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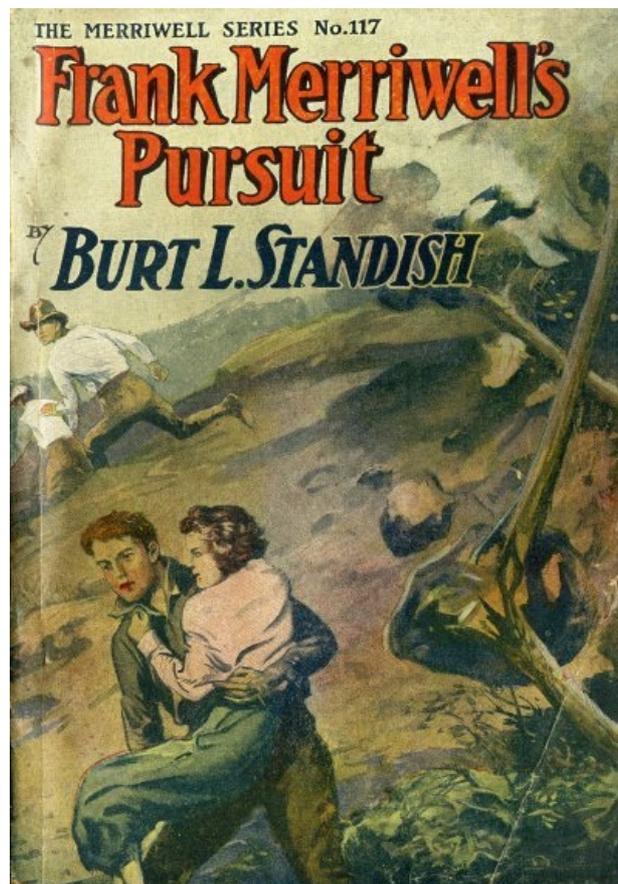
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK MERRIWELL'S PURSUIT; OR, HOW
TO WIN ***

THE MERRIWELL SERIES No. 117

Frank Merriwell's Pursuit

By

Burt L. Standish



Frank Merriwell's Pursuit

OR,

HOW TO WIN

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of the famous MERRIWELL STORIES.



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Frank Merriwell's Pursuit

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FRANK MERRIWELL'S PURSUIT.

CHAPTER I.

THE OATH OF DEL NORTE.

Rain had ceased to fall, but the night was intensely dark, with a raw, cold wind that penetrated to one's very bones.

Shortly after nightfall three men crossed the east branch of the Ausable River and entered the little settlement of Keene.

Of the three only one was mounted, and he sat swaying in the saddle, seeming to retain his position with great difficulty.

The two men on foot walked on either side of the horse, helping to support the mounted man. At intervals they encouraged him with words.

A few lights gleamed from the windows of Keene. Before a cottage door the trio halted, and one of the men on foot knocked on the door.

A few moments later a man appeared with a lighted lamp in his right hand, shading his eyes with his left as he peered out into the darkness.

"Who are you?" he gruffly asked, "and what do you want?"

"We want a surgeon or a doctor as soon as we can find one," answered the man at the door. "One of our party has been wounded by accident, and we wish to have his wound dressed."

"Another city sportsman shot for a deer, eh?" said the man in the doorway, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "It's the same old story."

"Yes, the same old story," acknowledged the man at the door. "He may die from the wound if we do not find a doctor very soon."

"There's no doctor nearer than Elizabethtown."

"Is there none in this place?"

"No."

"How far is Elizabethtown?"

"Twenty-five miles."

"How is the road?"

"It might be worse—or it might be better. You can't follow it to-night."

"We must. This is a case of life or death. See here, my friend, if you will help us out we will make it worth your while. We will pay you well. Have you any whisky in the house?"

"Mebbe so."

"It's worth five dollars a quart to us, and we will take a quart or more."

"I reckon I can find a quart for you," was the instant answer.

"If you will secure two horses and a guide to take us over the road to Elizabethtown to-night we will pay you a hundred dollars."

This offer interested the man with the lamp.

"Bring your friend in here," he said, "and I will see what I can do for you. Perhaps I can get the horses, and if I can——"

"Do you know the road?"

"I have been over it enough to know it, but it will be no easy traveling to-night. Better take my advice and stay here until morning."

The man outside, however, would not listen to this, but insisted that the journey to Elizabethtown must be made that night. He returned to his companions, and the mounted man was assisted to descend from the saddle. One of them held his arm while he walked into the house, and the other took care of the horse.

The lamp showed that the injured one had bloody bandages wrapped about his head. He was pale and haggard, and there was an expression of anxiety in his dark eyes. At times he pulled nervously at his small, dark mustache.

"Bring that whisky at once," said the wounded man's companion, as he assisted the other to a chair. "He needs a nip of it, and needs it bad."

The whisky was brought, and the injured man drank from the bottle. As he lifted it to his lips, he murmured:

"May the fiends take the dog who fired that bullet! May he burn forever in the fires below!"

The liquor seemed to revive him somewhat, and he straightened up a little, joining his companion in urging the man who had procured the whisky to secure horses and guide them, over the road to Elizabethtown.

"We have money enough," he said, fumbling weakly in his pockets and producing a roll of bills. "We will pay you every cent agreed upon. Why don't you hasten? Do you wish to see me die here in your wretched hut?"

The man addressed promised to lose no time, and soon hurried out into the night. He was not gone more than thirty minutes. Those waiting his return heard hoofbeats, and the light shining from the open door of the cabin fell on three horses as they stepped outside.

"It's fifty in advance and fifty when we reach Elizabethtown," he said, as he sprang off. "I will not start till the first fifty is paid."

"Pay him the whole of it," said the wounded man, "and shoot him full of lead if he fails to keep his part of the bargain."

Stimulated by the whisky, this man had revived wonderfully, and soon the four rode out of Keene on the road that followed the river southward.

Through the long hours of that black night the guide led them on their journey. The road was indeed a wretched one, winding through deep forests, over rocky hills and traversing gloomy valleys. As the night advanced it grew colder until their teeth chattered and their blood seemed stagnating in their veins. Many times they paused to give the wounded one a drink from the bottle. Often this man was heard cursing in Spanish and declaring that the distance was nearer a hundred miles than twenty-five.

Morning was at hand when, exhausted and wretched, they entered Elizabethtown. Soon they were clamoring at the door of a physician, into whose home the wounded man was assisted as soon as the door was opened.

"Examine my head at once, doctor," he faintly urged, as he sat back in a big armchair. "Find out where that infernal bullet is. Tell me if it's somewhere inside my skull, and if I have a chance of recovery."

In a short time the bandages were removed and the doctor began his examination.

"Well! well!" he exclaimed, as he saw where the bullet had entered. "How long ago did this happen? Yesterday afternoon? Forty miles from here? And you came all this distance? Well, you have sand! At first glance one would suppose the ball had gone straight through your head. It struck the frontal bone and was deflected, following over the coronal suture, and here it is lodged in your scalp at the back of your head. I will have it out in a moment."

He worked swiftly, clipping away the hair with a pair of scissors, and then with a lance he made an incision and straightened up a moment later, having a flattened piece of lead in his hand.

"My friend," he said, "you have grit, and I don't think you'll be laid up very long with that wound. You're not at all seriously injured. It must have been fired from some one below you. Was he shooting at a deer?"

"Yes, señor," was the answer.

"Very strange," said the physician. "This is a thirty-two-calibre bullet, and it's not like the kind used to shoot deer. Most remarkable."

He hastened to cleanse and dress the wound, again bandaging the man's head.

"You are certain, señor, that this injury is not serious?" questioned the wounded man, when everything had been done.

"I see no reason why it should be," was the answer. "It is not liable to give serious trouble to a man of your stamina, endurance, and nerve."

The doctor's bill was paid, and then they sought a hotel, where they found accommodations, and the wounded one was put into bed. Ere getting into bed he shook hands with his two companions and said:

"It's not easy, señors, to kill one in whose veins runs the blood of old Guerrero. They thought me dead, but the dog that fired the shot shall pay the penalty of his treachery, and I swear I will yet crush Frank Merriwell as the panther crushes the doe. That's the oath of Porfias del Norte!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TERROR OF O'TOOLE.

Watson Scott, familiarly known as Old Gripper, was a man of great hardihood and endurance, and, therefore, for all of his recent experience with Frank Merriwell's enemies, for all that he had been imprisoned by his captors in a natural well and had stood for hours in water up to his hips, he rapidly recovered after arriving once more at the cottage of his friend and business associate, Warren Hatch, on Lake Placid.

But Old Gripper had been aroused, and he was determined to make it hot for his recent captors, who, led by Porfias del Norte, had gone to desperate lengths to obtain valuable papers which were the basis of a business combination that threatened the interests of Del Norte and his associates.

"Unless they move on the jump I'll have the bunch of them nipped before long," Old Gripper declared.

To his vexation he found it was impossible to properly swear out a warrant for the arrest of Del Norte's companions without making the journey to Saranac Lake.

"I'll do that the first thing in the morning," he said.

In the morning, however, he found himself stiff and lame, and he was induced to delay until noon.

During the forenoon he decided to return without further delay to New York. Having settled on this, he sent a message to Saranac Lake, stating his charges against Porfias del Norte's band of desperadoes, and asking that the warrant be drawn up and brought to him at the station as he was passing through. He also gave instructions that officers should be on hand to immediately take up the work of running the gang down.

Before noon Belmont Bland, Old Gripper's private secretary, was apparently taken ill, and when the time came for Scott to depart Bland seemed unable to travel. He asserted that it was one of his usual nervous attacks, and declared he would be all right by the next day. Therefore it was arranged that he should remain at Lake Placid.

Frank Merriwell had given in to the urging of Warren Hatch, who almost begged him to stay over another day and fish again in the morning.

"It's not often I strike a fisherman after my own heart," said Hatch. "When I do I don't like to let him slip through my fingers. Stay over until to-morrow at least, Merriwell. There is no reason why you should tear away in such a hurry."

"You can stay, Merriwell," declared Scott. "We have settled the railroad deal right here. Bragg and I will get things to moving in the city. Leave that to us."

"I'm very willing to leave it to you," laughed Frank. "I'll stay one more day, Mr. Hatch."

"If we can have another good morning to fish—ah, we won't do a thing!" chuckled Hatch, ending with a cough.

"You ought to stay up here for the next month," declared Old Gripper. "That cough of yours—"

"Oh, it's nothing! I've had it for a year, and it's not serious in any way—only annoying."

At Saranac Lake Scott saw that the warrant for Del Norte was placed in the proper hands and the machinery of the law set in motion.

When Frank and Warren Hatch returned to the cottage of the latter they were surprised to find the place locked, the shutters closed, and an air of desertion hanging over everything.

But it was not deserted.

While Hatch was fumbling on the door they heard a stir within and a voice shouted:

"Be afther getting away from there, ye divvils, ur Oi'll blow yez full av lead! It's armed Oi am to th' tathe!"

It was the voice of Pat O'Toole, an Irishman who had been one of Del Norte's gang, but out of gratitude, had saved Frank's life and had been actively concerned in the rescue of Old Gripper.

"O'Toole!" cried Frank; "why the dickens have you locked yourself up this way?"

"Is it you, Misther Merriwell?" cried O'Toole, joyously. "It's a great relafe to hear your foine, musical voice wance more! Wait a minute unthil Oi open th' dure."

The door was unlocked and thrown open. O'Toole stood with a rifle in his hands, looking pale and agitated. Around his waist was a belt holding a pair, of pistols and a knife.

"What's the matter, man?" asked Hatch. "You look like a walking arsenal?"

"It's me loife Oi'm ready to defend to th' larrust gasp," declared the Irishman.

"Your life? Why, what—"

"Oi'm in danger of bein' murdered."

"In danger?"

"Ivery minute av me ixistence."

"What makes you think that?"

"Oi don't think it; Oi know it. Afther ye wint away to th' shtation Oi sat on th' verandy shmokin' me poipe an' thinkin'. The longer Oi thought th' more froightened Oi became. It wur Porrfeeus dil Noort thot paid me well to assist him in a litttle schame to trap a certain young gintleman named Frank Merriwell. Oi took his money and promised to rinder me best assistance. Oi know this parrut av th' counthry well, an' so Oi was valuable to Dil Noort. Oi towld him about th' owld hut in th' valley an' th' natural well. Oi towld him a man dhropped inther thot well moight shtay there an' rot widout ivver bein' found. That wur pwhere he meant to dispose av you, Misther Merriwell. Afther that it was yersilf thot saved me loife at Sarrynack Lake. Thin Oi says, says Oi, 'O'Toole, ye miserable divvil, av ye don't git aven wid thot foine young gint, ye ought to be hanged fer a shnake.' Oi knew ye would be thrapped thot same noight, Misther Merriwell, an' Oi rode loike th' ould bhoy to cut yez off an' get me finger in the poie. You remimber pwhat happened."

"I remember that you aided me to escape from the hands of Del Norte and his paid desperadoes," nodded Frank.

"An' got mesilf disloiked fer it. Oi knew Dil Noort would be ready to cut me throat on soight. Oi thought th' safest thing wur to hilp capture Dil Noort, an' thot's pwhat took me here, pwhere Oi arrived just in toime to hilp in the search fer Misther Shcott."

"And help us you certainly did," nodded Merry. "Aided by you, we lost no time in finding the valley and the well in which Mr. Scott was imprisoned."

"But it's th' divvil's own doin's there was before thot," said O'Toole. "Oi wur in a bad shcrape whin Oi run inther th' hands av Bantry Hagan an' he marruched me to thot old hut, where Oi was bound hand an' foot. Nivver a bit did Oi drame th' drunk aslape on th' flure av th' hut an' shnorin' away wur yersilf, Misther Merriwell. Aven whin Oi lay chlose to yez an' ye began to untoie me bonds Oi couldn't suspect it was yersilf. Whin Dil Noort showed up Oi knew it meant throuble, an' sure it wur a relafe to feel in me hand th' pistol ye put there. Th' divvil bent over me wid a knoife in his hands, an' Oi saw murther in his oies. Thin Oi didn't wait, but Oi shot him through th' head."

"But I don't understand what all this has to do with the fear you profess to feel," said Hatch. "I didn't fancy you were a coward, O'Toole."

"No more Oi am; but Porrfeeus dil Noort is a moighty dangerous mon, and he——"

"Is dead. You're not afraid of dead men?"

"It's dead Oi saw him before me," nodded the Irishman; "but Oi wish Oi had seen him buried, so Oi do. Whin we returned afther pulling Misther Shcott out av th' well Dil Noort's body wur gone."

"His companions carried it away," said Merry.

"Mebbe thot's roight," said O'Toole; "but afther ye left me here, wid Joe gone an' mesilf all alone, it's nervous Oi became. Oi took to thinkin' it all over, an' in th' air Oi hearrud a voice whisper, 'O'Toole, yure goose is cooked, fer, dead ur aloive. Porrfeeus dil Noort will get aven wid ye!' It made me have cowld chills down me back, an' out in th' grove yonder Oi saw shadows movin' an' crapin'. Oi began to ixpect a bullet through me body, an' afther a whoile Oi joomped up an' run inther th' cabin, jist shakin' loike Oi had a chill an' me tathe knockin' togither. Oi fashtened th' dures an' closed th' shutters av ivery windy. Thin Oi armed mesilf, an' nivver in all me loife did Oi hear swater music than whin ye shpoke outside, Misther Merriwell."

Merriwell laughed.

"I declare, O'Toole, I'd never expect a man of your courage and wit to be frightened in such a manner. Del Norte is dead, and it's almost certain his companions have taken to their legs to get away as fast and as far as possible. Mr. Scott will have officers searching high and low for them. They are fugitives from justice. Even though they were not under the ban of the law, with Del Norte gone, there is not one chance in a hundred that any of them would ever lift a hand to annoy or molest you or me. The fall of their leader put an end to their work, and they will scatter and keep under cover until the storm blows over."

"That's right, O'Toole," declared Warren Hatch. "You rendered Mr. Merriwell and the rest of us a great service when you fired the shot that brought Del Norte down. They won't dare have you arrested for that shooting, as no one would venture to appear against you. If they escape from the officers, I expect we'll hear in a few days how Del Norte's body was carried out of the mountains and expressed to friends somewhere."

"They may not dare do that," said Frank. "They may bury him here in the mountains, rather than take any chances of being captured themselves. At any rate, it's foolish for you to worry, O'Toole. Of course it's not a pleasant thing to think you have shot a man, but you did it in self-defense, and were justified."

"It's roight ye are on thot point, me bhoy; but it's a long toime before Oi'll rist aisy from thinkin' av it an' belavin' me own loife in danger. Oi'll be afeared av me own shadder in th' darruk."

Porrfeeus dil Noort wur th' firrust man Oi ivver saw that made me fale as if bullets wouldn't kill him an' kape him dead. Wur he to roize before me this minute nivver a bit surprisid would Oi be."

Although Merry jollied the Irishman, it was no easy matter to relieve O'Toole's nervousness.

Later Belmont Bland appeared at the cottage, having sought the advice of a physician who was spending an outing at the little settlement on the southern shore.

"I'm feeling better already," said Bland. "The doctor gave me some medicine to quiet my nerves. I'll be all right to leave for the city to-morrow, I hope, although I feel that I need several days of rest."

Frank wondered why Bland had lingered at the lake.

CHAPTER III.

NEW ARRIVALS AT THE LAKE.

Late that afternoon Warren Hatch and Frank went out to fish and remained until after nightfall.

Lights were gleaming from the cottage windows as they rowed slowly back.

Away at the southern end of the lake were other lights, indicating the location of the little settlement of cottagers. Lake Placid was a popular resort at this season of the year.

Joe, the man of all work, came down to the shore and took care of the boat.

"Take care of the fish, Joe," called Hatch, as he hastened after Merry, who was striding toward the cottage.

The shades were drawn and the place seemed silent enough until Frank opened the door and stepped inside. Then he was surprised and startled to find himself seized by four pairs of hands, which hustled him about amid bursts of laughter and shouts of welcome.

"Hold on! hold on!" he gasped, in the greatest astonishment, for he recognized his four assailants as his friends, Bart Hodge, Bruce Browning, Inza Burrage, and Elsie Bellwood. "Where in the world did you all drop from?"

"We have run you down at last," said Hodge; "but you gave us a merry old chase."

"It's been the greatest game of hide and seek I ever played," grunted Browning, ceasing from his attack on Frank and dropping lazily on a chair, which creaked beneath his weight. "Just when we would think we were going to put our hands on you sure you would disappear like a wizard."

"Aren't you glad to see us?" demanded Inza.

