and dismal. The imperfect light failed to show all the pitfalls that lurked for their feet, but she warned them, and they escaped injury.

The miller had lived in the mill, and the girl took them to the part of the old building that had served as a home.

"Har," she said, opening a closet door, "I've brung food fer you-uns, so yer won't starve, an' I knowed ye'd be hongry."

"You are more than thoughtful, Miss Kenyon."

"Yer seem ter have fergot what we agreed ter call each other, Frank."

She spoke the words in a tone of reproach.

"Kate!"

Barney turned away, winking uselessly at nothing at all, and kept his back toward them for some moments.

But Frank Merriwell had no thought of making love to this strange girl of the mountains. She had promised to be his friend; she had proved herself his friend, and as no more than a friend did he propose to accept her.

That he had awakened something stronger than a friendly feeling in Kate Kenyon's breast seemed evident, and the girl was so artless that she could not conceal her true feelings toward him.

They stood there, talking in a low tone, while the morning light stole in at one broken window and grew stronger and stronger within that room.

Frank was studying Kate's speech and voice. As he did so a new thought came to him—a thought that was at first a mere suspicion, which he scarcely noted at all. This suspicion grew, and he found himself asking:

"Kate, are you sure your brother is still wearing a convict's suit?"

She started, and looked at him closely.

"Sure o' it?" she repeated. "No, fer he may be dead."

"You do not know that he is dead—you have not heard of his death?"

"No."

"Is he bold and daring?"

Her eyes flashed, and a look of pride swept across her face.

"Folks allus 'lowed Rufe Kenyon wa'n't afeard o' ary two-legged critter livin', an' they war right."

"Perhaps he has escaped."

She clutched his arm, beginning to pant, as she asked:

"What makes you say that? I knowed he'd try it some day, but—but, have you heard anything? Do you know that he has tried it?"

The suspicion leaped to a conviction in the twinkling of an eye. If Rufe Kenyon was not at liberty, then he must be right in what he thought.

"I do not know that your brother has tried to escape. I do not know anything about him. I did think that he might be Muriel, the moonshiner."

Kate laughed.

"You-uns war plumb mistooked thar," she said, positively. "Rufe is not Muriel."

"Then," cried Frank, "you are Muriel yourself!"

Kate Kenyon seemed astounded.

"Have you-uns gone plumb dafty?" asked the girl, in a dazed way. "Me Muriel! Wal, that beats all!"

"But you are—I am sure of it," said Frank, swiftly.

The girl laughed.

"Well, that beats me! Of course I'm not Muriel; but he's ther best friend I've got in these maountings."

Frank was far from satisfied, but he was too courteous to insist after this denial. Kate laughed the idea to scorn, saying over and over that the boy must be "dafty," but still his mind was unchanged.

To be sure, there were some things not easily explained, one being how Muriel concealed her luxurious red hair, for Muriel's hair appeared to be coal-black.

Another thing was that Wade Miller must know Muriel and Kate were one and the same, and yet he preserved her secret and allowed her to snatch his victims from his maws.

Barney Mulloy had been more than astounded by Frank's words; the Irish youth was struck dumb. When he could collect himself, he softly muttered:

"Well, av all th' oideas thot takes th' cake!"

Having seen them safely within the mill and shown them the food brought there, Kate said:

"Har is two revolvers fer you-uns. Don't use 'em unless yer have ter, but shoot ter kill ef you're forced."

"Begorra! Oi'm ready fer th' spalpanes!" cried Barney, as he grasped one of the weapons. "Let thim come on!"

"I feel better myself," declared Frank. "Next time Wade Miller and his gang will not catch us napping."

"Roight, me b'y; we'll be sound awake, Frankie."

Kate bade them good-by, assuring them that she would return with the coming of another night, and making them promise to await her, and then she flitted away, slipped out of the mill, soon vanishing amid the pines.

"It's dead lucky we are ter be living, Frankie," observed Barney.

"I quite agree with you," laughed Merriwell. "This night has been a black and tempestuous one, but we have lived through it, and I do not believe we'll find ourselves in such peril again while we are in the Tennessee mountains."

They were hungry, and they ate heartily of the plain food that had been provided for them.

When breakfast was over, Barney said:

"Frankie, it's off yer trolley ye git sometoimes."

"What do you mean by that, Barney? Is it a new sell?"

"Niver a bit. Oi wur thinkin' av pwhat yez said about Kate Kenyon being Mooriel, th' moonshoiner."