"If you're not, we'll go right away," said Elsie.

"Glad!" cried Frank. "I'm speechless with delight. But I don't understand it yet."

Then they explained how they had followed him to Boston and from that city to New York, and how in the latter place, after no end of trouble and detective work, they learned that he was off for Lake Placid, in the Adirondacks. Arriving at Newman late that afternoon, they had driven over to the cottage of Mr. Hatch, which they reached while Frank and his host were still out fishing.

"Here is Mrs. Medford, Frank," said Inza, calling his attention to a smiling, middle-aged lady who sat near the open fireplace.

Mrs. Medford was a relative of Inza's who often accompanied her as companion and chaperon.

"Mrs. Medford," said Merry, hastening to clasp the smiling woman's hand, "I am delighted to see you again. I'm quite overcome with surprise and pleasure. It's evident I am, for I have forgotten Mr. Hatch."

No wonder Mr. Hatch had been overlooked, for he had stepped back and remained quiet during all the chatter and laughter of the meeting between Frank and his friends.

"I am greatly pleased to meet your friends, Mr. Merriwell," he declared, as Frank introduced one after another. "If the accommodations at my poor cottage——"

"Oh, we wouldn't think of putting you to the slightest inconvenience!" declared Inza. "We can find accommodations in Newman, Mr. Hatch, and we wouldn't think of——"

"Unless it is too uncomfortable here," Hatch hastened to say, "I shall consider it a favor to entertain you as the friends of the cleverest fisherman and finest young man it has been my good fortune to meet in twenty years. Anything and everything here is yours as long as you choose to remain, and you can't remain too long for me."

That was quite enough, for they saw he was in earnest. He could thaw out and be genial and

pleasant when he chose, and this was an occasion when he had no difficulty in thawing. He called Joe and gave orders about supper, and soon the delightful odor of cooking fish came faintly to their nostrils.

While supper was being prepared Frank related the story of the many adventures which had befallen him since he hastily left Maine in pursuit of the Mexican who had stolen one of his valuable papers.

As she listened Inza flushed and paled by turns. She was elated by his success, and she found it difficult to check a tremor as she realized how many times he had been in deadly danger.

"Where is O'Toole?" cried Hodge, as Frank finished. "I want to congratulate him on his job in ending the career of that snake, Del Norte."

O'Toole was aiding Joe in the cook house, and he was finally induced, under protest, to appear in the cottage. He stood before Frank's friends, grinning bashfully and bowing awkwardly.

"O'Toole," said Bart, shaking the Irishman's hand, "you never did a better bit of work in all your life than when you shot Porfias del Norte."

"It's not so sure Oi am av that," declared the man. "It's nivver a bit will Oi shlape till Oi know fer sure th' baste is dead an' burried six fate under ground."

"Why, Frank said you shot him through the head."

"Oi did thot, but whin we returned to th' hut pwhere he was it's up an' gone he had."

"Frank says the body was carried off by his friends."

"Mebbe it wur, Oi dunno; but whoy th' ould scratch they wur afther takin' all thot throuble an' risk is pwhat bates me. Somehow Oi'm thinkin' th' mon up an' walked away all by hissilf, an' it's cowl'd chills Oi git from thinkin' he may be lookin' fer me to sittle our account."

"You'll get over that feeling after a while," said Hodge. "Frank knows when a man is dead, and you heard him pronounce Del Norte dead."

In Browning's ear Frank whispered:

"I confess I'd feel better satisfied if I had seen him buried; but I don't intend to tell O'Toole that."

In due time supper was cooked and served in the plain but comfortable dining room. The death of Del Norte was forgotten, and it was a jolly crowd that gathered about the large table.

"Hold me!" cried Browning, as he drank in the odor of baked potatoes, cooked fish and steaming coffee. "If you don't look out I'll wade in here and create a famine. I feel as if I might eat everything on this table without half trying."

"There is plenty of everything," said Warren Hatch. "Joe tells me there is more fish. Here he comes with some of his hot biscuits right out of the oven."

Joe appeared with a heaping plate of biscuits, and soon all were enjoying the meal.

Inza was unusually vivacious, her cheeks being flushed and her dark eyes sparkling. The pleasure of being with Frank again was enough to put her at her best, and indeed she was a most beautiful girl.

Elsie was quieter, but there was no mistaking the expression of deep satisfaction which hovered on her sweet face. The fact that Inza was happy was enough to give her pleasure.

In the midst of the meal there came a rapping at the door. Mr. Hatch answered the summons and was gone some time. When he returned he explained that there was to be a masquerade dance at a pavilion used for dances and picnics down at the cottage village, and, having learned of the presence of guests at his cottage, invitations had been extended to them all.

"Perfectly jolly!" cried Inza. "But we have no costumes."

"Never mind that," said Mr. Hatch. "Without doubt there will be others in the same predicament. You can easily manufacture some masks, and, being strangers here, no one outside your own party will recognize you. I'm sorry I can't assist you in the matter of dress, but I can help the male members of the party. I have a full Indian rig and a cowboy outfit, which will do for two. The third can dress in old clothes, like a hunter or guide. The whole thing can be arranged somehow if you care to go. Where there's a will there's a way, you know."

"Oh, say," grunted Browning, "count me out. I'm no dancer. Besides that, I'm tired."

"The same old complaint," laughed Frank. "What do you think about it, Elsie?"

"If Inza wishes to go, I'm ready," answered Elsie. "We might have a good time."

Hodge expressed a willingness to go along, and then Frank cried:

"It's a go, my children! Let's enter into this thing in earnest and have a high old time. Bruce, you ought to be ashamed of your laziness."

"Don't begin that old song!" said the big fellow. "There's not enough laziness in this world."

Everybody howls about strenuousness and hustle, and people wear themselves out and die before they should. I'm setting a good example, and I'll continue to set."

"Or sit," nodded Merry. "All right, Lazybones, stay here by your lonesome and content yourself thinking what a fine time we're having."

"Thanks," grunted Bruce.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO GHOSTS.

The colony on the south shore of Lake Placid was about to break up. Cold weather was setting in. Already many of those who had spent much of the summer there were gone. Others were going. Soon that region would be left entirely to the hunters and the fishermen.

Before returning to the city the cottagers had planned a last grand time in the form of a masquerade dance. They did not call it a "ball." There was to be nothing formal about it.

Thus it happened that the party at Warren Hatch's cottage received an invitation.

Mrs. Medford was tired; she would not attend the dance; but she offered to assist the girls in getting up their costumes.

"Costumes!" cried Inza. "Where will we find them? We'll have to go without special preparation in that line. Frank and Bart are the lucky ones."

"Come with me," smiled Mrs. Medford, after consulting in a low tone with Mr. Hatch, who smiled and nodded. "Perhaps we can find something."

The girls followed her to the upper part of the cottage, leaving Frank and Bart to make up below. Merry gave Bart his choice of the two rigs, and Hodge took the Indian outfit, leaving the cowboy costume for Frank.

At intervals the sound of laughter came from above, indicating that the girls were making progress.

Mrs. Medford came down first and announced that the girls would follow in two or three minutes.

"They are putting on the finishing touches," she said.

She professed to be alarmed by the fierce appearance of Merriwell, who swaggered toward her in "chaps," woolen shirt, and wide-brimmed hat, a loose belt about his waist, with a pistol peeping from the holster, while his face was hidden by a mask in keeping with the rest of his outfit.

"It's a whole lot tired we're getting of waiting for them yere gals, madam," said Frank. "I opine they'd better hurry some, for we'll have to hike right lively if we shake a hoof at this dance to-night."

Then Hodge danced forward in his Indian rig, flourishing a tomahawk and uttering a war whoop.

"Heap right," he cried. "White woman bring gals."

"Mercy!" gasped Mrs. Medford, retreating toward the table and suddenly turning the lamp very low.

Then came a rustling sound on the stairs, followed by a low moaning, and into view glided two ghostly figures in flowing robes of white. These figures paused in a corner of the room where the shadows were deepest, and the surprised witnesses seemed to see through their white draperies the gleaming outlines of the upper portions of two skeletons. The ribs, the waving, bony arms, and the horrible, shining skulls were plainly beheld. After a moment the two apparitions advanced.

"Heap spook!" cried Hodge, while Frank pretended to be greatly alarmed.

Browning sat bolt upright, uttering a grunt of surprise.

As the forms came forward into the dim light the skeleton figures faded and disappeared.

"I reckon these are the real things, Injun," said Frank.

"Much so," nodded Bart.

Then the girls broke into laughter and Mrs. Medford turned up the lamp.

With the aid of two sheets, a needle and thread and a few pins, Mrs. Medford had made some very ghostly garments for the girls, fitting them with a skill which partly revealed and partly concealed the graceful outlines of the wearers. Eyelets had been cut, and the general effect was indeed striking.

"But the skeletons we saw?" questioned Frank.

"A little phosphorus produced them," explained Mrs. Medford. "I drew the skeleton outlines on the sheets with phosphorus. Of course they'll be visible only in the dark."

"Mrs. Medford, you're a wonder!" declared Hodge. "Now we're all right. There'll be ghosts abroad in the Adirondacks to-night."

After a general inspection of their costumes, the party prepared to start.

"Almost wish I had decided to go," confessed Browning. "But I'll stay here and take care of Mrs. Medford."

"If you wish to go, I can take care of her," assured Warren Hatch.

"It's too late now," said Bruce quickly. "Besides that, it's quite a walk over there, and I'd get tired of dancing in short order. I'll stay here and rest."

They paused a moment on the veranda. The night was very still, and the moon was just rising above the treetops, silvering the mirror-like surface of the lake.

From far away on the southern shore came the sound of music and they could see the gleaming lights.

"Take care of those girls, boys," called Mrs. Medford. "If anything happens to them I'll never forgive myself for letting them out of my sight."

"Don't worry," advised Frank. "You may rest assured that they are quite safe in our care. We'll guard them with our lives, but there is no possibility of danger to-night."

Little he knew what would happen before the night passed.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOLVES.

The pavilion was brilliantly lighted. Hundreds of Chinese lanterns were suspended from the beams and cross timbers. The musicians were hidden by an arbor of green at one end of the floor. The floor itself swarmed with dancers wearing all sorts of grotesque and beautiful costumes.

Amid the whirling throng two ghosts were waltzing, the partner of one being a cowboy, while the right arm of a redskin encircled the waist of the other.

The waltzing of these couples was the poetry of grace and motion. They seemed to glide over the floor without effort of any sort. The ease of their movements was admired by many.

"Isn't it delightful, Frank?" enthusiastically whispered one of the ghosts; and her cowboy partner answered:

"It's all the more delightful being unexpected and unplanned, Inza. I feel to-night as if I hadn't a care in the world."

"Why have you any great cares to worry you now?" she asked. "All your great business projects are coming out right, and the man who could make you trouble has paid the penalty of his villainy. He'll never interfere with you again."

"That's right. With him out of the way, his railroad plan and mining and development company will never mature."

"I see no reason why you should hurry back to Mexico now. Can't you remain in the East longer?"

"I'll know better about that after consulting with Watson Scott. If possible to linger, I'll be in no hurry to go."

They swept past a solitary man who stood watching the dancers. His mask was the head of a wolf. Through the twin holes of the mask his eyes gleamed strangely as they followed Merry and Inza.

Another wolf approached and touched the first on the shoulder.

"Have you found him yet?"

"Look!" exclaimed the first. "See the girl in flowing white?"

"With the Indian?"

"No; with the cowboy."

"I have noticed both."

"Well, it is the cowboy I want you to watch. Listen near him. Hear him speak. I think it is our man. If so—well, to-night I strike the blow that makes me the master!"

"Your head——"

"Never mind. I have taken pains to hide well anything that might betray me. The dead seldom rise, and I am dead, you know."

"It's the greatest wonder in the world that you are not."

The music stopped. Frank escorted Inza to one of the great, open windows, through which came a grateful breath of the cool, still night. Through the trees outside they could see the lake, with the silver moonlight shimmering on its bosom.

"It's a beautiful spot here," said the girl. "See how peaceful everything is out there, Frank."

After a few moments they strolled out together beneath the trees, where the shadows were heavy. Arm in arm, they walked up and down, pausing at intervals to listen to the music which came from the pavilion, where the dancers were again whirling over the polished floor.

Suddenly they came face to face with a silent figure beneath the trees. This figure started back, uttering a low exclamation, turned suddenly, and almost fled round a corner of the building.

Frank laughed.

"You gave him a start, Inza. The phosphorus skeleton shows plainly here, you know."

"Somehow I didn't fancy that was why he fled so quickly," she said.

"What other reason could there have been?"

"I don't know, but there seemed something familiar in his movements. It was fancy, I suppose."

"It must have been. We know no one here, save Hodge and Elsie."

"Let's go in. Somehow a feeling of apprehension is on me. I'm not often nervous, you know; but something is the matter with my nerves now."

He laughed at her, but they returned to the floor and danced out the latter part of the two-step.

When this dance was over Merry left Inza, departing to find and bring her a glass of water.

Barely was he gone when she was surprised to hear a harsh voice at her elbow saying:

"I'll not believe your ghostly garments hide nothing save the hideous skeleton I saw a few moments ago. I must confess you gave me a shock."

One of the wolves had paused close at hand.

Knowing the dance was informal, as masquerade affairs must be, she was not surprised to be addressed in this manner.

"Then it was you who fled before me?" she laughed. "It seems that even a wolf may be frightened by a ghost."

"Quite true, fair wraith; but you are not the only ghost at this dance to-night."

"I have a sister ghost with me."

"It was not your sister I spoke of," growled the wolf. "There is still a third ghost present."

"Indeed? I have not seen——"

"I think you will later. For all of your awesome aspect I would entreat you to favor me with one dance were it not that something I cannot explain denies me the pleasure of dancing to-night."

"Why do you growl in that manner? Are you trying to disguise your voice? It is not necessary, for I know only my own friends at this dance."

"It is natural for wolves to growl," he retorted. "Although you know few here, it is possible you are known. I think I can describe you."

"I doubt it."

"You are dark, with black hair and eyes."

"Wonderful guessing."

"Your lips are like the reddest rose, and your teeth are so many pearls."

"Flattering, at least."

"Of your sex you are the fairest ever beheld by the eyes of wolf."

"You forget you have not seen me."

"If that is true, I'll convince you that the sagacity of some wolves passes human understanding. Your name is—Inza!"

She fell back in amazement, betraying her surprise by the movement.

From behind the wolf mask came a low, growling chuckle.

"It is enough!" he declared. "To deny it now would be useless. The cowboy returns, and cowboys do not like wolves, so I will slink away."

Filled with amazement, Inza watched him as he walked swiftly away. Frank came up and she clutched his arm, pointing at the retreating figure and almost panting:

"Who is that man?"

"I don't know, Inza. Has he bothered or insulted you? If so, I will——"

"Frank, he knows me!"

"Impossible!"

"He spoke my name! He called me Inza. His words were strange and somewhat faltering. He spoke with a growl that I am certain he assumed to disguise his voice. There is something familiar about him—something familiar in his movements and his walk. Frank, I know him! Is there no way to find out who he is?"

Merry was aroused.

"Drink, Inza," he said, "and I'll find a way to discover who he is. Perhaps Warren Hatch has put up a joke on us. If so, we must turn the joke."

Bart and Elsie came up. Frank left Inza with them as he returned with the empty glass.

Leaving the glass, he set out to find the wolf. As he was passing one of the wide windows he saw two wolves standing outside. Immediately he stepped through the window and joined them.

"Howdy, pards," he said, with an assumption of the cowboy manner. "I opine one of you two was chinning with my friend, the ghost, a few moments ago. Now, even a wolf won't take advantage of a lady, and so, as you happened to call her name, I reckon it's up to you in natural politeness to give her yours in return."

They appeared somewhat startled, but one of them said:

"You're mistaken, sir; neither of us has spoken to a lady since arriving here to-night. We have not danced yet, and therefore have not had occasion to speak to any of the fair sex."

Frank rested his hands on his hips and eyed them searchingly.

"I have the word of the lady herself," he said. "I don't opine you're going to dispute a lady?"

"You are at liberty to opine what you like," sneered the second wolf; "and I advise you to go about your business, unless you are looking for trouble. If it's trouble you are after, you may get more than you want."

"I never hunt trouble; but I thought it possible that, out of politeness, the one who spoke to the lady would give his name."

"Get about your own business and leave us alone," advised the pugnacious chap. "If you don't you'll get your make-up ruffled."

Now, Frank had not confronted them with the idea of pressing a quarrel. His first thought had been to draw them into conversation that he might hear their voices, thinking it possible he would recognize one or both of them. There was nothing familiar about their voices, however, and now their offensive atmosphere aroused him and caused his blood to stir warmly in his body.

"Although there are two of you," he said, "I would advise you some not to try any ruffling business with me. It might work unpleasantly for you."

This angered them, and suddenly they both attacked Frank.

Instantly there was a stir within the pavilion, for men uttered exclamations, and women gave cries of alarm.

Hodge had remained with Inza and Elsie, but at the first alarm, thinking Frank might be in trouble, he left the girls and dashed across the floor. Elsie called to him, starting to follow. Suddenly she stopped, turning back to Inza, whom she had left by the open window.

Inza was gone.

"Where is she?" gasped Elsie, looking around. "I am sure——"

She paused in bewilderment, a sudden feeling of terror seizing her.

From somewhere in the grove outside the pavilion came a smothered cry of distress.

Elsie Bellwood had left Inza standing close to the huge, open window. Barely was Elsie's back turned when the heavy folds of a blanket were thrown over Inza's head and she felt herself lifted bodily and snatched through the window.

Remarkable though it was, no one within the pavilion saw this happen. The attention of all was turned toward the opposite side of the building, where the encounter was taking place between Frank and the two wolves.

At first Inza was stunned and bewildered. Her hands and arms were enfolded in the blanket, and she was unable to make anything like effective resistance. The blanket was twisted about her until she could not cast it off, and she felt herself lifted and carried away in a pair of arms that held her tightly.

Had she been of a nervous or timid nature she might have fainted at once. But she was brave and nerved and she struggled hard for her freedom, seeking to cast off the blanket which was smothering her and giving her a sensation of agony.

The man had not carried her far when she nearly succeeded in getting her head clear of the blanket. She uttered a cry that was broken and smothered, for, with an exclamation of dismay, her captor again twisted the blanket tightly about her head and neck.

It was this cry which reached the ears of Elsie, who had just missed her friend.

Inza continued to struggle, kicking and uttering muffled cries beneath the blanket; but she was helpless, and, holding her thus, the man, who wore a wolf mask, almost ran through the grove to the shore of the lake.

By the time the shore was reached the girl's struggles had become very weak, and the only sounds issuing from the smothering folds of the blanket were choking moans.

As Inza's captor approached the water he uttered a low, peculiar whistle.

It was answered by a similar whistle.

The answer served to guide the man with the wolf mask to the spot where a canoe lay floating with its prow touching the shore, guarded by a man who stood straight and silent on the bank.

"Ben!" excitedly yet softly called the man with the girl.

"Here," was the answer.

"Ready with the canoe! Back there you hear them shouting. Thank the saints the señorita no longer struggles! She has fainted."

"What got?" asked the man on the shore, who was a full-blooded Indian guide, known as Red Ben. "Big bundle."

"Never mind what I have here. I paid you to wait and be ready to take me away in a hurry, and now it is in a hurry I must go. Swing the canoe so I may put her in it."

The shouts of men and excited voices of women came to their ears from the pavilion.

"Let them bark!" muttered Inza's captor. "I'll soon be far away, and the water will leave no trail for Merriwell, the gringo, to follow. Once he trailed me, but I have taken precautions this time."

Unhesitatingly he stepped into the water beside the canoe, in the bottom of which he placed Inza, with the blanket still wrapped about her. A moment later he was seated in the canoe, which Red Ben pushed off from shore, springing in himself and seizing a paddle.

"Keep in the shadows near the shore," directed the wearer of the wolf mask. "Paddle hard, for much trouble it might make us both should we be seen."

"You steal gal?" questioned the curious Indian.

"She belongs to me," was the answer. "My enemy claims her, but she is mine. Don't talk, Ben—paddle for your life. Were we to be seen now——"

"Point out there," said the redskin. "We go by him, nobody back there see us."

"Then get past the point at your finest speed, and it is doubly well you shall be paid for this night's work."

The Indian made the canoe fly over the surface of the water. He kept close to the shore of a little cove and then swept out in the shadow of the trees along the rim of the lake, soon reaching the point.

As Ben sent the canoe shooting past that point it came near colliding with another canoe that contained a single occupant, who was smoking a pipe and paddling along leisurely.

"Look out, you lubbers!" grunted the man with the pipe. "What are you trying to do?"

It was Bruce Browning, who, after all, had found it impossible to remain at the cottage. In Joe's canoe Bruce was leisurely paddling over to the south shore, thinking he would look in on the dancers. He had not heard the approach of the other canoe and knew nothing of its presence until it shot past the point and nearly struck him.

Neither Red Ben nor his companion made any retort. The Indian swerved the canoe aside and continued to ply the paddle, flashing past Bruce.

Browning stared in surprise, for the moonlight fell full and fair on the redskin's companion, showing the wolf mask.

"One of the dancers, I judge," he mumbled. "Nice, sociable fellow! Never said a word when they came so near cutting me in two. What's he doing now?"

Bruce swung his canoe so he could watch the other without cramping his neck, for he saw that something like a struggle was taking place, the masked man seemingly holding some object helpless in the bottom of the frail craft.

"Queer doings," growled the big fellow. "I'd like to know what it means. There seems to be some sort of excitement going on yonder."

He turned from the canoe to listen to the sounds on shore.

"Guess I'll poke along and find out what all the racket is," he decided, as he resumed his lazy paddling, giving no further attention to the other canoe.

Arriving at the landing, Bruce made his way to the pavilion. Ere he reached it he was certain something of an unusual nature had taken place. Persons were searching with lights in the grove, and he encountered a party of four, who surveyed him searchingly and passed on.

He had reached the pavilion when he encountered Hodge, who was doing his best to quiet Elsie, the latter apparently being on the verge of hysterics.

"What's the matter, Bart?" asked Bruce, wonderingly. "What's happened here, anyhow?"

Hodge clutched him by the shoulder.

"Inza!" he exclaimed. "She has disappeared mysteriously."

The big fellow immediately threw off his apathy. His careless, lazy air vanished in a twinkling and he asked some questions that brought a brief but complete explanation from Bart.

"Where is Frank?" demanded Browning.

"He is with the searchers."

Bruce lost no time in looking for Merriwell, soon coming face to face with him in the grove. Frank's face was pale and stern, and there was a dangerous, desperate gleam in his eyes.

"You're wasting your time here, Merry," declared Bruce. "Hodge has just told me of the men who wore the wolf masks. There must have been three of them. While you were having that set-to with two of them the third carried Inza off."

"But where is she?" asked Frank hoarsely. "Where did he take her?"

"You won't find her on shore. Look on the lake."

"The lake?"

"Yes."

"Why——"

Immediately Browning told how he had seen one of the men wearing a wolf mask in the canoe which so nearly collided with the one he occupied.

"There was something in the bottom of that canoe. I fancied a struggle was taking place. I thought it mighty singular."

"By Heaven!" cried Frank, "if a hair of Inza's head is harmed the guilty wretch shall pay the penalty with his life!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE GRASP OF DEL NORTE.

There are two large, heavily wooded islands in Lake Placid. Into a little cove of the northern island Red Ben ran his canoe. His companion, still wearing the wolf mask, stepped out and lifted the helpless girl, bearing her along a path that led to a little opening where the moonlight fell brightly. He placed her on the ground and stood gazing down at her, his arms folded. He had removed the stifling blanket from her head and shoulders.

"By my soul she is beautiful!" he murmured, and the words were spoken in Spanish. His voice was soft and musical, quite unlike the growling hoarseness of the wolf with whom Inza had conversed at the pavilion.

A silent shadow slipped into the opening and stood near. It was the Indian.

"Much dangerous business," he said. "You tell Ben you want to square old score with Merriwell

man. Tell me be ready to take you quick away in canoe. No tell me you carry off gal."

"I did not know she would be there," explained the wolf. "When I found her there my plans I changed. It can make no difference with you. You have been paid, but I will pay you doubly if you stick by me to the end. You know every mile of these mountains and forests. You can help me get away, and by it you shall lose nothing."

The Indian shook his head.

"Much bad! much bad!" he declared. "What you do with gal?"

"I shall keep her."

"How you do it. Mebbe she no want to stay. She have many friend. They hunt you same like a real wolf."

"Then they shall find that the wolf has teeth. I expect her gringo lover will hunt. Ha! ha! ha! It is the joy of my soul to wring his heart and make it bleed! I hate him! Between him and me it is a struggle to the death, and in my body runs the blood of old Guerrero, who feared no peril and never paused to count the cost when he struck at a foe. Could I leave him dead, even as he thought me dead, my path would be clear. The prize is worth the peril, for it is a double prize, the fairest señorita and a great fortune. Listen, Ben: if by me you stay fast and I slay my enemy, five hundred dollars shall be yours. Think of that. Five hundred is as much as you can obtain as guide in a season."

"But the white man's law," said the Indian. "I know him. Once I steal a hoss. White man officer arrest me, take me to court, where white man judge say go to jail one year. I go. No want some more like that. Once I 'most kill man down at Long Lake. White man officer hunt me long time. I remember jail. No want some more. I hide. Send word no let um officer take me alive. Bimeby they no hunt me some more. 'Nother time I git drunk, burn house. Have to hide again long, long while till snow come, an' nobody look for me some more. If I help you do some bad things now, mebbe git officer after me 'gain."

"You will not be to blame for anything I do, and the money will pay you so you can afford to hide until the trouble is past. My friends will join us here, as we planned. After that we can get away into the woods. With you to guide, we can baffle all pursuit. But I pray the señorita's gringo lover seeks to follow, so that we may meet. I'll leave him for the wild beasts, with my knife in his heart!"

"But gal she hate you then."

"I'll teach her to love me. I have sworn she shall be mine, and the oath of a Del Norte is never broken. Leave everything to me. Go back and watch for our friends. They will come as soon as they can get away and reach us without being seen."

Silently the redskin turned away and disappeared into the path.

Then the wolf once more turned to the girl. He was somewhat startled to discover her eyes were wide open and fastened upon him. Quickly he bent over her, speaking softly and with an effort to reassure her.

"Fear not, señorita; you are not injured, and in my hands you are safe, for I will guard you with my life. A thousand pardons I ask if I have caused your heart to beat with alarm."

With an effort she rose on one hand, holding up the other as if to ward him off.

"Don't touch me, you monster!" she gasped. "I shall scream!"

"Spare yourself the effort, fair one," he said, "for though you were to shriek with all your strength no one could hear you. You were unconscious, and while thus I brought you here."

"Where am I?"

"Many miles from the spot where I found you, señorita."

"That voice!" she whispered, shrinking in terror. "It cannot be that you are—— I am dreaming!"

"It is no dream, sweet one. Could you see into my heart you would fear me no longer. Trust me and all will be well."

"Trust you! Trust a monster who has done what you have done! I fear you as I would fear a venomous reptile!"

"Ah! how little you understand, señorita!"

He knelt on one knee before her, holding out his open hands.

"If you would only believe in me and trust me, my beautiful gringo flower! You will learn in time to do so, for I shall teach you. Some day you shall bless your guardian angel that to-night I found you and snatched you from your boastful lover."

To his surprise, she leaned toward him, as if to permit him to clasp her in his arms. A moment later, with a swift movement, she caught at the wolf mask and tore it from his head.

"Porfias del Norte!" she cried, falling back and staring at him as he knelt with the moonlight shining on his face and his bandaged head.

He smiled in that remarkable manner that ever made his face seem handsome to a wonderful degree.

"Yes, señorita," he murmured, with that strange sweetness in his voice, "I am Porfias del Norte."

"Not dead!"

"Far from it, fair one."

"But Frank said——"

"He thought he had left me dead in the old hut where I was shot down by a treacherous dog who shall pay the penalty with his life. The bullet struck me here, but Heaven changed its course and spared my life. My time had not come, Señorita Inza."

"Heaven had no hand in it!" cried the girl. "Some evil spirit protected you!"

"Some time you will think differently."

"Never! You monster, how dared you do what you have done to-night?"

"Dare!" he laughed. "Have you yet to learn that a Del Norte dares anything? Have you yet to learn a Del Norte will risk anything to secure the woman he loves?"

She fought against the great terror that threatened to overcome her and rob her of consciousness once more.

"You must be deranged!" she said. "You cannot realize what your act will bring about. It is plain you do not yet know Frank Merriwell. If you did you would not fancy you could do this thing and escape the punishment he will surely bring upon you. Why, he will find you and make you suffer, even though he had to employ a hundred men and rake over every inch of these mountains. Once arouse him, as he must now be aroused, and he will follow like a Nemesis on your trail. There is but one escape for you."

"Only one?" questioned the man, with a touch of mockery in his voice.

"Only one."

"And that is—tell me what, señorita?"

"You must permit me to return to him without delay. You must see that I return unharmed. If you do that, I give you my promise to keep him still long enough for you to get far away. If you are wise you will make all haste back to your own country."

Del Norte laughed softly.

"You have yet much to learn of me. In this game I hold the winning cards. In my employ is an Indian who knows where in these mountains we may hide so securely that a thousand men cannot find us. In one of these hiding places I shall keep you secure. If your gringo lover comes, I'll meet him. I'll fight him to the death. One of us will conquer, and no man ever triumphed over one in whose blood was the spirit of old Guerrero. If we meet in fair battle and I am his master, then you will realize how much superior I am to the boasting Americano you thought you cared for. In time you will learn to love me a thousand times more deeply than you ever loved him."

"It's plain you reckon all women on the standard of such women as you have known. Only women of savage races transfer their affection from dead lovers to their slayers. But you do not yet comprehend the fearful task before you. Your conceit is colossal. In single combat with Frank Merriwell you would not have one chance in a thousand."

He could not help feeling the scorn and contempt in her face and words, but still he laughed.

"Time will show you your mistake, señorita; words cannot. Do not fear me. I have sworn that you shall love me, and to win your love I'll be as tender and considerate as possible."

"Tender and considerate!" panted the trembling girl. "After this night I shall fear and loathe you a thousand times more than ever before. Keep away! Don't touch me!"

"It saddens me to see that you fear me so," he sighed, rising to his feet and standing with folded arms. "I have ventured everything on this move, and I shall carry it through. You American women love wealth and power. Señorita, all the vast wealth that is coming to me will I place at your feet. Yours shall be all the power it can command. As my wife you shall some day be admired and envied by all women."

"Now I know you are deranged!" she declared, also rising. "Any man in his right mind could not think to win the love of a woman after such a fashion. Porfias del Norte, that wound has made you a madman!"

"It is love that has made me mad, my Northern flower. Since parting from you on the crown of Mount Battie, up in Maine, I have thought of you, and dreamed of you, until you took possession of my whole being. I felt that I must have you for my own to keep always until death came between us. I have felt that to have you thus I would face a thousand deadly perils. To-night I saw

you at the dance. Even though your face was hidden, my heart gave a leap the moment my eyes rested on you. By your grace I recognized you, yet I was not certain until I found an opportunity to speak with you. I watched my opening and grasped it the moment Merriwell left you. Even though I felt that you might discover my identity and betray me, I ventured to speak with you."

"I believed you dead; otherwise I should have recognized you, even though you disguised your voice."

"No doubt, señorita. I feared then that you might tell him, and he would make a move that should baffle me. I spoke to my comrades. Fortune aided me in the wild plan I quickly formed. He saw them and engaged in altercation with them, which gave me the opening I sought. You were again left alone, and in a moment I acted. I carried you away, but in the struggle your garment of white was torn from you, and it lies in the canoe that brought us to this spot. I have no doubt that my comrades will join me soon, and then we shall move again. By daybreak we will be safely hidden in one of the many safe places known to the Indian who is with me."

Inza was desperate. She did not know they were on an island, and now her terror led her, having somewhat recovered her strength, to wheel suddenly and flee as fast as her feet would carry her. By chance she struck into the path and came quickly to the shore where lay the canoe, with Red Ben standing near it.

"Help!" she cried, appealing to him. "Save me! You shall be paid—anything, anything you ask!"

In her excitement she clutched his arm. He turned toward her a grim, immovable face. Not a word did he speak in reply.

Del Norte issued from the path and deliberately approached.

"It is useless, señorita," he declared. "Flee whither you will, there is no escape. You are on an island. This is my Indian comrade."

"Others come," said Red Ben.

"Where?" asked the Mexican anxiously.

"There."

The redskin lifted his arm and pointed away over the surface of the silent lake.

"My friends!" gasped the girl. "They are coming to rescue me."

In the distance a black spot lay on the water. The faint clanking of oars was heard.

Del Norte whistled a sharp signal.

In return there was a similar answer.

"Señorita," he laughed, "you are wrong; those who come are my friends."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SENTINEL.

With the sun slipping down toward the western peaks, another day was passing.

Hidden on the side of a wooded mountain, yet having a position that commanded a wide expanse of country, with a view of the lower hills and valleys, Red Ben lay prone on his stomach. At his side lay a loaded rifle.

In front of the Indian was a precipice, over which he peered at intervals, his keen eyes searching the valley below.

Finally he stirred quickly, sat up and turned with the rifle in his hands.

A man was approaching, but the moment this man appeared plainly in view Red Ben put down the rifle.

Del Norte came hurriedly forward.

"Have you seen anything of pursuers?" he anxiously questioned.

The redskin nodded.

"They near," he answered.

"You have seen them?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Down there," with a motion of one brown hand toward the valley beneath them.

"When?"

"Hour ago."

"How many?"

"Five."

"Whither did they go?"

"So," with another gesture up the valley.

"Then they are not on the trail. Your trick in covering our tracks in case they found and followed the trail was successful. Are you sure they were pursuers? Perhaps they were hunters looking for deer."

"No," asserted the Indian decidedly. "Ben he know. Make no mistake. They hunt for lost gal."

"They'll never find her. In that cave she is as safe as if buried a thousand feet underground. Even if they passed within ten feet of the entrance they could not discover it. Was Merriwell with them?"

Ben shook his head.

"No can tell. Ben not know him. Two young men; others older."

From a pocket the Mexican drew a pistol, which he examined, making sure it was in perfect working order. His usually handsome face wore a look that transformed it, while there was a deadly glitter in his black eyes.

"Listen, Ben," he said; "I will describe the hated gringo to you. If he is near, I wish to find the opportunity to meet him again face to face. Twice he has nearly destroyed me, but my escapes have told me my life is charmed, and I know it is next his turn. When again we meet I'll leave him food for the wolves, with this in his heart!"

He suddenly produced and flourished a keen dagger. His description of Frank was accurate and flattering, for he confessed that the young American was handsome and manly in appearance, with a resolute face and a fearless eye. He declared that the redskin could not mistake Merriwell, as the very appearance of the latter proclaimed him a leader among his companions.

"Of course," he added, "I wish no chance to face him in company with many of his friends, but I pray the Virgin he may give me the opportunity alone."

"Not much chance," grunted Red Ben. "How gal?"

"She is wonderful in her courage and defiance. Never did I see her equal, and it is this spirit that makes me love her all the more. How long do you think we'll have to hide here in the cave, Ben?"

"Can't stay long. Little grub."

"If necessary you could bring food at night."

"Mebbe so. Much dangerous to stay long. First chance we best go quick. Your friend they watch her?"

"Yes, they are guarding her now."

"She run quick she git chance."

"She'll have no chance."

The redskin surveyed Del Norte curiously.

"You want marry gal?" he asked.

"I have sworn to make her my wife."

"No good! She no do it. You waste time. You fix um your enemy, better leave her, git out fast. Canada up there. You reach Canada, have chance to git 'way."

"Even with the gringo dead, my triumph would not be complete if she escaped me. I will take her to Mexico."

"Where Mexico?" asked the Indian. "No hear of it any before."

"It is far from here, my own fair land!"

"Gal make heap trouble 'fore you git um there. Ben him know. Him see in her eye how she hate you. Gals no good. Alwus make bad trouble for anybody. Men big fools over gals. Ben know. Once him git foolish over 'nother man's squaw. Heap fight over her. Prit' near git um head shot off. Let squaws 'lone sence that."

"You cannot understand," declared Del Norte, with a gesture. "This thing I have set myself to do I will do, and all the powers of earth shall not thwart me."

Ben grunted and shrugged his shoulders.

"When white man gits that way him go it lickety split till him finish up done for. All right. Ben he got nothin' to say. No waste talk. You pay him, he do all he can for you."

"That's all I ask and all I want. Keep your eyes open. If the hunters come near, give me warning. If Merriwell strays alone, let me know and I will hasten to meet him."

A few moments later the redskin was again left as a sentinel on the mountain side, while Del Norte retraced his steps to the cave where he had sought concealment with his fair captive.