"I was not off my trolley so very much then."

"G'wan, me b'y! Ye wur crazy as a bidbug."

"You think so, but I have made a study of Muriel and of Kate Kenyon. I am still inclined to believe the moonshiner is the girl in disguise."

"An' Oi say ye're crazy. No girrul could iver do pwhat thot felly does, an' no band av min loike th' moonshoiners would iver allow a girrul loike Kate Kenyon ter boss thim."

"They do not know Muriel is a girl. That is, I am sure the most of them do not know it—do not

dream it."

"Thot shows their common sinse, fer Oi don't belave it mesilf."

"I may be wrong, but I shall not give it up yet."

"Whoy, think pwhat a divvil thot Muriel is! An' th' color av his hair is black, whoile the girrul's is red."

"I have thought of those things, and I have wondered how she concealed that mass of red hair; still I am satisfied she does it."

"Well, it's no use to talk to you at all, at all."

However, they did discuss it for some time.

Finally they fell to exploring the old mill, and they wandered from one part to another till they finally came to the place where they had entered over a sagging plank. They were standing there, just within the deeper shadow of the mill, when a man came panting and reeling from the woods, his hat off, his shirt torn open at the throat, great drops of perspiration standing on his face, a wild, hunted look in his eyes, and dashed to the end of the plank that led over the water into the old mill.

Frank clutched Barney, and the boys fell back a step, watching the man, who was looking back over his shoulder and listening, the perfect picture of a hunted thing.

"They're close arter me—ther dogs!" came in a hoarse pant from the man's lips. "But I turned on 'em—I doubled—an' I hope I fooled 'em. It's my last chance, fer I'm dead played, and I'm so nigh starved that it's all I kin do ter drag one foot arter t'other."

He listened again, and then, as if overcome by a sudden fear of being seen there, he suddenly rushed across the plank and plunged into the mill.

He ran fairly upon Frank Merriwell.

In the twinkling of an eye man and boy were clasped in a close embrace, struggling desperately.

"Caught!" cried the fugitive, desperately. "Trapped!"

He tried to hurl Frank to the floor, and he would have succeeded had he been in his normal condition, for he was a man of great natural strength; but he was exhausted by flight and hunger, and, in his weakened condition, the man found his supple antagonist too much for him.

A gasp came from the stranger's lips as he felt the boy give him a wrestler's trip and fling him heavily to the floor.

The man was stunned for a moment. When he opened his eyes, Frank and Barney were bending over him.

"Wal, I done my best," he said, huskily; "but you-uns trapped me at last. I dunno how yer knew I war comin' har, but ye war on hand ter meet me."

"You have made a mistake," said Frank, in a reassuring tone. "We are not your enemies at all."

"What's that?"

"We are not your enemies; you are not trapped."

The man seemed unable to believe what he heard.

"Why, who be you-uns?" he asked, in a bewildered way.

"Fugitives, like yourself," assured Frank, with a smile.

He looked them over, and shook his head.

"Not like me," he said. "Look at me! I'm wore ter ther bone—I'm a wreck! Oh, it's a cursed life I've led sence they dragged me away from har! Night an' day hev I watched for a chance ter break away, and' I war quick ter grasp it when it came. They shot at me, an' one o' their bullets cut my shoulder har. It war a close call, but I got away. Then they follered, an' they put houn's arter me. Twenty times hev they been right on me, an' twenty times hev I got erway. But it kep' wearin' me weaker an' thinner. My last hope war ter find friends ter hide me an' fight fer me, an' I came har—back home! I tried ter git inter 'Bije Wileys' this mornin', but his dorg didn't know me, I war so changed, an' ther hunters war close arter me, so I hed ter run fer it."

"Begorra!" exclaimed Barney; "we hearrud th' dog barruckin'."

"So we did," agreed Frank, remembering how the creature had been clamoring on the mountainside at daybreak.

"I kem har," continued the man, weakly. "I turned on ther devils, but when I run in har an' you-uns tackled me, I judged I had struck a trap."

"It was no trap, Rufe Kenyon," said Frank, quietly.

The hunted man started up and slunk away.

"You know me!" he gasped.

"We do."

"An' still ye say you-uns are not my enemies."

"We are not."

"Then how do you know me? I never saw yer afore."

"No; but we have heard of you."

"How?"

"From your sister Kate."

"She tol' yer?"

"She did."

"Then she must trust you-uns."