The sun was touching the tip of a rocky western peak. For a long time Red Ben had been watching a solitary man who was making his way slowly and cautiously up the mountain. The eyes of the Indian glittered and his fingers closed firmly on his rifle, which was ready for use.

Nearer and nearer came the unsuspecting man. At times he disappeared from view amid the timber, only to reappear at some point anticipated by the watcher.

Finally he drew near the spot where the Indian lay. Slowly Red Ben pushed forward his rifle, bringing the butt against his shoulder. The muzzle covered the heart of the unsuspecting man, who also carried a rifle.

At that moment the man dropped like a flash and rolled over twice until he lay behind a sheltering boulder.

Red Ben was astonished, for he realized that the other had scented danger, yet how this had happened was more than the redskin could comprehend.

"Howld on there, ye spalpane!" cried a voice. "Don't be afther shootin' yer bist friend. Oi know ye're there, fer Oi saw th' bushes wiggle a wee bit. If it's Red Ben ye are, ye ought to know Pat O'Toole, so ye had."

The astonishment of the Indian increased, but for some moments he neither spoke nor made a sound.

"Nivver a bit av good will it do to kape so shtill," declared he of the rich Irish brogue. "Oi know ye're there. It's not often Pat O'Toole makes a mishtake."

The Indian sat up, exposing the upper part of his body.

"Come," he invited. "Ben no shoot."

O'Toole rose from his place of concealment, grinning triumphantly.

"Begorra, Oi think Oi saved mesilf a foine hole in me shkin," he chuckled, as he advanced. "Whin Misther Browning towld me about th' Injun in th' boat wid the wolf, sez Oi to mesilf, sez Oi, 'Oi'll bet me loife Oi know th' mon, an' it's Red Ben.' Misther Merriwell wur sure th' spalpane he's afther must be somewhere here, an' it's the counthry all over they are searchin'. Oi took it on mesilf to invistigate this soide av th' mountain, but Oi had me oies open all th' toime. Something towld me ye'd be on th' watch if ye wur with them; an' it's sudint Oi dhropped whin Oi saw th' bushes move."

"How," said Red Ben, accepting O'Toole's extended hand.

"Howdy yersilf. Long toime no see, eh?"

"What you do here?"

"Pwhat th' divvil are you doin', Ben? It's a bad shcrape ye're afther gettin' yersilf in through this girrul business. Arter Oi saved ye from bein' shot full av lead fer foolin' round Bill Curran's woife Oi thought ye'd know betther than to iver monkey wid a female again."

"Ben he no monkey. White man him gal crazy."

"But ye're afther hilpin' him, ye lunatick, an' it's a schrape ye'll foind yersilf in. Oi've known ye tin year now. We've worruked togither guidin' more than wance, and nivver a bit av a quarrel did we have. Oi'd not tell ye a loie, an' Oi want ye to know thot Frank Merriwell will rake these mountains down an' lay them level av he don't foind thot girrul. It's a big oath he has taken to make anny wan shmart thot has caused her wan minute av distress."

"How you know so much 'bout him?" asked Red Ben, a heavy frown on his face.

"It's a long shtory, an' Oi'll not tell ye the whole av it. Oi wur paid to hilp do him a bad turn, an' Oi troied to bate th' head off him. It's a foine lickin' Oi got. Afther thot he saved me loife whin a mad buck had me down an' wur about cuttin' me to pieces wid his hoofs. Sure Oi found him a foine young gintleman, an' it's his friend Oi became. Wid me own hand Oi put a bullet through the head av thot shnale Porrfeus dil Noort; an' now it's some av Dil Noort's gang that's seekin' to git square by carryin' off Merriwell's girrul. As yer friend, Ben, Oi ax ye to give th' spalpanes th' double-cross an' hilp Frank Merriwell git back th' girrul. Av ye do thot Oi promise ye Oi'll see that nivver a bit av throuble do ye get into. Av ye refuse it's more than wan year ye'll be afther spindin' in jail fer your foolishness."

The Indian had listened with the frown growing deeper.

"Mebbe you go back on me?" he questioned. "Mebbe you tell um Merriwell Red Ben help carry off gal?"

"Oi didn't have to tell him. His bist friend saw ye in your canoe afther ye shtarted wid th' girrul. Ye're in fer it, Ben, me bhoy, onliss ye turrun roight-about-face an' do pwhat ye can fer th' girrul an' to have the indacint rascals pwhat shtole her poonished."

"Sit down," invited the redskin, motioning toward the ground at his side. "We talk it over."

O'Toole accepted the invitation and squatted on the ground.

"Ben he must think," said the Indian. "He must have time to make up him mind."

"Take yer toime, me bhoy," nodded O'Toole, in his pleasantest manner; "but don't yez fergit Oi'm yer friend, an' it's fer your good Oi'm advisin' ye. Th' divvils pwhat shtole th' girrul can't git away, fer Merriwell has tilegraphed it all over this parrut av th' counthry, an' it's big rewards he has offered fer th' apprehinsion av th' rascals. Whin th' shtorm comes, Ben, ye want to git out from under. There'll be a terrible crash, moind pwhat Oi say."

"Ben him git big money for what him do."

"It's litthle good money will do yez wid yer neck shtretched, an' th' bhoys are carryin' ropes fer th' gints pwhat run off wid th' girrul. Oi'd not fool yez fer th' worruld," O'Toole continued, in his most convincing manner. "Says Oi to mesilf whin Oi made up me moind ye wur wid the gints pwhat done ut, said Oi, 'Pat, me bhoy, Ben is yer friend, an' ye are his friend, an' it's up to ye to go along an' foind him an' give him a tip to git under cover before it rains.' Oi'm here. It's roight foine luck Oi found yez. A foine broth av a bhoy is Frank Merriwell, an' whin he knows ye hilped save th' girrul, Oi'll shtake me loife he pays ye well fer it."

The Irishman was doing his level best to win the Indian over, and his words were not without effect. After a while Red Ben said:

"You go to um Merriwell, ask how much he give Ben to bring gal. Ask if him swear Ben no git hurt. Ask if him dare meet Ben an' swear he no git hurt to bring gal. Come soon, tell what him say."

"It's darruk it will be, fer th' sun is down now."

"Ben stay here. Men who steal gal leave him to watch. He stay. You know owl hoot. When you come back make owl hoot so Ben no think it somebody else an' shoot um. Must know what Merriwell him say. Must have him promise."

Evidently the Indian was determined to drive the best bargain possible, and at the same time he was resolved to take every precaution to insure his own safety in case he betrayed Inza's captors.

O'Toole knew the redskin well enough to comprehend quickly that further argument and pleading would be a waste of words. Once Red Ben had set his mind on anything he was stubborn as a mule.

"All roight me bhoy," said the Irishman, rising. "Oi'll do jist pwhat ye say; but don't yez be afther lettin' thim carry off th' girrul whoile Oi'm spinding toime this way. It's a bit nervous Oi am about thrampin' round through th' woods afther darruk since Oi shot thot divvil Dil Noort, but it's no more he'll bother any wan at all, at all, an' soon Oi think some of his foine friends will be in th' same box wid him."

"You shoot um Del Norte?" asked Red Ben, with a show of interest. "Him say Irishman do it, but Ben no think it him friend."

"He said so?" cried O'Toole. "Begorra, thot's th' firrust toime Oi ivver knew av anny wan thot had hearrud a dead mon talk!"

"You think you kill um Del Norte?" asked the Indian.

"Oi know Oi did onless a man can live wid a bullet clean through his head," declared the Irishman.

Out of the shadows suddenly appeared a man, who exultantly cried, as he pointed a finger at O'Toole:

"Diablo! I have you! Traitor, this is my time of vengeance!"

As O'Toole saw before him Del Norte, with a white bandage about his head, the face of the Irishman turned ashen gray and his knees smote together.

"Howly saints!" he groaned. "It is the dead aloive!"

A moment later, uttering a wild shriek of terror, he turned and ran blindly toward the precipice close at hand, over which he rushed, being unable to check himself when he reached the brink.

As the poor fellow fell he uttered another shriek, which was followed by the silence of death.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE FOOT OF THE PRECIPICE.

The strange disappearance of O'Toole, who was unaccountably missing, caused much wonderment among the searchers for Inza Burrage and her captors.

There were at least thirty of these searchers in that vicinity, Frank Merriwell being their leader.

Some hunters camped on the northeastern shore of Lake Placid had seen Del Norte and his companions, having the girl a captive, land at a certain point after leaving the island, conceal the boat and canoe there, and then strike into the wilderness.

These hunters had aided the party of searchers led by Frank to pick up the trail early on the morning following the kidnapping of the girl.

Merriwell's skill as a trapper had enabled him to follow the villains to a point in the vicinity of the mountain where, at the suggestion of Red Ben, Del Norte had sought concealment in a cave, the mouth of which was hidden by thick shrubbery.

The craft of Red Ben in covering the trail had bothered and baffled the pursuers for some time. They had broken up into smaller parties for the purpose of scouring the woods thereabouts. Belmont Bland had insisted on accompanying them, and he clung to Merriwell with a persistence that annoyed Frank, who could not help suspecting the man of treachery.

It was Merry's belief that Bland had been well paid by Del Norte while in New York to betray Old Gripper's plans and keep the Mexican posted on Frank's movements. He had no proof of this, but all Bland's actions had seemed suspicious down to his seeming illness that had prevented him from returning to New York with Watson Scott.

Merriwell communicated his suspicions to Hodge, whom he urged to keep a close watch on Bland. He then divided the searchers into five parties, leaving Bart in charge of the one including Bland, while he took O'Toole with him.

The Irishman had disappeared, and, having appointed a definite spot at which to meet, Frank's party scattered to look for O'Toole and continue the search at the same time.

Was it chance or fate that led Merry to the vicinity of the foot of the precipice over which O'Toole plunged in his unreasoning terror? At any rate, Frank was down there in the gloom of the valley. He heard the last cry that came from the doomed man's lips as he fell, and a few moments later, a short distance away, there came a crashing amid the trees, followed by a sodden thud and silence.

Merry shuddered, for he knew the cry had been that of a human being, and he felt that he would find the unfortunate wretch at the spot where the crash and thud had sounded. With his rifle ready for use, he tried to obtain a position which would command a clear view of the brink of the precipice far, far above him, but this was not easy, and up there on the mountain no living thing seemed stirring.

Darkness was gathering in the silent valley. Through the trees the western sky glowed redly, but this glow was fading and dying behind the black peaks.

That a terrible tragedy had occurred Merry was certain, but whether a human being had fallen from the mountain by some misstep or had been hurled to his doom he could not say.

He did not hesitate long.

Advancing swiftly, alert and ready for anything, he sought the one who had fallen. His keen eyes soon discovered a dark form sprawled on the ground.

"I was not mistaken," he muttered, as he knelt beside the form. "It is a man. Here is where he crashed down through the branches of this tree. Poor devil! Who can it be? I wonder if he still lives."

He turned the man upon his back, discovering signs of life as he did so. Hastily lighting a match, he held the blaze protected by his curved hands and threw the light upon the man's face.

"O'Toole!" he gasped.

The Irishman was breathing faintly, and instantly Frank did what he could to restore him. In a few moments the poor fellow moaned a bit.

Striking another match, Merry found O'Toole's eyes were wide open, but he was bleeding from the mouth and presented a ghastly appearance. He was conscious, however.

"O'Toole, where are you hurt?" asked Merry.

"Me back is broke," was the faint answer. "Oi'm a dead mon."

"What happened? How did you fall? Tell me, for, at least, I may be able to avenge you."

"It's the dead returned to loife!" gasped the dying man. "Oi saw him up there, me bhoy!"

"Who did you see?"

"Thot human divvil Porrfeeus dil Noort."

"Impossible! Del Norte is dead."

"Thin it wur his ghost, fer Oi saw him, with his—face pale—an' a whoite bandage about his head. This is me punishmint—fer havin'—fer havin' anything to do wid th' loikes av him!"

O'Toole labored through this speech with failing strength, and Frank saw he was sinking rapidly.

"Tell me quickly, man," urged Merry, "just where you saw him."

"Up yonder, me bhoy. Red Ben is there. Oi found him, an' Oi wur—talkin' wid him. Oi know Ben, an' Oi saved his loife wance by—by stroikin' up the hand av a mon who wur—goin' to shoot him."

It was with the greatest difficulty that O'Toole labored to draw his breath. Frank was deeply moved by the dying agonies of the unfortunate fellow, for Merry's experience convinced him that the Irishman was indeed dying.

However, Frank felt it his duty to learn everything possible while O'Toole could speak, and so he urged him to go on.

"It's me best Oi—did fer ye, Mither Merriwell—an' fer th' girrul. Oi had Red Ben ready to—ready to turrn on th' villains—pwhat carried her off. It's your promise av protiction he asked fer if he—done thot. Oi wur comin'—to foind ye. Jist thin th'—the divvil—dead ur aloive—walked out, pointin' av—his finger at me. Oi shtarted to run away, an' thin—an' thin Oi fell. Thot's all, me bhoy."

Remarkable and unaccountable though it seemed, Frank came to believe, while O'Toole talked, that Del Norte still lived. That explained the kidnapping of Inza. Merry had wondered that Del Norte's late companions should make such a move; but now, knowing the Mexican's passion for her, the motive of her capture was clear.

The thought of Inza in the hands of that villain fired Frank's blood.

"If Del Norte lives, O'Toole," said Merry, "I swear to you now that you shall be avenged, for never will I know a moment of rest until Inza is rescued and he is dead beyond the shadow of a doubt."

A gurgling groan came from the Irishman. Striking another match, Frank saw the man was dead.

CHAPTER IX.

THE KNIFE DUEL.

The moon came up in due time and flooded the wooded mountain wilds with its mellow light.

With the caution of a creeping panther Frank Merriwell had climbed the mountain side. He had waited patiently for the moon to rise, believing it would aid him on that unfamiliar ground. He was now in the vicinity of the top of the precipice over which the Irishman had plunged to his death.

Suddenly a sound reached his ears, causing him to crouch on the alert, with his rifle ready for use.

He quickly decided that some one was approaching the precipice, and in this he made no mistake. Twice he caught a glimpse of the man before the latter appeared in the full moonlight. When this man did appear, Frank's heart gave a mighty bound of exultation, and the butt of the rifle leaped to his shoulder.

"Halt, Del Norte!" he commanded, in a low, distinct voice. "Stand in your tracks! If you try to run I'll shoot you dead!"

Del Norte it was, and he stopped like a man turned to stone.

"Up with your hands!" ordered Merriwell. "Your heart is covered by my rifle!"

For a single instant it seemed that the villain would make an effort to reach cover. Had he attempted it Frank would have shot him down. This Merry did not wish to do, as he intended forcing the scoundrel to give Inza up.

The Mexican's courage to attempt escape by a plunge into the shadows failed him, and reluctantly he lifted his empty hands, snarling an oath.

"Keep them up!" ordered Merry, as he slowly advanced.

But when he was fairly in the moonlight another voice issuing from the shadows near at hand brought him to a halt.

"Drop um gun! Ben him ready to shoot!"

It was the redskin sentinel.

Frank glanced round without turning his head, but he could see nothing of Red Ben.

"Shoot, Ben—shoot him down!" panted Del Norte.

"Ben got him foul," was the assurance. "Him shoot you, Ben shoot him."

"Shoot first, you fool!" snarled the Mexican.

"No shoot 'less have to," was the retort. "Ben he no want hang for murder."

Frank realized that he was in a trap. Were he to fire at Del Norte it was almost certain the hidden redskin would shoot from cover. In his eagerness he had stepped into a bad snare. His wits worked swiftly to discover a manner in which he might extricate himself.

"Del Norte," he quickly said, "listen to me. We have met here face to face, and we are deadly enemies. The end of our enmity must be destruction for one of us. There can be no other end."

"You are the one, Señor Merriwell," declared Del Norte. "Had you shot me from cover you might have escaped. But now——"

"I never strike a foe from cover. We are face to face, and I propose that we settle our trouble man to man in combat. I challenge you to fight me."

"Heap fair," said Red Ben, from the shadows, satisfaction in his voice.

"Why should I agree?" cried Del Norte. "I have the best of you now. A friend of mine has you covered, gringo dog, and he can shoot you down."

"Ben him no do it 'less forced," declared the hidden Indian. "Him make fair offer. Let best man win. You kill him, you have gal. He kill you, he git gal. Heap fair."

Plainly the redskin was delighted with the proposition, and Frank saw this was the only way out of the trap.

"Select the weapons, Del Norte," he said. "I accept Red Ben as the referee. It's plain he believes in fair play."

The Mexican realized there was no method of avoiding the encounter, so he cried:

"It shall be knives, and I'll drive mine through your heart, cur of a gringo! With pistols you would be my equal, but I know the art of fighting with the knife, and I'll cut you to pieces!"

"Knives it shall be," agreed Frank, still holding the man covered. "If you have a pistol, cast it aside. Should you try to shoot as you pretend to drop the pistol, I'll drop you where you are."

Uttering a sneering laugh, Del Norte removed and flung aside his coat, saying his pistol was in it. He produced a knife, the blade of which glittered in the moonlight.

"I have no weapon of that sort," said Merry. "Have you another?"

"Here," called Red Ben.

Something whizzed through the air and fell at Frank's feet.

It was the Indian's hunting knife.

Del Norte was advancing, the moonlight showing a deadly look of hatred on his face.

Merry dropped his rifle and flung off his coat in a twinkling. Stooping, he caught up Red Ben's knife just as his foe rushed upon him.

With a quick, sidestepping movement, Merry flung up his hand and deftly parried the blow of Del Norte's blade, steel clashing against steel.

"Ha!" panted Del Norte, as he was flung back by a surge of Merry's powerful arm. "Next time, gringo—next time!"

He was at Frank again in a twinkling, but once more the young American met and baffled him.

Out of the shadows stalked Red Ben, holding his rifle in both hands and standing near as if ready to use it in a twinkling. The moonlight fell full on his dusky face, showing there an expression of savage satisfaction in the battle he was witnessing.

"Best man shall have gal," he muttered. "Ben he see fair play. Merriwell him best man, Ben stand by him."

The ground was somewhat rough. Over its broken surface the men dashed, and leaped, and turned, and circled. Once Del Norte uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he struck, but Merry leaped away and the keen blade of Del Norte's knife simply cut a long slit in his shirt front.

"Near it that time, gringo dog!" panted the Mexican.

"A miss is as good as a mile," retorted Frank.

As the blades clashed together again Frank's knuckles were slightly cut and the blood flowed

freely.

"First blood!" exulted Del Norte.

"A scratch," was the retort.

But soon that scratch began to prove troublesome, for the flowing blood covered the haft of the knife and made it slippery. This came near proving fatal for the American youth. Again the blades clashed, and, with a twisting movement, the Mexican wrenched Merry's knife from his grasp.

The weapon rattled on the rocks ten feet away.

"Now you die, gringo!" snarled Frank's enemy, with a wolfish laugh.

He launched himself at the defenseless youth with frightful fury, but Frank managed to clutch the wrist of his foe and check the stroke that would have been fatal. With a surge he flung the Mexican aside, at the same time springing toward the spot where Red Ben's hunting knife lay. The moonlight revealed it plainly, and Merry had it in a twinkling.

Del Norte had followed him up, and was at him with a madness that was almost irresistible. He sent Frank staggering from the shock, and Merry tripped over a stone, nearly falling.

Seeing this, the Mexican uttered another cry of exultation, which turned into a curse as he saw the youth regain his footing like a cat.

"Much good fight!" muttered Red Ben.

"I'll get you yet, gringo!" panted the Mexican. "I have sworn to leave you dead, with my knife in your heart. Then the beautiful Señorita Inza will be mine—all mine! With you dead and gone, I'll have your mine and your sweetheart."

In this manner he sought to infuriate Frank and lead him to some act of rashness.

Although Frank's blood was burning like lava in his veins, outwardly he was wonderfully cool. As always happened in a time of great danger, he laughed outright.

"You boaster!" he exclaimed.

Del Norte was beginning to breathe heavily from his exertions. Again and again he struck at Frank, but each time the strokes were parried, blocked, or avoided. At last he began to realize that the American was a wonderful fighter with a knife, and, to his dismay, he saw Merriwell appeared almost as fresh and vigorous as when the fight began.

"Must end it quick," thought Del Norte.

But when he lunged again Frank leaped aside and struck him in the shoulder, from which the blood flowed swiftly, staining the Mexican's white shirt.

"The fiends must protect you, gringo!" hissed the wounded man.

"Fair fight!" muttered Red Ben. "Merriwell him win, he git gal."

For a few moments Del Norte's injury seemed to make him fiercer and more dangerous. A little while he kept Frank on the defensive, and then he was slashed in the forearm.

Clapping his free hand to the wound, he leaped backward, Spanish oaths flowing from his lips.

"Him beaten!" whispered the watching Indian. "Merriwell kill him soon now."

Frank followed Del Norte up.

"Stand up to it, greaser," he urged. "The fight has just begun. You have threatened to leave your knife in my heart. I could have split yours a dozen times, but I have spared you. When you are well cut up, I'll wring from your lips the secret of Inza's hiding place."

"Never!" vowed the Mexican. "If die I do, I'll tell nothing. But I'll not die! I'll yet kill you!"

Fancying he saw an opening, as Frank's hands were both hanging by his sides, Del Norte leaped in. He was sent reeling back with another wound, this time in the ribs.

Frank followed up his failing foe, forcing him to the edge of the cleared space. He kept close, fearing Del Norte might attempt to flee. Instead, the man danced round Merry till his back was toward the centre of the cleared space, while the dark shadows of the scraggy timber was behind Frank.

Again Del Norte rushed, but this time his wrist was seized and given a wrench that brought him, with a gasping groan of pain, to his knees.

"Fight done now!" muttered Red Ben, as he saw Merriwell lift his blood-stained blade.

"You're at my mercy, Del Norte," said Merry. "I can kill you with a single stroke. I'll spare you if you speak the truth. Where is Inza Bur—"

Out of the shadows behind Merriwell darted a figure. A heavy club crashed on Frank's head.

Thus treacherously struck down, the brave youth dropped his knife and fell senseless to the

ground.

CHAPTER X.

THE LANDSLIDE.

When Frank regained consciousness and opened his eyes he found he was lying on the rocky floor of a cave, his arms being bound at his sides. The place was lighted by two flaring torches thrust in crevices of the rocks.

Near at hand were three men. One was Del Norte, pale from loss of blood, yet with a murderous light gleaming in his eyes. Another man was Red Ben, who stood with folded arms, silently watching. The third man was unknown to Merry.

The Mexican uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he saw Frank's eyes unclose.

"At last he is conscious," said Del Norte. "I wished him to have his reason when he died. Look you, dog of a gringo, your time has come. I bear many wounds on my body and limbs made by the knife in your hand. You have only one scratch on your knuckles. But soon you will have this knife of mine in your heart!"

He displayed the weapon, stooping to sweep it flashing in the torchlight before the eyes of the helpless youth.

Frank did not shrink in the least.

"Oh, you're defiant, I see, Señor Gringo!" snarled Merry's enemy. "Soon I will make you groan with agony. Your sweet señorita is near in this very cave, but you shall not see her. She is guarded by one of my faithful ones. When I take her from here we'll leave your lifeless carcass behind. Have you still a grain of hope in your soul? Cast it away. Even though thousands of your friends were near they could not find you in this place. You are doomed."

He took savage pleasure in taunting Frank thus. Again he swept the knife before the eyes of the helpless youth, repeating his threats.

"Beg, gringo dog!" he exclaimed—"beg for your worthless life!"

"A thousand greasers could not make me do that!" declared the defiant captive.

"Do you think so? We'll see! Remember that once I vowed to cut from your mouth your stinging tongue? That was when we stood face to face in New York. You thought my opportunity to keep that oath would never come, did you? It has come at last! Before I kill you I shall cut out your tongue! Ha! ha! ha! How like you the prospect, brave gringo?"

Again Frank looked around. Surely he could expect no assistance from either of the mad Mexican's companions. The white man stood looking on with an air of indifference. Red Ben was motionless, his rifle leaning against the wall at his side.

"You see there is no escape," laughed Del Norte. "At last you begin to understand. You have triumphed over others, but in me you meet your master."

"My master—no! I had you at my mercy when I was treacherously struck down from behind. This Indian knows it, for he saw it all. Porfias del Norte, of all vile things in human form you are the vilest! The mongrel dog that bites the hand that feeds it is your superior. You are——"

With a furious oath, the taunted man flung himself on the speaker, clutching him by the throat.

"Out with your tongue!" he cried. "I'll choke you till it protrudes from your mouth, and then I'll cut it off!"

A feminine shriek rang through the cave, and out of the darkness into the light of the flaring torches rushed Inza Burrage, followed by the man who had been guarding her. She sprang at Del Norte with both hands outthrust and flung him from the prostrate form of her lover, sending him rolling over and over on the rocky floor of the cave, snarling forth profanity in Spanish.

He dropped the knife, and she caught it up, ready to stand over Frank and defend him to the last.

But to the aid of the frenzied girl came most unexpectedly another. Red Ben grasped his rifle and with the butt of the weapon struck down the man who had pursued Inza. Quickly reversing the weapon, he held it ready to shoot, at the same time saying:

"Red Ben him say he see fair play an' best man git gal. Merriwell him best man, but he no have fair play. Now Ben see him git it! I shoot first man who touch him or touch gal!"

They knew he meant it. Del Norte sat up, his pale face contorted with fury.

"Um better stay still," said the redskin, turning the muzzle of the rifle on the Mexican.

"Quick, Inza!" urged Frank—"cut these ropes! Set me free! It's our opportunity!"

Immediately she stooped and obeyed. Frank rose as quick as possible.

"Red Ben," he declared, "you'll not lose by this act of manhood! I'll remember you."

"Take gal that way," urged the Indian, with a jerk of his head. "Git out of cave that way! Quick! Ben him foller."

Merry did not delay. Grasping Inza, he hurried her into the darkness. The cave narrowed, the walls closed in, and the roof came down. Crouching and feeling their way, they pressed on. Almost on hands and knees they crept out into the open air amid a thick screen of brush and shrubbery that concealed the mouth of the cave.

"Thank Heaven!" murmured Inza, on the verge of collapsing.

"Where is that Indian?" cried Frank. "I cannot leave him alone to face those men."

"No leave him," said a voice, as Red Ben came leaping out from the cave. "Him here. Back up, keep um odders front of gun all time. They come now prit' quick. Go, Merriwell, with gal. Ben stop um here."

He sought cover near the mouth of the cave, urging Merry to get Inza away. Then came one of the baffled villains hurrying from the cave. A spout of flame leaped from Red Ben's rifle and the report awoke the mountain echoes and started a few loose pebbles rolling on the steep slope above them.

The pursuer dropped just outside the mouth of the cave. If others were close behind him, they halted instantly, not caring to show themselves and share his fate.

Frank had lifted Inza and carried her through the brush and shrubbery. As he emerged he found himself face to face with several men, and his heart bounded when the voice of Hodge joyously shouted his name. With Hodge was Bruce Browning, Belmont Bland, and others.

"Merry, you've found her—you've rescued her!" burst delightedly from Hodge.

"Listen!" gasped Belmont Bland. "What is that sound?"

On the steeps above there was a murmuring movement, and, looking upward, they seemed to see the mountain stirring slightly in the moonlight. The rushing murmur grew louder, and pebbles began to rattle amid the bowlders and ledges near at hand.

"A landslide!" shouted Frank, horrified. "Flee for your lives!"

As he uttered the words he saw Red Ben come leaping like a deer from the shrubbery.

"Follow!" cried the Indian as he passed them, and fled along the side of the mountain.

What ensued was like a terrible nightmare to Merriwell. He remembered lifting Inza bodily and running for their lives with her in his arms. Pebbles and small stones rained about him, while the rushing murmur grew louder and louder. Beneath his feet at one time the whole mountain side seemed sliding into the valley. A great bowlder, weighing many tons, went bounding and crashing past them like a living thing seeking escape from the awful peril. Small trees were slipping and moving toward the valley.

On and on Frank raced, straining every nerve. Not one of his companions was burdened like him, yet not one of them made greater speed in the effort to escape. His exertions were almost superhuman. It seemed that the knowledge of Inza's awful peril actually lifted him over every obstacle.

Finally some one clutched and stopped him. He found it was Red Ben, who said:

"All right now. Mountain him no run down hill here."

It was true Frank had escaped from the track of the landslide and had brought his sweetheart to safety. Behind them the avalanche of earth, and stones, and timber was heaping itself on the tiny plateau and pouring over the brink of the cliff in a cascade that thundered into the valley below. All around the rocky slopes and wooded steeps were roaring back the sounds like monsters awakened from peaceful slumber and enraged at being thus disturbed.

All this had been brought about by the shot fired by Red Ben. That small concussion had started rolling a single pebble that was the keystone. Recent rains had loosened that pebble. Others followed it, and a bit of earth began to slip downward. This dislodged larger stones, and soon the landslide was under way.

It ceased almost as quickly as it began. The grumbling, roaring mountains continued raging for a few moments, and then they, too, became silent. The bright moonlight revealed the change wrought by the landslide, and it told those who had escaped that the mouth of the cave that had been the hiding place of Del Norte and his companions was closed forever by tons of earth, burying the wretches in a living tomb.

Slowly Frank's friends gathered around him. They were all there; all had escaped. Of the entire party Belmont Bland was the only one missing. One remembered having seen Bland running blindly toward the brink of the precipice, apparently having forgotten its existence. No human eye ever beheld him afterward. If he did not rush blindly over the precipice, it is likely he halted

on the brink and turned to escape in another direction when it was too late, being swept over by the rushing landslide.

At the foot of that precipice the body of Pat O'Toole was also buried where Frank had left it when he lost no time in climbing the mountain side.

CHAPTER XI.

BURIED ALIVE!

As Frank and his party left the mountain side there remained two men buried alive in the cave whose mouth was closed by the landslide!

"Where are you, Del Norte?" cried one of the imprisoned men, in a gasping, frightened voice when the roar and rumble of the landslide had ceased, and they began to realize their terrible position.

"I am here," answered the other. "What can we do, Ridgeway?"

"Do? Why, we can die like dogs! There is nothing else for it. You're sure there is no other way out of this cave?"

"No other way. Perhaps we can dig out."

"Not in a thousand years! What have we to dig with—our bare hands?"

"I have my knife—the knife with which I was going to cut out the tongue of that cursed gringo, Merriwell! Why didn't I do it?"

"You know why. Red Ben went back on us, may the fiends take the redskin cur! He helped Merriwell get away with the girl. When Sears tried to follow the Indian shot him, and he's buried out there somewhere beneath that landslide. But he's better off than we are, for he is dead, and we must die! I can't die, Del Norte! I'm not ready to die! I'm not fit to die!"

Then the poor wretch began to weep and pray in the utmost anguish of soul.

Del Norte seemed cowed. He had burned many matches in order that by their faint glow he might examine the great mass of earth and stone that was piled on and crushed into the place that had once been the entrance to the cave. He had seen that a mighty boulder was blocking the greater part of the former entrance. That stone alone would be enough to imprison them hopelessly, but the sounds of the landslide which had made the mountain roar and shake had satisfied him that the boulder was held in place by a mass of earth and timber through which, with the best implements, it would be impossible to dig in a week.

"Merriwell has triumphed!" muttered the Mexican. "He will have no more trouble from me."

"Fiends take you!" snarled Ridgeway. "Why did you ever cross my path, and tempt me to such a death with your money? For the love of Heaven, light another match!"

"I have but three more."

"Can't you find a brand from the fire? Let's have some light! We had torches. Where are they?"

"They were extinguished by the rush of air when the slide took place. I've tried to find them, but failed. I'll try again."

"I'm going mad—mad!" groaned Ridgeway.

Del Norte began to search for the extinguished torches. After a time, during which his companion wept, prayed, and cursed by turns, he discovered one of them.

Then he carefully struck one of his matches. The extinguished torch was a piece of resinous pine, and it burned up quickly, giving a flaring light and sending up a wavering stream of black smoke.

By the light the two men gazed into each other's ghastly faces. Their eyes were distended with horror. Their mouths were dry and their lips drawn back from their gleaming teeth. They looked like beasts.

"Curse you, Porfias del Norte!" snarled Ridgeway. "It was you who brought me to this!"

"Bah! It was your greed for the money I paid you that brought you here."

"Had I not met you——"

"You might have been hanged for some crime. Dying this way will save you from hanging."

"Don't talk of hanging!" panted Ridgeway. "If ever a man deserved it you are that man!"

"But I was not born to be hanged."

"Better that than this kind of a death! At least, you would be out in the open air, with a chance to

breathe. I am stifling! I feel these walls crowding in upon me! They are going to crush me! Keep them off! keep them off!"

The wretch flung himself on the ground and writhed with agony and fear.

With the torch in his shaking hands, Del Norte stepped forward and kicked his abject and fear-tortured companion.

"Get up, here!" he snarled. "We will take one more look. We will see once more if there is any chance of escape."

Although Ridgeway declared there was no hope, he got up. With the Mexican leading, they passed back into the cave, being forced several times to bend low in a crouching position to avoid striking their heads against the rocky roof.

There were three chambers and only one straight passage from chamber to chamber. It was a simple matter to explore the entire cave. When they came at last into the third chamber they soon found themselves at the end of it, with the dank wall of stone before them.

For some moments they stood quite still, staring helplessly at this wall.

Suddenly a shriek burst from the lips of Ridgeway.

"Doomed!" he cried. "No escape! I feel the mountain collapsing! The walls are crowding in upon us! It's the end! Oh, for just one more breath of free air! For just one more sight of the world outside!"

With that cry, he dropped flat on his face and lay still, as if death had come to claim him, also.

"Get up!" harshly ordered Del Norte, again kicking the man. "Get up, or I'll leave you here alone. I am going back."

Why he desired to return to what had once been the mouth of the cave he could not tell, for there he would be no nearer liberty than in his present position.

The smoke from the torch was filling the place and making the air foul.

"We'll smother in a little while!" thought the Mexican. "It's a wonder we have not smothered already."

Again he kicked his companion and called for him to rise.

Ridgeway lifted his head and stared with terrible eyes at his comrade in misery.

"Did you have a mother?" he asked.

"Of course I did!"

"Did you promise her you would be good?"

Del Norte swore in Spanish.

"I'll not stay here a minute longer!" he declared. "If you stay, you'll remain in the dark."

"Hold on!" commanded Ridgeway, lifting himself on one hand and stretching the other out to the Mexican. "Don't you dare leave me! You're the man who brought this on me! Some one fired a bullet through your head, but it did not kill you. I wish it had! You thought you bore a charmed life; you thought nothing could kill you. Lead failed to do it, but God sent the landslide, and you are as good as dead. Ha! ha! ha!"

Del Norte started away.

"Stand where you are!" yelled Ridgeway, leaping up with amazing quickness. "You were not killed by the bullet, and now, for all of the landslide, you still live. You're a fiend, and you ought to die! I am commanded to kill you! I must do it!"

The Mexican did not dare turn his back on the raving man. Again he started away, but this time he moved backward, keeping his eyes on Ridgeway, who came creeping after him, crouching a little and seeming ready to spring.

Suddenly Ridgeway leaped. His arms shot out and his fingers closed on Del Norte's neck.

"I must kill you!" he yelled. "I am the one chosen to do it! Your time has come!"

The torch fell to the floor and lay there, spluttering and flaring. By this dim and flickering light a fearful struggle took place.

Ridgeway had obtained a powerful clasp on Del Norte's throat, and the Mexican could not hurl him off. They staggered against the wall, which seemed to fling them off. They swayed from side to side, once staggering over the spot where the torch lay.

Then the Mexican succeeded at last in drawing something from his bosom. It flashed brightly in the dim torchlight as he struck with it. There was the impact of a muffled blow, and Ridgeway gave a great start, seeming to grow suddenly straight and tall.

Again the Mexican struck, but now, instead of growing straighter, the other man seemed

suddenly to collapse. His breath escaped from his lips in a husky groan, and he dropped in a sprawling heap on the ground at Del Norte's feet.

The man who remained erect backed off a little, staring at the other.

"I had to do it!" whispered Del Norte. "The fool drove me to it! He was mad! He had me by the throat, and he would have killed me! I had to do it!"

Over and over he kept repeating those words:

"I had to do it!"

He felt himself shaking from his head to his feet. On his forehead were great, cold beads of perspiration. His heart seemed choking him.

The man on the ground moved and groaned.

"I had to do it!" whispered Del Norte.

The torch was going out. The man on the ground lay stretched squarely across the floor of the cave, which was not more than eight feet wide at that point. In order to reach the torch it would be absolutely necessary to step over him.

Del Norte started and then stopped. His teeth were chattering, and his cheeks were fully as pale as those of the poor wretch at his feet.

The torch burned dimmer.

At last the Mexican summoned all his courage and stepped over the body, catching up the torch. He swung it until it blazed up brightly.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm sorry, Ridgeway; but you forced me!"