"She saved us from certain death last night, and she brought us here to hide till she can help us get out of this part of the country."

Rufe Kenyon looked puzzled.

"I judge you-uns is givin' it ter me straight," he said, slowly; "but I don't jes' understan'. What did she save yer from?"

"Moonshiners."

The man seemed filled with sudden suspicion.

"What had moonshiners agin' you-uns? Be you revernues?"

"No. Do we look like revenue spies?"

"Yer look too young."

"Well, we are not spies; but we were unfortunate enough to incur the enmity of Wade Miller, and he has sworn to end our lives."

"Wade Miller!" cried Rufe, showing his teeth in an ugly manner. "An' I s'pose he's hangin' 'roun' Kate, same as he uster?"

"He is giving her more or less trouble."

"Wal, he won't give her much trouble arter I git at him. He is a snake! Look har! I'm goin' ter tell you-uns somethin'. Miller allus pretended ter be my friend, but it war that critter as put ther revernues onter me an' got me arrested! He done it because I tol' him Kate war too good fer him. I know it, an' one thing why I wanted ter git free war ter come har an' fix ther critter so he won't ever bother Kate no more. I hev swore ter fix him, an' I'll do it ef I live ter meet him face ter face!"

He had grown wildly excited, and he sat up, with his back against a post, his eyes gleaming redly, and a white foam flecking his lips. At that moment he reminded the boys of a mad dog.

Woe to Wade Miller when they met!

When Kenyon was calmer, Frank told the story of the adventures which had befallen the boys since entering Lost Creek Valley. The fugitive listened quietly, watching them closely with his sunken eyes, and, having heard all, said:

"I judge you-uns tells ther truth. Ef I kin keep hid till Kate gits har—till I see her—I'll fix things so you won't be bothered much. Wade Miller's day in Lost Creek Valley is over."

The boys took him up to the living room of the old mill, where they furnished him with the coarse food that remained from their breakfast. He ate like a famished thing, washing the dry bread down with great swallows of water. When he had finished and his hunger was satisfied, he was quite like another man.

"Thar!" he cried; "now I am redly fer anything! But I do need sleep."

"Take it," advised Frank. "We will watch."

"And you'll tell me ef thar's danger?"

"You may depend on it."

"You-uns will watch close?"

"Never fear about that."

So the hunted wretch was induced to lie down and sleep. He slept soundly for some hours, and, when he opened his eyes, his sister had her arms about his neck.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE GREATEST PERIL.

"Rufe!"

"Kate!"

He sat up and clasped her in his arms, a look of joy on his face.

It is quite unnecessary to describe the joys of that meeting. The boys had left brother and sister alone together, and the two remained thus for nearly an hour, at the end of which time Rufe knew all that had happened since he was taken from Lost Creek Valley, and Kate had also been made aware of the perfidy of Wade Miller.

"I judge it is true that bread throwed on ther waters allus comes back," said Kate, when the four were together. "Now looker how I helped you-uns, an' then see how it turned out ter be a right good thing fer Rufe. He found ye har, an' you-uns hev fed him an' watched while he slept."

"An' I hev tol' Kate all about Wade Miller," said the fugitive.

"That settles him," declared the girl, with a snap.

Rufe explained.

"Kate says ther officers think I hev gone on over inter ther next cove, an' they're arter me, all 'ceptin' two what have been left behind. They'll be back, though, by night."

"But you are all right now, for your friends will be on hand by that time."

"Yes; Kate will take word ter Muriel, an' he'll hev ther boys ready ter fight fer me. Ther officers will find it kinder hot in these parts."

"I'd better be goin' now," said the girl. "Ther boys oughter know all about it soon as possible."

"That's right," agreed Rufe. "This ain't ther best place fer me ter hide."

"No," declared Kate, suddenly; "an' yer mustn't hide har longer, fer ther officers may come afore night. I'll take yer ter ther cave. It won't do fer ther boys ter go thar, but you kin all right. Ther boys is best off har, fer ther officers wouldn't hurt 'em."

This seemed all right, and it was decided on.

Just as they were on the point of descending, Barney gave a cry, caught Frank by the arm, and drew him toward a window.

"Look there, me b'y!" exclaimed the Irish lad. "Phwat do yez think av it now?"

A horseman was coming down the old road that led to the mill. He bestrode a coal-black horse, and a mask covered his face, while his long, black hair flowed down on the collar of the coat he wore. He sat the horse jauntily, riding with a reckless air that seemed to tell of a daring spirit.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Frank Merriwell, amazed. "It is Muriel!"

"That's pwhat!" chuckled Barney. "An' it's your trate, me lad."

"I will treat," said Frank, crestfallen. "I am not nearly so smart as I thought I was."

"Muriel?" cried Kate, dashing to the window. "Where is he?"

She did not hesitate to appear in the window and signal to the dashing young moonshiner, who returned her salute, and motioned for her to come out.

"He wants ter see me in er hurry," said the girl. "I sent word ter him by Dummy that ther boys war har, an' that's how he happened ter turn up. Come, Rufe, go out with me. Muriel will be glad to see yer."

"And I shall be glad ter see him," declared the escaped convict.

Kate bade the boys remain there, telling them she would call them if they were wanted, and then, with Rufe following, she hurried down the stairs, and hastened to meet the boy moonshiner, who had halted on the bank at some distance from the old mill.

Watching from the window, Frank and Barney saw her hasten up to Muriel, saw her speak swiftly, although they could not hear her words, saw Muriel nod and seem to reply quite as swiftly, and then saw the young leader of the Black Caps shake her hand in a manner that denoted pleasure and affection.

"Ye're a daisy, Frankie, me b'y," snickered Barney Mulloy; "but fer wance ye wur badly mishtaken."

"I was all of that," confessed Frank, as if slightly ashamed. "I thought myself far shrewder than I

am."

As they watched, they saw Rufe Kenyon suddenly leap up behind Muriel, and then the doubly burdened horse swung around and went away at a hot pace, while Kate came flitting back into the mill.

"The officers are returnin'," she explained. "Muriel will take Rufe whar thar ain't no chance o' their findin' him. You-uns will have ter stay har. I have brung ye more fodder, an' I judge you'll git along all right."

So she left them hurriedly, being greatly excited over the return of her brother and his danger.

The day passed, and the officers failed to appear in the vicinity of the mill, although the boys were expecting to see them.

Nor did Wade Miller trouble them.

When night came Frank and Barney grew impatient, for they were far from pleased with their lot, but they could do nothing but wait.

Two hours after nightfall a form suddenly appeared in the old mill, rising before the boys like a phantom, although they could not understand how the fellow came there.

In a flash Frank snatched out a revolver and pointed it at the intruder, crying, sternly:

"Stand still and give an account of yourself! Who are you, and what do you want?"

The figure moved into the range of the window, so that the boys could see him making strange gestures, pointing to his ears, and pressing his fingers to his lips.

"Steady you!" commanded Frank. "If you don't keep still, I shall shoot. Answer my question at once."

Still the intruder continued to make those strange gestures, pointing to his ears, and touching his lips. That he saw Frank's revolver glittering and feared the boy would shoot was evident, but he still remained silent.

"Whoy don't th' spalpane spake?" cried Barney. "Is it no tongue he has, Oi dunno?"

That gave Frank an idea.

"Perhaps he cannot speak, in which case he is the one Kate calls Dummy. I believe he is the fellow."

It happened that the sign language of mutes was one of Frank's accomplishments, he having taken it up during his leisure moments. He passed the revolver to Barney, saying:

"Keep the fellow covered, while I see if I can talk with him."

Frank moved up to the window, held his hands close to the intruder's face, and spelled:

"You from Kate?"

The man nodded joyfully. He put up his hands and spelled back:

"Kate send me. Come. Horses ready."

Frank interpreted for Barney's benefit, and the Irish lad cried:

"Thin let's be movin'! It's mesilf that's ready ter git out av thase parruts in a hurry, Oi think."

For a moment Frank hesitated about trusting the mute, and then he decided that it was the best thing to do, and he signaled that they were ready.

Dummy led the way from the mill, crossing by the plank, and plunging into the pine woods.

"He sames to be takin' us back th' woay we came, Frankie," said the Irish lad, in a low tone.

"That's all right," assured Frank. "He said the horses were waiting for us. Probably Kate is with them."

The mute flitted along with surprising silence and speed, and they found it no easy task to follow and keep close enough to see him. Now and then he looked back to make sure they were close behind.

At last they came to the termination of the pines, and there, in the deep shadows, they found three horses waiting.

Kate Kenyon was not there.

Frank felt disappointed, for he wished to see the girl before leaving the mountains forever. He did not like to go away without touching her hand again, and expressing his sense of gratitude for the last time.