He stepped back over the body and turned with the torch in his hand to take a last look. The eyes of the stricken man were staring straight up at the rocky ceiling, and there was on his face a strangely altered expression, at which Del Norte wondered. In truth, his look was one of peace and happiness, and he smiled a little. His lips moved, and faintly he whispered:

"Mother—it is—your boy—Jack!"

Then those lips were hushed forever.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE CAVE OF DEATH.

With the smoking torch gripped in one shaking hand and the knife that had done the terrible work in the other, Porfias del Norte hurried from the scene of that frightful underground tragedy.

"I'm the only one left," he muttered thickly. "I can't last long in this infernal hole."

He stopped in the central chamber.

"Where does all the smoke go to?" he exclaimed. "By this time the torch should have filled the place to suffocation."

There was smoke enough in the chamber, but, as he stood there, he could see it creeping across the roof above his head, striking the lower arch of the passage, and passing on in a slow, gentle current.

"It finds an outlet somewhere!" he whispered, feeling his heart giving a sudden leap in his breast. "What sort of an outlet?"

The faintest ray of hope had shot into his soul. Still he realized that smoke might go where a human being could not pass. Nevertheless, with a burning sensation of eagerness creeping over his hitherto chilled body, he bent low and hastened onward into that low passage.

All the time he kept staring upward at the smoke.

Suddenly he stopped.

He had found the place where the smoke escaped!

It was directly over his head, a long crack across the roof, scarcely wider than a man's hand. Into this the smoke was pouring in the same slow, deliberate manner.

He stared at that crack in bitter, heart-crushed disappointment.

Smoke might escape through that narrow fissure, but a human being—never!

The agony of disappointment that he felt nearly robbed him of his strength and caused him to collapse. He fell back against the wall, a groan coming from his parched throat.

"No chance!" he said hoarsely. "Ridgeway was right! We were both doomed when the landslide came! But he is the better off, for his agony is over!"

Then he thought of his pistol. As a last resort he could blow out his brains and have it ended.

He thrust the deadly knife back into the bosom of his shirt, straightened up, and thrust his fingers into the crack. He tried to force his hand through, to reach up appealingly to the free world far above.

A few pebbles and a little dirt came rattling down and rained over him, bounding from his head and shoulders. Some of the tiny particles of stone struck him on the face.

Then suddenly he began clawing like a madman at the crack, as if he would pull the whole mountain down upon him.

His efforts brought down more stones and earth.

He found a niche into which he set the torch, and then he fell on his knees, calling on the saints.

When he rose again to his feet he bethought himself of the knife and once more took it from the place where it was hidden. With that knife he began digging at the crack. He was compelled to stand in a cramped, crouching position, but he worked fiercely, furiously.

More and more the earth rattled over him and the tiny pebbles rained upon him. His eyes were filled and half blinded, his mouth and nostrils inhaled the dust and caused him to cough. The smoke of the torch choked him.

Still he worked on. It seemed a mad, hopeless task, for he knew that above his head the slope of the mountain extended far upward. Should he make an opening large enough for his body as far as he could reach, what then could he do?

Even though he knew that the chances were a million to one against him, he continued to labor at the roof of the cave, digging out the rocks and earth with his knife. The stuff thus set free began to heap itself in a little circular rim about his feet.

Once he stopped. The torch was dying down, and a glance showed him that it was almost burned out.

The thought of being again left in that frightful darkness made him quickly catch up the bit of burning wood that remained and hasten back to seek for more of the extinguished torches. With its aid he found two of them. He lighted one and returned to the spot where he had been at work.

It seemed that already he had spent many days in that cave of death. He wondered that he was not overcome with hunger, and he felt an awful longing for water. Oh, for a drink, for a swallow, for a drop!

"There's plenty of water outside," he snarled. "There are streams, and rivers, and lakes! I'd give my everlasting soul to drink from one of them now!"

Dig! dig! dig! He was working in the same frantic manner as before. His strength still held out, and he was glad of that. Even if he could not escape, this was something to occupy his mind for the time and prevent him from going mad.

Suddenly a considerable mass of earth, set free by his efforts, fell into the cave. A stone, the size of a man's fist, struck him on the shoulder, but he did not mind the pain.

"I'm dragging the mountain down upon me!" he grated. "I don't care! I am glad! Let it come! Let it fall!"

He stood with one shoulder against the roof, reaching up into the hole he had made, still cutting away with this once keen knife, which was now dulled and blunted.

Suddenly something snapped—something fell on the heap of stones and earth at his feet.

It was the blade of the knife, which had been broken in the middle!

As he stood staring at the broken blade he found the light again growing dimmer, and then he saw that the second torch had burned to the point of expiring.

He lighted the last torch.

When that was burned out he could not escape the dreadful darkness that would close over him.

But the broken knife—the only tool with which he could work was useless!

He dropped in a sitting posture on the ground and covered his distorted, terror-drawn face with his hands. For some time he sat thus, without moving, without making a sound.

The silence was broken by a pattering sound like hail. He lowered his hands and saw that earth was still falling from the hole he had made. It came in little starts and spurts.

The captive of the cave sprang up once more. He thrust both arms up into that hole and tore with his fingers. This he continued until the nails were worn away to the quick and his hands were cut and sticky with blood and dirt.

Finally he stopped from sheer exhaustion. Even his frantic energy was beginning to fail.

Then he heard something like a soft movement above him. He rolled his eyes upward and beheld the roof of the cave directly above him moving the least bit. At first he thought this movement was not actually taking place, but that he imagined it.

Only an instant; then he saw that a part of the roof was settling and seemed about to fall.

He leaped backward to escape from beneath it.

Barely in time.

It fell, and a portion of it hurled him down and caught his feet and legs, pinning him fast.

The torch was extinguished.

At first Del Norte thought the end had come. As he lay with the weight of earth holding his legs fast, he fully expected another mass to follow the first and end his life without delay.

A sudden feeling of indifference came over him, and calmly he waited for the end.

"Come, death!" he urged. "Get it over quickly!"

But no more of the roof fell.

After a little he found himself looking upward into the opening, and far, far away, seemingly miles distant, he imagined he could detect a ray of light.

Lifting the upper part of his body, he began dragging away, with his hands, the earth and stones which had fallen on his legs. It did not take him long to clear his feet.

Next he sought for the torch, but it was buried and lost beneath the fallen mass.

This mass had made a great mound almost as high as the roof of the passage.

He crawled upon it and finally succeeded in straightening up in the opening left when it fell. This opening was plenty large enough for his body; he could move his arms freely; and with his outstretched elbows he was able to touch either side.

Standing there, he tipped back his head and looked upward.

His heart gave a fearful throb as if bursting, and through it shot a sharp pain.

It was no fancy, no hallucination of his deranged brain; away up there he could see light!

"If I could climb up there I might escape!" he whispered. "But how can I do it—how?"

With his hands he felt of the rocky sides of the place where he stood. The walls were rough, with many niches and protrusions.

He resolved at once to make the attempt, well knowing it might cause another fall of earth and rocks, which would crush him to death.

He found a niche on one side for one foot and a protruding bit of ledge on the other side for the other foot. He fastened his fingers in a cleft and slowly succeeded in dragging himself up into the crack, which was now quite wide enough for him to accomplish this.

He felt about and found other cracks and protrusions. Little by little he climbed higher.

Once his foothold gave way and he came near falling. By bracing across the cleft he succeeded in preventing such a calamity.

Then he found the cleft was growing narrower and narrower. It closed in until it threatened to stop him.

He choked as he thought of the possibility. It was the most fearful thing thus almost to get a taste of liberty and then have it denied him.

At last he was checked. For the time being he could force his way no higher.

He felt his strength leaving him. A dizziness came upon him, and he knew he was on the verge of falling. But he maintained his hold and began to feel about. By working his way cautiously some distance along the cleft, he finally came to a point where the walls were wide enough apart for him to slowly drag his body through. Above that point was a narrow ledge, on which he paused to rest.

Still that rift of light was far above his head. Could he ever reach it?

For some time he rested on the ledge, seeking to summon back all the natural strength he possessed. Finally he resumed his almost superhuman efforts.

Occasionally he paused to look up at the cleft of light. At first it had seemed very narrow, but now it was growing wider. Each time he looked it appeared wider than before.

"I'll reach it!" he told himself, with absolute confidence. "Porfias del Norte still lives, Señor Merriwell, as you shall have good cause to know!"

Now the air seemed sweeter and purer. He realized how stagnant and stifling it had been away down there in the cave of death. He turned his face up to it and drew in deep breaths.

Finally he came to a place where the cleft widened on either hand until it was impossible to mount higher by clinging to opposite sides.

At that point he seemed baffled.

Was it possible he could fail and perish with life and liberty almost in his very grasp?

There was but one course for him to pursue. He would have to abandon the attempt to climb with the assistance of both walls; he must take to one wall and make his way up that in some manner.

A little light came down to him from the opening, enabling him to choose the holds for his feet and hands.

At last he came to another ledge, where he lay at full length and rested, although the fear of slipping from it and falling back through that fissure into the heart of the mountain caused him to suffer intense torture. His fancy led him to imagine himself slipping, sliding, falling, seeking to grasp the walls with his torn hands, but failing utterly and dropping at last into the cave, where he found the dead man laughing at him.

Above the ledge at that point he could creep no farther. He aroused himself and crawled slowly along it. It led him out to a place where the light shone in and the cleft was wide above his head.

"Almost free!" he panted.

Had it not been for his life that he was struggling he could never have made that last ascent. In some mysterious manner he accomplished it, dragging himself at last by the aid of some bushes on the brink over the edge and dropping unconscious on the rocky mountain side.

In a little time the air revived him. He lifted his head and looked around. A cry of joy burst from his lips, and he managed to stagger to his feet. Around him on every side lay the beautiful world, the mountains, the autumn-tinted woods and the blue lakes. Above him was the sapphire sky and the gloriously golden sun, for the night had passed and another day was well advanced. He drew in deep breaths of the clear, sweet air, and his blood leaped in his veins.

Yet a marvelous change had taken place. At the time when he entered that cave his hair was as black as a raven's wing; now his face was like that of an old man, and his hair was snowy white!

"Free!" he cried. "I have escaped! But how I have suffered! That dog of a gringo, Frank Merriwell, caused it all! He thinks me dead and out of his path forever. I am alive, and I swear to make Merriwell suffer even as I have suffered! I'll not kill him at one blow, but I'll rob him of all he holds dear, his sweetheart, his beauty, his strength, his wealth, and then I will find a way to destroy him at last!

"This is the oath of Porfias del Norte!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW RAILROADS ARE BUILT.

Four men of great power and influence in the financial world had gathered in the offices of Scott & Rand, brokers, New York City.

Of course, old Gripper Scott himself was one of the four. Two more were Sudbury Bragg and Warren Hatch.

The fourth was a slender, smooth-faced, cold-eyed, thin-lipped man of uncertain age, whose name was Basil Jerome. The latter had just appeared, and had been greeted by the others assembled.

It was several days after the landslide that had brought the stirring events in the Adirondack Mountains to a close—events that were directly traceable to the great business consolidation that these capitalists were now discussing.

"Mr. Jerome, gentlemen," said Watson Scott, "has expressed his willingness to come into our railroad project in case he is satisfied that it will be carried through in a manner that will insure success and profit to us all. You have expressed your willingness to take him in if he will enter on the same terms as the rest of us. Mr. Merriwell should be here now, and——"

"He is," said a voice, and Frank Merriwell, himself, entered the office. "I hope I have not kept you waiting, gentlemen. My cab got into a jam on Broadway, and I was delayed full fifteen minutes."

"You are in good season, Merriwell," said Old Gripper. "Let me introduce to you Mr. Basil Jerome, the gentleman I spoke to you about last evening. Jerome has been concerned in the organization of many a big project, and he stands ready to take a corner in the Central Sonora Railroad deal."

"Providing," said Jerome, "that I become satisfied that the deal is to be carried through properly and there are no serious obstructions in its way."

Frank did not like the man's look, nor the cold voice that corresponded so well with his frigid eyes and face.

"Just what do you mean, sir," he questioned, "when you state you are ready to come in if the deal is carried through properly?"

Jerome sat down, and Frank followed his example. They faced each other, and something told Merriwell there was to be a clash between them.

Jerome surveyed Merry from head to feet, taking him all in. Without at once answering the question, he observed:

"You are a very young man to be the promoter of a project of such magnitude."

Frank flushed, for there was something most annoying in the manner and words of the fellow.

"I fail to see what my age has to do with it."

"Youth lacks experience and judgment. It is liable to be flighty and build great projects on moonshine."

"I think you will admit, sir, that Watson Scott is not a man to be dazzled or deceived by moonshine. He is actively concerned in this business."

"Mr. Scott seldom makes mistakes," admitted Jerome.

"Besides," added the youth, "I object to the word 'promoter' as you applied it to me. I am not a promoter. I propose to put a good, round sum of hard cash into the combined fund of the syndicate."

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which goes to prove that what I have just said is correct—youth lacks experience and judgment."

Frank was surprised.

"I fail to see how you make that out. If the plan is a promising one, and I am satisfied that the railroad will be a paying venture, why should I not invest my money in it? If I were not confident that it would pay, I'd not be advocating it."

Jerome made a slight gesture.

"No such project can be absolutely assured of success at the outset," he asserted. "It is a great venture, and the men who get in on the ground floor are certain to protect themselves from loss in any case."

Merriwell frowned, a puzzled expression on his face.

"How is that possible?" he asked. "If we are assembled here to organize and build that railroad, how is it possible for us to be protected against loss if the railroad does not prove a paying piece of property?"

A cold smile flitted across the face of Jerome.

"I knew you were inexperienced. Young man, there are several ways of doing it; but undoubtedly the simplest way is to organize a stock company and sell stock to the public. Let the public in general build the railroad, while we reap the profits, if there are any."

"But if the public owns the stock, I fail to see how we can reap the profits if the railroad is a financial success."

Jerome looked with something like pity at the questioning youth.

"It is a simple matter. I will explain it in a few words. To begin with, it is not necessary for us to invest one dollar of our own money in the scheme."

"What? And still we may hold an interest in it?"

"The controlling interest, Mr. Merriwell."

"Go on, sir."

"We will suppose at the start that we organize the Central Sonora Railroad Company and capitalize it for—well, just as an example, let's say ten millions of dollars. Before deciding on this we will have made surveys and estimates that have convinced us beyond question that the road may be built and placed in operation for four millions of dollars."

"Then why should it not be capitalized for four millions?"

"Because that is not business—safe, conservative business. Because that would make it impossible to raise the money needed without ourselves taking chances of great loss. Let me proceed. Having organized in a legal manner, and having issued certificates of stock to the extent of ten millions of dollars, we can next proceed to raise the money required to begin active

building operations."

"By placing the stock on the market?"

"Not yet. Every man here, with the possible exception of yourself, Mr. Merriwell, is known to every great banking institution in the country, and his credit is unlimited. At the outset we will take four million dollars' worth of our stock to some institution and secure from it on that stock the full sum required to build the railroad. Thus, you can see, we will not have to put up a dollar of our own money; but we will build the railroad with the money of the general public, which has been deposited at the bank from which we secure it."

"I see," nodded Frank, his eyes shining queerly. "It's a fine little scheme you have, Mr. Jerome!"

"I am letting you into the secret methods of capitalists who build railroads and organize great business projects without using a dollar of their own money," said Jerome. "Having secured our money, we will proceed to put our railroad through."

"We'll build it, and the general public will pay the bills?"

"Exactly. Having it constructed, by successful manipulation—the easiest thing in the world for those who know the trick—we'll unload four million dollars' worth of stock on the public and square ourselves with the bank. At this stage of the game the public will have paid for the railroad, which was built with the public's own money; but we shall still hold six million dollars' worth of stock in that road, or the controlling interest."

Frank felt his blood growing hot within his veins.

"In short," added Jerome, "we take no chances whatever, for at the start we know the road will cost a million less than half the amount for which it is capitalized, we have borrowed the public's money to build it, we are certain we can sell stock enough to pay back every dollar, and still hold control of the railroad, and we are in a position to come out ahead whether the railroad proves to be a paying piece of property or not."

"And this is the way railroads are built?" muttered Merriwell. "But what if we find, after the railroad is put in operation, that it is a losing venture—that it will not pay a dividend on the amount at which it is capitalized, and is running behind?"

"Then it becomes a simple matter for us to step out from under, and as we step out we can take with us in our own pockets a few millions in profits. If we become satisfied that the railroad is a loser, we'll again work the stock market, and, by certain manipulations, boost the price of Central Sonora to the highest possible point. When we are satisfied that we have it up to the top notch, we'll dump every dollar's worth of stock in our possession, pocket our profits, and smile as we see Central Sonora slump and go to the dogs."

"In short," said Frank, "after we have built the railroad with the money of the general public, overcapitalized it in a criminal manner, and discovered that it will not pay a dividend on its watered stock, you propose that we perpetrate another outrage on unsuspecting investors by selling back to the public our holdings of stock that actually belongs to the public anyhow!"

"Your inexperience is again shown by the manner in which you apply the term 'watered' to that stock. Watered stock is new stock issued by a railroad or other corporation that already has a certain amount of stock in existence, but claims that it does not fairly represent, through increase of the value of a property and franchises, the increase of actual capital. We capitalize at the start for more than double the actual cost of building and putting in operation, and therefore our stock may not justly be called watered. In case this railroad should thrive wonderfully, and should pay wonderful dividends on our ten million dollars' worth of stock, we might then water it by issuing more stock. I hope I have made the whole thing clear to you, Mr. Merriwell."

"You have!" cried Frank. "You have made it clear that what you propose is criminally dishonest, is a gigantic swindle, and that parties concerned in such an outrageous fraud should be amenable to the law and sent to the penitentiary!"

Frank had risen to his feet, his eyes flashing and his whole aspect one of righteous indignation.

Although he had thus pretended, he had not been entirely ignorant of the dishonorable methods of stock jobbers, but he had feigned ignorance in order to draw Basil Jerome out and lead him to fully expose the true inwardness of his reprehensible plan of operation.

Jerome gazed at the indignant youth with a mingling of surprise and pity.

"My dear boy," he said, "you are excited. Don't permit yourself to become so wrought up and to use such violent language. I have simply explained to you the usual method of building railroads, as Mr. Scott and the other gentlemen will attest."

"Then the usual method of building railroads is a rotten and dishonest method!" exclaimed Merry. "Mr. Scott, do you approve of such a scheme?"

"What if I should tell you that I do?" asked Old Gripper, his stolid face calm and unreadable.