It was his hope that she might join them before they left the mountains.

The horses were saddled and bridled, and the boys were about to mount when a strange, low cry

broke from Dummy's lips.

There was a sudden stir, and an uprising of dark forms on all sides. Frank tried to snatch out his revolver, but it was too late. He was seized, disarmed, and crushed to the earth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed a hateful voice. "Did you-uns think ye war goin' ter escape? Wal, yer didn't know Wade Miller very well. I knowed Kate'd try ter git yer off, an' all I hed ter do war watch her. I didn't waste my time runnin' round elsewhar."

They were once more in Miller's clutches!

Frank ground his teeth with impotent rage. He blamed himself for falling into the trap, and still he could not see how he was to blame. Surely he had been cautious, but fate was against him. He had escaped Miller twice; but this was the third time, and he feared that it would prove disastrous.

Barney had not a word to say.

The hands of the captured boys were tied behind their backs, and then they were forced to march swiftly along in the midst of the Black Caps that surrounded them.

They were not taken to the cave, but straight to one of the hidden stills, a little hut that was built against what seemed to be a wall of solid rock, a great bluff rising against the face of the mountain. Thick trees concealed the little hut down in the hollow.

Into this hut the boys were marched.

Some crude candles were lighted, and they saw around them the outfit for making moonshine whiskey.

"Thar!" cried Miller, triumphantly; "you-uns will never go out o' this place. Ther revernues spotted this still ter-day, but it won't be har ter-morrer."

He made a signal, and the boys were thrown to the floor, where they were held helpless, while their feet were bound.

When this job was finished Miller added:

"No, ther revernues won't find this still ter-morrer, fer it will go up in smoke. Moonshine is good stuff ter burn, an' we'll see how you-uns like it."

At a word a keg of whiskey was brought to the spot by two men.

"Let 'em try ther stuff," directed Miller.

"Begorra! he's goin' ter fill us up bafore he finishes us!" muttered Barney Mulloy.

But that was not the intention of the revengeful man.

A plug was knocked from a hole in the end of the keg, and then the whiskey was poured over the clothing of the boys, wetting them to the skin.

"Soak 'em!" directed Miller.

The men did not stop pouring till the clothing of the boys was thoroughly saturated.

"Thar!" said Miller, with a fiendish chuckle, "I reckon you-uns is ready fer touchin' off, an' ye'll burn like pine knots. Ther way ye'll holler will make ye heard clean ter ther top o' Black Maounting, an' ther fire will be seen; but when anybody gits har, you-uns an' this still will be ashes."

He knelt beside Frank, lighted a match, and applied it to the boy's whiskey-soaked clothing!

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MYSTERY OF MURIEL.

Not quite! The flame almost touched Frank's clothing when the boy rolled over swiftly, thus getting out of the way for the moment.

At the same instant the blast of a bugle was heard at the very front of the hut, and the door fell with a crash, while men poured in by the opening.

"Ther revernues!" shouted Wade Miller.

"No, not ther revernues!" rang out a clear voice; "but Muriel!"

The boy chief of the Black Caps was there.

"An' Muriel is not erlone!" thundered another voice. "Rufe Kenyon is har!"

Out in front of Muriel leaped the escaped criminal, confronting the man who had betrayed him.

Miller staggered, his face turning pale as if struck a heavy blow, and a bitter exclamation of fury came through his clinched teeth.

"Rufe!" he grated. "Then it's fight fer life!"

"Yes, it's fight!" roared Kate Kenyon's brother, as a long-bladed knife glittered in his hand, and he thrust back the sleeve of his shirt till his arm was bared above the elbow. "I swore ter finish yer, Miller; but I'll give ye a squar' show! Draw yer knife, an' may ther best man win!"

With the snarl that might have come from the throat of a savage beast, Miller snatched out a revolver instead of drawing a knife.

"I'll not fight ye!" he screamed; "but I'll shoot ye plumb through ther heart!"

He fired, and Rufe Kenyon ducked at the same time.

There was a scream of pain, and Muriel flung up both hands, dropping into the arms of the man behind.

Rufe Kenyon had dodged the bullet, but the boy chief of the Black Caps had suffered in his stead.

Miller seemed dazed by the result of his shot. The revolver fell from his hand, and he staggered forward, groaning:

"Kate!—I've killed her!"

Rufe Kenyon forgot his foe, dropping on one knee beside the prostrate figure of Muriel, and swiftly removing the mask.

The face of Kate Kenyon was revealed!

"Sister!" panted her brother, "be ye dead? Has that rascal killed ye?"

Her eyes opened, and she faintly said:

"Not dead yit, Rufe."

Then the brother shouted:

"Ketch Wade Miller! Don't let ther critter escape!"

It seemed that every man in the hut leaped to obey.

Miller struggled like a tiger, but he was overpowered and dragged out of the hut, while Rufe still knelt and examined his sister's wound, which was in her shoulder.

Frank and Barney were freed, and they hastened to render such assistance as they could in dressing the wound and stanching the flow of blood.

"You-uns don't think that'll be fatal, do yer?" asked Rufe, with breathless anxiety.

"There is no reason why it should," assured Frank. "She must be taken home as soon as possible, and a doctor called. I think she will come through all right, for all of Miller's bullet."

The men were trooping back into the hut.

"Miller!" roared Rufe, leaping to his feet. "Whar's ther critter?"

"He is out har under a tree," answered one of the men, quietly.

"Who's watchin' him ter see that he don't git erway?" asked Rufe.

"Nobody's watchin'."

"Nobody? Why, ther p'izen dog will run fer it!"

"I don't think he'll run fur. We've tied him."

"How?"

"Wal, ter make sure he wouldn't run, we hitched a rope around his neck an' tied it up ter ther limb o' ther tree. Unless ther rope stretches, he won't be able ter git his feet down onter ther ground by erbout eighteen inches."

"Then you-uns hanged him?"

"Wal, we did some."

"Too bad!" muttered Rufe, with a sad shake of his head. "I wanted ter squar' counts with ther skunk."

Kate Kenyon was taken home, and the bullet was extracted from her shoulder. The wound, although painful, did not prove at all serious, and she began to recover in a short time.

Frank and Barney lingered until it seemed certain that she would recover, and then they prepared to take their departure.

After all, Frank's suspicion had proved true, and it had been revealed that Muriel was Kate in

disguise.

Frank chaffed Barney a great deal about it, and the Irish lad took the chaffing in a good-natured manner.

Rufe Kenyon was hidden by his friends, so that his pursuers were forced to give over the search for him and depart.

One still was raided, but not one of the moonshiners was captured, as they had received ample warning of their danger.

On the evening before Frank and Barney were to depart in the morning, the boys carried Kate out to the door in an easy-chair, and they sat down near her.

Mrs. Kenyon sat on the steps and smoked her black pipe, looking as stolid and indifferent as ever.

"Kate," said Frank, "when did you have your hair cut short? Where is that profusion of beautiful hair you wore when we first saw you?"

"That?" she smiled. "Why, my har war cut more'n a year ago. I had it made inter a 'switch,' and I wore it so nobody'd know I had it cut."

"You did that in order that you might wear the black wig when you personated Muriel?"

"Yes."

"You could do that easily over your short hair."

"Yes."

"Well, you played the part well, and you made a dashing boy. But how about the Muriel who appeared while you were in the mill with us?"

She laughed a bit.

"You-uns war so sharp that I judged I'd make yer think ye didn't know so much ez you thought, an' I fixed it up ter have another person show up in my place."

"I see. But who was this other person?"

"Dummy. He is no bigger than I, an' he is a good mimic. He rode jes' like me."

"Begorra! he did thot!" nodded Barney. "It's mesilf thot wur chated, an' thot's not aisy."

"You are a shrewd little girl," declared Frank; "and you are dead lucky to escape with your life after getting Miller's bullet. But Miller won't trouble you more."

Mrs. Kenyon rose and went into the hut, while Barney lazily strolled down to the creek, leaving Frank and Kate alone.

Half an hour later, as he was coming back, the Irish lad heard Kate saying:

"I know I'm igerent, an' I'm not fitten fer any educated man. Still, you an' I is friends, Frank, an' friends we'll allus be."

"Friends we will always be," said Frank, softly.

After this little more was said.

It was not long before our friends left the locality, this time bound for Oklahoma, Utah and California. What Frank's adventures were in those places will be told in another volume, entitled, "Frank Merriwell's Bravery."

"We are well out of that," said Frank, as they journeyed away. "Am I not right, Barney?"

"Sure, Frankie, sure!" was Barney's answer. "To tell the whole thruth, me b'y, ye're nivver wrong, nivver!"

And Barney was right, eh, reader?

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK MERRIWELL DOWN SOUTH ***

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