"Then here and now I would lose no time in announcing my withdrawal from the project," retorted Merriwell. "I am not a poor man, but did I not possess a dollar in the world, and you were to show me beyond question that I could make five millions as my own share by entering

into such a dastardly operation, I would refuse to have anything to do with it."

"Very well," said Jerome, with one of his cold smiles, "it will be a simple matter to leave you out of it. If I have been correctly informed, your principal reason for wishing this railroad constructed is to give you better facilities for handling the production of a mine of yours, located in Eastern Sonora, near the line of the proposed road. Am I right?"

"If you are—what then?"

"We may build the road, and you need have nothing to do with it. The desired result will be obtained, for your mine will have an outlet by rail to the rest of the world, and you will no longer find it necessary to pack ore or bullion hundreds of miles to the nearest railroad shipping point."

"Then you are ready to carry this thing through without me?" asked Frank, holding himself in check.

"If these other gentlemen are ready to take hold of it in the proper manner, they will find me ready to stand with them."

"And the proper manner is the dishonest manner you have just explained to us! Not only do I decline to take a part in such an operation, but I refuse to permit it to be carried out!"

"What?" cried Jerome, surprised out of his icy reserve for once. "I don't think I understand you. You refuse to permit us to carry it out?"

"That is what I said, sir. Evidently you understood me perfectly."

"You refuse?" repeated Jerome.

"Yes, sir."

The man smiled.

"I fail to see what effect that can have on us. To begin with, you are crazy to make such ridiculous talk. Don't you want that railroad? Wouldn't it be of benefit to you?"

"I want the road, and it would be of great benefit to me," confessed Merriwell; "but not even to obtain that benefit and advantage will I permit the road to be constructed in a manner that I regard as criminal from start to finish."

"You talk about not permitting it, young man. In case we decide to build, I don't see how your permission or your refusal will have the slightest effect on us. Will you explain how it can?"

"Yes."

"How? What will you do?"

"I will expose the whole rotten scheme to the public! I will let the public know just how its money is being used for the purpose of defrauding it. I will publish the story from one end of the country to the other. You may borrow four million dollars and give as security the stock of the Central Sonora, but I promise you I'll let daylight into that thing so that the gullible public will decline to buy your stock, and in the end you'll have to make that four millions good out of your own pockets."

Again Jerome surveyed Frank Merriwell from his head to his feet, unable to keep from his cold face a slight expression of wonderment. What sort of a young man was this who not only refused to share in the profits of such a deal, but threatened to stop the whole thing by exposure, even though the construction of the railroad was greatly desired by him and would be of incalculable value to him?

"I confess that you are beyond my comprehension," he said. "It is possible, however, that Mr. Scott may be able to do something with you."

There was a queer look in the eyes of Old Gripper.

"I have found," he said, "that Mr. Merriwell is not easily turned aside once he has determined on any course."

"But you," said Jerome—"you and the other gentlemen present know that the plan I have proposed is the only safe and conservative way of building this railroad. Here is Mr. Hatch—he has been concerned in similar deals."

"But I have never had as an associate a man like Mr. Merriwell," confessed Warren Hatch, stroking his full beard with his thin hand. "In fact, I think it wholly improbable that the whole of us could turn Merriwell a whit, even if we set about the task in unison."

"Do you mean to admit," asked Jerome, "that you are willing to be governed by this fellow, who is scarcely more than a boy? I can't think it of you!"

"Perhaps we have good reasons," grunted Sudbury Bragg.

Jerome gazed at them each in turn, his show of wonderment increasing.

"And do you mean to say," he questioned, "that you propose to invest your good money in this railroad project of his? Is it possible that men like you, who are familiar with all the methods of

pushing through such a project without risk, will let this young fellow inveigle you into jeopardizing yourselves?"

"We have become satisfied," said Scott, "that the scheme promises well, and we are willing to take the risk. Unless you wish to come in and join your money with ours in backing the deal, I think we'll have to get along without you."

"We'll get along without him under any circumstances," said Frank grimly.

"Why——"

"Nothing in this world could induce me to become concerned in any business venture with Mr. Jerome as a partner, for I would be in constant expectation that in some underhand method he would undermine and defraud me."

"You have heard Mr. Merriwell's decision, Jerome," said Watson Scott. "That lets you out."

Jerome's pale face was unusually so as he rose to his feet. His thin lips were pressed together, and his mouth drooped a little at the corners. After a moment of silence, he said:

"Very well, gentlemen; I will depart and leave you to organize. I wish you all the success you deserve to obtain through a wildcat scheme of a simple boy, who knows just about as much about business and business methods as a yellow dog knows about algebra. Good day, gentlemen!"

With a contemptuous movement, he walked out of the office.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER OBSTACLE.

As Basil Jerome left the office of Scott & Rand he came face to face with a thickset, florid-faced man and a slender, dark-eyed youth, who had just stepped from the elevator.

"Howdy do, Mr. Jerome! Is it yourself?" said the man, with just the slightest hint of an Irish brogue. "It's a bit glum you're looking. Anything wrong?"

"How do you do, Mr. Hagan," responded Jerome. "Didn't know you were in town. Haven't seen you for months."

"I've been moving around a bit, but I'm back again, large as life and just as natural. Saw you coming out of Old Gripper's den. I'm bound there myself, for I understand there's a little matter going on in which I'm a trifle interested."

"You don't mean that Mexican railroad affair, do you?"

"Why, yes, me boy, that's it; but how did you guess so quick?"

"I was invited to take a hand in that myself, but I prefer to keep out. In the manner they propose to do it, I want none in mine. If you're thinking of butting in, take my advice and stay out."

"As a friend, would you mind telling me why? You have aroused me curiosity."

"If you investigate closely I fancy you'll find out why, Hagan. This youngster, Merriwell, who is promoting the scheme, is altogether too finicky about the manner in which the deal shall be financed. He's old-fashioned in his ideas of honesty and business methods. How Old Gripper can swallow him is more than I can understand, and Gripper has inveigled Warren Hatch and Sudbury Bragg into it. Keep out, Hagan—keep out."

Hagan laughed.

"Thank ye for the advice," he said; "but I have a little trick of my own to turn with those gentlemen. I'm glad to know I'll find them all ready for me. Don't worry about Bantry Hagan. He seldom gets left. So-long, Jerome."

Hagan passed on, with the dark-eyed youth at his heels, and entered the office of Scott & Rand.

The four men left in the private room were settling down to business when the office boy appeared and announced that Mr. Bantry Hagan wished to speak with Mr. Scott at once on very important business.

Old Gripper seldom betrayed astonishment, but he could not conceal it now. There was likewise indignation in his face and voice as he exclaimed:

"Hagan? That man here? Why, confound his cast-iron cheek! how dare he show his face in my office! What do you think of him, Merriwell?"

"It's just what I should expect of him," declared Merry. "He has gall enough for a regiment."

"Many thanks for your fine opinion of me," said the voice of Hagan himself, who had boldly followed the boy. "It's you, Mr. Merriwell, I'm wishing to chat with, too, and I'm lucky to find ye

here with Mr. Scott. And here are Mr. Bragg and Mr. Hatch! Come right in, Felipe."

The somewhat shy-appearing youth of the dark eyes followed him into the room as he pushed the office boy aside.

By this time Watson Scott was on his feet, his face dark as a storm cloud.

"Bantry Hagan, you scoundrel," he cried, "how dare you show yourself to us!"

"Now, Mr. Scott; don't excite yourself," said the intruder. "You are said to be a man with iron nerves, but your behavior this moment belies your reputation. Why shouldn't I show myself to you?"

"You know well enough, you villain! You know there is a warrant for your arrest now in the hands of the sheriff of Essex County."

"And I also know the sheriff of Essex County is not here to serve it. I further know he never will serve it."

The cool assurance of Hagan was almost staggering.

"It's an easy matter to swear out another warrant here in this city, and Mr. Merriwell is just the man to do it."

"Mr. Merriwell is just the man not to do it. Were he to take so much trouble, what would he prove against me?"

"He could prove that you were concerned in a dastardly attack upon him up in the Adirondacks, being at that time the worthy associate of Porfias del Norte, who came to a well-merited death, together with two other ruffians, by being buried by a landslide."

Hagan grinned.

"It would be easy enough to make such a charge, but quite another matter to prove it. Who could appear as witnesses against me? Could you swear, Mr. Scott, that I had anything whatever to do with this matter of which you speak? No? Well, certain it is that your trusted private secretary, Belmont Bland, will never appear to furnish evidence for any one, nor will O'Toole. It is easy enough to have any man arrested, but proving him guilty is quite another matter."

"It's a shame, Hagan," said Frank, "that you were not in the cave with Del Norte when that landslide occurred."

"That's the way you look at it, me boy," nodded the Irishman; "but I have a different feeling about it, and I thank the saints that I was spared. I fancy you thought yourself well rid of all your troubles when Del Norte met with that little misfortune, and you're now ready to go ahead with your great railroad scheme. But before you lead these gentlemen into it I have a little revelation to make that may interest them and you a bit."

"Say the word, Merriwell, and I'll have the man kicked out," growled Watson Scott.

"Let's hear his revelation," suggested Frank, "and then he may have the decency to take himself off of his own accord."

"Now you are coming to your senses," chuckled Hagan. "When you have heard what I'm going to tell ye it's in no hurry you'll be to have me go without a little understanding and agreement between us. Porfias del Norte had a plan of his own that bothered you some, for he convinced you that he was the rightful heir of Guerrero del Norte, who years ago had obtained an extensive land grant in Eastern Sonora, and on this land claimed by him your San Pablo Mine is located. Del Norte had parties working in Mexico to obtain a reaffirmation of that old concession. With Del Norte dead and gone I fancy you thought your troubles ended. Me boy, you were wrong. Although you did not know it, old Guerrero was not the only one who obtained concessions in Eastern Sonora."

"What's the man driving at?" growled Scott. "Is he here with another cock-and-bull story about land grants?"

"It's no cock-and-bull story you'll find it," asserted the Irishman. "The grant to old Guerrero, Porfias del Norte's grandfather, was made by President Pedraza in 1832. Am I not right?"

"What if you are?"

"It means a great deal to Mr. Merriwell, as I will demonstrate. I have lately learned that there was an earlier claimant to that same territory. The first Mexican republic was organized in October, 1824, with General Don Felix Fernando Victoria as president. You are quite familiar with Mexican history, Merriwell, me boy. Am I correct in this statement?"

"You are."

"Very well. Now I'm coming to me point. One of General Victoria's chief assistants, and a gallant officer in his army, was Colonel Sebastian Jalisco. As a reward for this man's services, when Victoria became president he granted him a great tract of land in Eastern Sonora, covering practically the same territory as that afterward conceded to Guerrero by Pedraza. This grant of Victoria's was never revoked or annulled, and therefore Jalisco was the rightful claimant to it all

the while. Jalisco was ill for many years of a mental derangement, and neither he nor his heirs ever disputed Guerrero's right to the territory. Later, however, as you know, President Santa Anna revoked the Guerrero grant. The one made to Jalisco has never been revoked, and it holds good to-day. It happens that chance has thrown me in with Colonel Jalisco's only surviving heir, his great grandson, and this, gentlemen, is the boy."

Hagan waved one of his square hands toward his dark-eyed companion.

He had thrown a bomb into the meeting, and he smiled to see the havoc it created.

Warren Hatch was on his feet, while Sudbury Bragg had leaned forward on the square table, resting on his elbows, his jaw drooping. Watson Scott grasped both arms of his chair and leaned forward as if to rise, but did not get up.

Of them all Frank Merriwell was the only one who did not seem thunderstruck.

"Who is this boy, Hagan?" he asked.

"The great grandson of Colonel Jalisco, I have told you. His name is Felipe Jalisco, with a whole lot of fancy middle names thrown in."

"We have your word for it, but it takes something more than the mere word of Bantry Hagan to cut any ice."

"Does it, indeed, me lad?"

"It does."

"Then you shall have something more. In fact, Mr. Merriwell, I fancy I can give you all you require. What do you want?"

"Proof."

"Felipe can establish his relationship beyond the doubt of the most skeptical."

"But the old land grant to Felipe's great grandfather——"

"Is in me possession!" cried Bantry Hagan, as he dramatically produced a yellow parchment-like document and waved it triumphantly above his head.

He laughed aloud as he surveyed the men before him, but never a smile came to the dusky face of Felipe Jalisco, his companion.

"Gentlemen," he said, "before you set about building any railroads through that part of Sonora I advise you to transact a little business with me. It will save you lots of trouble later on."

"Will you permit us to examine that document?" asked Frank, still with perfect self-possession.

"On your word of honor as a gentleman—which I know ye are—to return it as soon as you have made the examination."

"You have the pledge," said Merry, stepping forward.

Hagan unhesitatingly handed the document over to Frank, who immediately spread it out upon the table.

The others pressed about Merry to obtain a look at the paper.

"The dashed thing is in Spanish!" gurgled Sudbury Bragg, in disgust.

"Of course it is," nodded Hagan.

"I can't read it," admitted Bragg.

"But I can," said Frank.

He hurriedly yet keenly scanned it through, inspecting the signature and seal, and finally straightened up with it in his hand.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "the document seems to be genuine."

"Seems to be?" said Old Gripper. "Then you think there may be a doubt about it?"

"There may be."

"But there isn't!" cried Hagan. "It's all right. Now, Merriwell, me boy, perhaps you'll not disdain to do a bit of business with Bantry Hagan."

Frank refolded the paper and returned it to the Irishman.

"What are you after?" he asked.

"Money, me lad—money. Of course Felipe Jalisco might raise a fuss and make you no end of trouble; but I have talked the matter over with him, and he is willing to surrender his claim to the concession made to his great grandfather in case he is well paid. You are rich, Merriwell; you have been making a fat thing out of your mines, and you can afford to pay. We have settled on a price, and we'll take not a dollar less. Either you'll come to our terms, or we'll cut the ground

from under yer and leave you nothing but empty air to stand on."

"What is your price?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars!"

"Quite modest!" said Merry sarcastically.

"Will you pay it?"

"Not a dollar of it!"

Hagan was set back, for he had fancied the youth weakening.

"Not a dollar?" he repeated, in astonishment. "Do ye mean it?"

"I always mean what I say."

"But—but you're crazy!"

"I think not."

"It's the devil's own broil ye'll find yourself in if you refuse."

"Then I'm certain to have a lively time, for I utterly and absolutely refuse to give up a dollar."

"You just said the document was genuine."

"I beg your pardon; you misunderstood me."

"I heard you say so!"

"I repeat, you misunderstood me."

"Then what did you say?"

"I said it seemed to be genuine."

"But you doubt if it is?"

"I do."

"How can ye?"

"There are various things which lead me to doubt."

"Will you name them?"

"I don't mind naming some of them."

"Do so."

"In the first place, before investing heavily in the San Pablo Mine, I took the trouble to investigate thoroughly the solidness of my title to the property, knowing how insecure most titles are in Mexico. I overhauled old records and probed into history. I found out all about the grant of President Pedraza to Guerrero del Norte. I found the concession had been reaffirmed by Santa Anna when he first received the presidency, and I afterward found that, later on, because old Guerrero preferred to remain a bandit and a plunderer, Santa Anna had revoked and annulled the grant."

"Well?"

"Well, that left me no doubt whatever in regard to the legality of my title. In all my investigating I found no record of any grant to Colonel Sebastian Jalisco. In all my probing into the history of Mexico and her struggles to rid herself of the Spanish yoke I am certain I found no mention whatever of any such person as Sebastian Jalisco, who held in the patriot army the commission of colonel. In short, Bantry Hagan, I do not believe any such person as Colonel Sebastian Jalisco ever existed!"

As far as Frank Merriwell was concerned, the bomb hurled by Hagan had missed the mark completely.

In spite of himself, Hagan was staggered by the bold stand of the youth that nothing could daunt. Not only was he staggered, he was enraged.

"It is a wonderful knowledge of Mexican history you have, me boy!" he cried. "But you're due to find out that you don't know near as much as you think you do. This poor boy has a claim to property you are holding and working, and as true as me name is Bantry Hagan, I'll see that he gets his rights!"

"Go ahead," said Frank quietly. "It's not the boy you are looking after; it's Hagan, and I can give you my opinion of Hagan in a very few words. From his toes to the hair on his head he is a thoroughbred rascal."

"Your talk is very bold, but you'll come down before we are done with you," snarled the Irishman, in exasperation. "I'll bring you to your knees and have you begging."

"I have no fear of that. You have taken up altogether too much of our time. Will you have the decency to retire and let us go on with our business!"

It was not a request; it was a command.

Hagan's belligerent nature was aroused, and it seemed that he was inclined to remain and create further annoyance. From Frank he turned to the others.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "you have heard our claim and you have seen the document by which we propose to back it up. If you know anything of Bantry Hagan, you know he enjoys a good fight and he sticks to a thing to the bitter end. I propose to stick to this thing. In the end this boy will secure his rights, and Merriwell will not hold one inch of property in Mexico. But let me give you warning that if you attempt to build that railroad you will find yourselves involved in a matter that will cost you more money than you can count in a week. In the end you will meet disaster. Before you go any further, either you or Merriwell must settle with Felipe Jalisco."

Then he stepped toward the Mexican lad, on whose shoulder he placed a hand, observing:

"You have heard, Felipe; the man who is usurping your rights refuses to do you justice, and proposes to continue robbing you."

The black eyes of the boy flashed.

"I will have my rights!" he exclaimed, in good English. "Either he shall pay me or he shall die! I will kill him!"

"Softly, my lad! Don't make such threats before witnesses, for it is bad business."

"It is what I mean!" shouted the boy, who had suddenly grown greatly excited.

He flung off Hagan's hand, and sprang out before Frank.

"You rob me!" he panted. "Pay me—pay me, or I kill you!"

"Better take him away, Hagan," said Merriwell, "or I'll turn him over to the police, which I do not care to do."

"He's dangerous, if he is young," said the Irishman. "I'm afraid you'll be sorry you did not listen to his demand for justice."

"If there were a grain of justice in his demand I would be ready enough to listen," returned Merriwell. "You are behind this business. Having failed in your other project, through the death of Del Norte, your fertile brain has originated this daring, yet foolish, scheme. Do you think you are dealing with children? Did you fancy you could frighten or browbeat me into paying you money before I had thoroughly investigated this Jalisco business and sifted it to the bottom? Why, you know that were you in my place you would not give up a dollar on such a demand. Take him away, Hagan, and be quick about it, or I swear I'll telephone the police and have you both arrested for attempted fraud!"

That Frank was in earnest now there could be no doubt.

"We'll go," nodded Hagan. "Not because we are afraid of the result should you have us arrested; but we know your power—you and the men behind you—and we care not to suffer the humiliation and inconvenience of temporary confinement. The Jaliscos are hot-blooded and revengeful, and you now have one for your bitterest enemy. Take my advice, me boy, and watch yourself day and night, for you can't tell when Felipe will strike at you."

Then the Irishman grasped his companion by the arm and urged him toward the door.

At the door, ere leaving the office, Felipe turned to glare over his shoulder at Frank, hissing:

"You rob me! I will kill you!"

CHAPTER XV.

HAGAN SECURES A PARTNER.

"The fight has begun, Felipe, me boy," said Hagan, as the two left the brokers' office and stood waiting for the elevator to carry them down to the ground floor. "I knew it would be no easy thing, but it was worth trying."

"I will kill him!" repeated the Mexican lad, in a savage whisper.

"No, no; better not."

"He robs me!"

"But it is not safe to kill in this country."

"Always the Jaliscos kill their enemies."

"If you were to do that in this State it would be the electric chair for yours."

"If they prove not that by me it was done——"

"You were foolish, me lad; you threatened. Besides that, to kill him would be to kill the goose that must lay the golden egg. You can see the folly in that. If you were to kill him, how could you force him to pay you the money you demand?"

"But what is it I am to do? I hate him! He is bold and he does not take the fright."

"Sure he's a hard boy to frighten," nodded the Irishman.

"But I will drive fear into his heart!" hissed Felipe. "He shall soon know that death is near him everywhere. Ah! that is what I will do! I will frighten him until he is glad to pay to escape the death that may strike him any time. I have friends who will stand by me. They are here in this city, and soon I can find them. They will help me to frighten the bold American. We will find a way."

"Perhaps you may, but I have me doubts. Here is the car."

The car stopped, the sliding door rattled, and they stepped in, being swiftly carried to the ground floor, from which they emerged upon lower Broadway.

"A little while ago," said Hagan, "I was in a scheme with Porfias del Norte to bring this Merriwell to his knees and denude him of his Mexican property. He defied us all, but I believe we might have succeeded had Del Norte lived. It was his game to frighten or destroy Merriwell. We followed the fellow up into the Adirondacks, but when I found that Del Norte actually meant to murder Merriwell I declined to remain and be concerned. It was carrying the thing too far for Bantry Hagan. I left and returned to New York. Well for me that I did. As near as I can get at it, Del Norte did capture Merriwell, aided by two other men, and got him into a mountain cave. But just as Del Norte was on the point of putting an end to Merriwell his Indian guide turned on him and helped the prisoner to escape from the cave. Then came a landslide that covered the mouth of that cave with tons of earth and bowlders and buried Del Norte and his comrades in a living tomb. The death they experienced there must have been a horrible one."

He shrugged his thick shoulders at the thought of it.

"Evidently," he went on, "Merriwell congratulated himself on the death of Del Norte, for he fancied that would put an end to all his troubles and he would be able to carry through his great schemes without opposition. He must be a bit disgusted now. He'll find Hagan a stayer. But he has strong backers behind him, and we need some men equally good, Felipe. There's Jerome—Basil Jerome! Just the man! He'll go into anything that promises big, and he knows how to carry any scheme through. He can make dollars grow on elder bushes, that man! His office is round here on Nassau Street. Come along, Felipe, and we'll see if we can find him."

They walked through Wall Street to Nassau, passing the Stock Exchange on their way. Turning up Nassau, they soon came to the building in which Basil Jerome had his office.

Jerome was in, and, on receiving Hagan's name, he agreed to see his visitors at once.

"Sit down," he invited, motioning them to chairs in the private office to which they were admitted. "Didn't expect to see you again, Hagan, in such a hurry. You must have rushed through your business with Old Gripper and his crowd. How did you come out?"

"By the door," answered the Irishman; "and it's little good it did us to go in."

"Did you take my advice as a tip in regard to that railroad deal?"

"It's no advice I needed, for I wasn't thinking of pushing into that."

"There might be money in it if they put her through in the proper manner; but it's Merriwell's idea, I reckon, to capitalize her at her proper value; and that will make it necessary for the men who build to take just as much risk as the general public who buys the stock. It doesn't seem possible that a shrewd old fox like Watson Scott can be dragged into such a dangerous affair. Now, if you and I were doing it, Hagan, we'd do it in a way that would leave us practically without risk, and I think we'd clean up a good thing out of it."

"Why can't we do it?" exclaimed Hagan, as if struck by a sudden thought.

"Why can't we?" questioned Jerome, in some surprise. "Why, that other gang is in it."

"We'll block 'em, me boy! We'll hold their scheme up, and reap the harvest ourselves!"

"How can it be done? Oh, no; I'm not looking for trouble with that bunch. It isn't necessary to build railroads in order to make money. There are plenty of roads in existence that can be manipulated and squeezed dry. There is no need to go searching round for new roads to build."

"But there is something more to squeeze in this than a railroad. What if I show you how we can get an interest in a vast tract of land in Eastern Sonora—a tract that is rich in minerals in one section and may be opened up for ranches and plantations in another?"

"Ranches and plantations? I've heard that all of Northern Mexico is barren and arid and practically worthless."

"Much of it is."

"How would you get hold of this land and obtain a railroad land grant from the Mexican government?"

"The grant is already in existence."

Hagan then explained to Jerome as clearly as possible Felipe Jalisco's claim to a great area of land in Sonora.

"The boy is without influence with the government," confessed Hagan, "else he would make application for his rights. Unfortunately, the politics of his family have run in the wrong direction, and he knows he would be turned down if he should try to secure his rights. But he actually owns the very land possessed by Merriwell—the land on which Merriwell's mine is located. And that mine is said to be fabulously rich. He will accept a fair sum as his share of the spoils; the rest we can divide between us."

"There's something in it," nodded Jerome.

"Here is the document," said Hagan, displaying Felipe's paper. "Can you read Spanish?"

"No."

"Well, even Merriwell, who can read Spanish, confessed that it seemed genuine. You see the opportunity, man; come in with us and make a good thing for yourself."

Jerome considered.

"There is no reason why we should attempt to build that road, Hagan," he said. "If you want me as your partner, I believe we can make a big thing out of it without ever constructing a rod of railroad."

"How?"

"Dead easy. We'll form a company, with the avowed purpose of putting the road through. We'll buck the Merriwell crowd just as if we meant business. If we do it in the proper manner, we can jar them some. But it's best to wait a bit until they get started, for it wouldn't do to frighten Scott and the others out before they were fairly under way. We will come down on them like a ton of bricks at the right time. If we scare them so they are on the verge of abandoning the whole deal, it's likely Merriwell will cough up a fancy sum just to have us drop our game and let them go on. There you are. It's money made on pure bluff."

"Fine enough!" chuckled Hagan, in satisfaction. "I knew I was coming to the right man when I came to you, me boy!"

"What am I to receive?" asked the Mexican lad, who had been listening with deep interest.

"Your share," answered Hagan.

The boy sprang up.

"I have another way!" he exclaimed. "I have the way of my own. Señor Merriwell shall find death creeping at his heels day and night. He shall know it is I, Felipe Jalisco, who threatens him with destruction; but I will take care to keep beyond his reach. He shall know that the only way to escape the peril that follows him is to pay me all I ask."

"We'll have to hold him down, Hagan," whispered Jerome. "The little fool is liable to murder Merriwell and ruin everything."

CHAPTER XVI.

ARTHUR HATCH.

That afternoon Frank Merriwell accompanied Warren Hatch when the latter left the city to return to his home on the Hudson. They took a train at the Grand Central Station.

When they were comfortably seated on the train, Mr. Hatch observed:

"Well, Frank, the thing is settled at last, and now it will be pushed through as fast as possible. We'll have that railroad built in a hurry, and you don't have to lift a hand. You have business enough to look after, and so——"

"I was not particularly anxious to become actively concerned in the construction of our railroad," said Merry; "but, of course, I stood ready and willing to do my share."

"Which you did by pledging yourself to take a good big lot of the stock when issued. As this road is to be capitalized at its actual value, it ought to become a rich thing for every stockholder. Leave it to us to take care of everything, Frank. There will be no delays."

"Unless Bantry Hagan and Felipe Jalisco cause them."

"But you were absolutely confident that Jalisco's document was a forgery."

"Absolutely confident, Mr. Hatch. I can't say whether Bantry Hagan worked up this scheme or not, with the idea of squeezing something out of us; but if he did he must have worked swiftly after the death of Del Norte. I'm more inclined to believe that by some chance he ran across Jalisco and was himself convinced that the document was genuine. The fact that I have so thoroughly investigated everything that might have the slightest bearing on the legality of my title to the San Pablo makes me absolutely confident that the Jalisco grant is a forgery."

"Well, you have settled Watson Scott's mind on that point, and Scott is not a man to make mistakes. The rest of us are ready to follow his lead."

"It's something of a relief to me," confessed Merry. "Of course, I was confident of coming out ahead of Del Norte, but the man kept me moving. As it has turned out, I don't feel it necessary to make a rush to Mexico, and I'll take my time about going West. If things pan out all right, I'll have some of my friends along, and we'll stop on the way at St. Louis and other places. I'm almost tempted to seek recreation in athletics and sports."

"You can choose your own course about that, Frank. If your business admits of it, I don't blame you for enjoying life through those sports in which you seem to take such a great interest. But you must stop with me a day or two. I want you to meet my boy, Arthur. He's a fine chap, but just a little inclined to be wild. I have to watch him closely to hold him down, and I'm afraid I don't hold him down all the time. I believe you'll like Art."

They chatted in this manner until Irvington was reached, where they left the train and entered Mr. Hatch's private carriage, which was waiting.

They were driven from the beautiful village to the splendid home of Mr. Hatch, which overlooked the Hudson.

A boy of seventeen or eighteen, with his head bare and his hands in his pockets, was standing on the veranda as they approached.

"There's Art now!" exclaimed Mr. Hatch. "Hello, Art!"

"Hello, dad," coolly responded the boy, without stirring.

"Here, Art, is Mr. Merriwell," said the banker, when they had left the carriage. "Mr. Merriwell, my son."

"How are you, Mr. Merriwell," said Arthur, with a touch of cordiality, as he shook hands with the visitor. "Father has been telling me about you. Says you're a corking fisherman. That was what put you right with him. He's the biggest crank on fishing that I ever saw."

Arthur Hatch was a chap it was not easy to fathom at first sight. He resembled his father slightly, but he was larger and better built, although somewhat too flat across the chest. He seemed to affect a drawl, and the grasp of his hand was not exactly hearty.

They entered the house.

"I'll take care of Merriwell now, father, if you don't mind," said the son. "Perhaps I can entertain him until dinner time."

"You'll find I don't need entertaining," laughed Frank. "I particularly dislike to have any one put himself out to entertain me. I feel easier when no effort is made."

"Come up to my room," invited the boy.

They ascended to Art's room, which was on the second floor, and proved to be almost luxurious.

"Now, make yourself at home, Merriwell," drawled the boy, with an air of familiarity. "There is the bathroom."

Frank removed his coat, pulled back his cuffs, and washed his face and hands, which gave him a feeling of freshness.

In the meantime, on returning to Art's room, he found the boy had produced a flask and glasses.

"Here's some fine old rye," he said. "We have lots of time to touch it up a little before dinner."

"Excuse me," said Merry, shaking his head.

"Don't you care for rye? Well, I have some bourbon here. Perhaps that will——"

"I'll have to be excused from taking anything."

"Really? It will do you good. You've been having a session with the governor and those Wall Street sharks, and it seems to me you need something after that."

"I don't think I need anything, thank you."

"Well, later on we can have a cocktail before dinner. Which do you prefer, a Manhattan, or a——"

Frank was now brought to the point where it was necessary for him to state that he did not drink Manhattans or cocktails of any sort.

Young Hatch eyed him with an expression of doubt.

"You don't seem to be stringing me," he said. "Don't you drink at all?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"I can't understand it," said Arthur. "Everybody drinks nowadays."

"Not everybody. You are mistaken about that."

"Well, there are precious few who don't. Young men who are up to date all take something."

"Then I'll have to confess that I'm not up to date."

"Strange," muttered the youth. "Have a cigarette?"

"I do not smoke them."

"Well, I keep a box of cigars for my friends who do not care for cigarettes. They are——"

"I do not smoke at all."

Arthur sat down, slowly rolling a cigarette between his fingers, eyeing Merry all the while.

"I didn't believe it," he finally muttered.

"Didn't believe what?"

"I've heard of you, you know, and what I've heard led me to think you a corking chap, one of the boys, you understand."

"I think those who know me well have always considered me 'one of the boys,'" smiled Merry.

"But really a fellow who never drinks nor smokes—why, he can't have any fun!"

"I beg to differ with you on that point. I do not believe any chap ever got more fun out of life than I have."

"Then you used to drink and smoke?"

"Never."

Arthur lighted his cigarette, took several whiffs, staring at Frank all the while, and finally observed:

"When the governor came home and told me about you, he said you didn't touch liquor and didn't smoke; but I sort of fancied you had been playing it clever with him for reasons of your own."

Merry flushed a little.

"In short," he said, "you thought I was fooling him?"

"Well, I thought it rather clever of you, for you were trying to get dad and a lot of those men of dough into some sort of a railroad scheme, and I reckoned you were playing it fine with them."

"That's not my way of doing things."

"Beg pardon; no offense. Everybody is slick in these times, you know. You'll find the men you are dealing with are all sharp as steel. They never play any game frank and open."

Frank looked doubtful.

"Of course you do not mean to place your father in that class?"

"Well, I fancy the old boy knows all the tricks," laughed the lad softly. "He's been able to hold his own with the rest of them. How did you get through college without drinking?"

"That was easy. When the other fellows found I was sincere in letting the stuff alone they respected my principles, and I had no trouble at all."

"You were a great athlete?"

"I made a fair record."

"Well, didn't you ever see the time when you felt that, just as you were about to take part in some contest, a drink might give you vim and energy?"

"Never. By letting the stuff alone and keeping constantly in the best possible condition, I had vim and energy enough. Had I drunk, it must have robbed me of some of my vim and energy."

"Oh, come, now! Not if you had drunk moderately and discreetly. Not if you had used liquor with good judgment."

"Liquor never gave a thoroughly healthy man any strength that was not false strength. It makes men feel stronger, but in truth it weakens them. I don't care to preach you a temperance lecture,

Arthur, but you sort of forced this out of me."

"I'm glad to hear what you think about it. I can't agree with you, you know; but you interest me. You don't mean to say that drinking has ever hurt me, do you?"

"It has never done you a particle of good, and the chances are that it has hurt you."

"I can't believe it. Look at me, and then look at my father. I'm better built, healthier and stronger in every way than he ever was. I've taken an interest in athletics always, and he has encouraged me, saying he made a mistake when he was in college by not doing so."

"Well, you owe much of your good condition, it is likely, to your inclination toward athletics and physical culture; but I believe you would be in better condition if you let liquor alone, and did not smoke cigarettes. Your father has weak lungs, and you are not properly developed across the chest. Still you injure the delicate tissues of your lungs by inhaling the smoke of cigarettes. At the same time you are weakening your brain power and your force of character. I am absolutely certain of this, for no fellow who indulges in those things escapes injury."

There was something in Merry's manner that impressed the boy. Frank had a way of convincing listeners when he spoke.

"If I thought so——" muttered Art.

"Would you give up cigarettes and liquor?"

"Well, I don't know. It would be pretty hard."

"Do you mean that your habits have such a hold on you already?"

"If I could go somewhere away from here where there was no whisky and no cigarettes, and I could see none of my chums who drink and smoke, I suppose I might break off."

"Why not here? Are you at your age a slave to cigarettes?"

"Well, you see it's this way: all the fellows know I drink and smoke, and they would laugh at me if I should say I'd stopped. They wouldn't believe it. They would keep at me until they shamed me into keeping on."

"Then you confess that you have not the will power to refuse and stick to it. Can't you see that your will power is weakened?"

"It's not that; it's because I don't wish to be laughed at and jollied."

"Which is a confession of weakness. Let them laugh; in the end, if you stick to your good resolutions, they will stop laughing and learn to respect you."

"Perhaps that's right; but I've seen some mighty mean, narrow, contracted men who never drank, never smoked, and never swore. I've seen some rascals who had none of the small vices, and usually they are the meanest sort of rascals."

"I don't doubt it; but does that prove that all men, or even the majority of men, who have none of the small vices are mean or rascally? I don't fancy you believe that. You know it's natural to suppose that a bad man should be a drinker, a smoker, and a swearer. When you see a bad man who does none of these things, it is so unusual that you immediately look on him as a representative of his kind."

Art nodded.

"Perhaps that's so," he acknowledged. "Of course, I do know men who have no vices, and who are good fellows. I swear, Merriwell, you've almost converted me."

Frank smiled.

"Would that I might wholly convert you!" he exclaimed. "Does your father know you drink?"

"Lord, no! I wouldn't have the governor know it for anything! He takes a little himself, but he thinks I'm on the water wagon yet—thinks I'm not old enough to get out with the boys and whoop her up."

After a moment he dropped the half-smoked cigarette on an ash tray.

"I believe I'll quit!" he exclaimed. "I've been working for chest development, and it's coming slower than any other part of me. Perhaps smoking is holding me back. I believe I'll let tobacco alone for a few months and see if I improve."

"Good!" cried Merry. "But you should knock off drinking at the same time."

"I will! It's going to be a hard thing to do, but I'll try it."

"Give me your hand on it, Arthur! Don't merely try, but make up your mind that nothing shall cause you to break your resolution. Show that your will power and determination have not been weakened."

They shook hands.

Frank was well pleased over the resolution of Arthur Hatch. He was beginning to like the boy.

They were talking in the most friendly fashion by this time, and Arthur began questioning Merry about college days and his life at Yale.

"I'd like to go to Yale," he said; "but the governor has made up his mind on Harvard, and it's Harvard for me."

"A fine college," said Frank.

"Somehow it seems to me that the fellows at Yale have better times."

"In a way, I believe they do. Harvard is more given to cliques. You know it has been called the rich man's college. Yale is more democratic. I have a brother not far from your age who is fitting for Yale."

"Where is he fitting?"

"He has been at Fardale Military Academy; but just now he is traveling abroad in company with his tutor, Professor Gunn, of Fardale."

"Traveling abroad! That must be fine. You have traveled a great deal, haven't you, Merriwell?"

"I have seen a part of the world. I went abroad myself when I was quite young with Professor Scotch, of Fardale, who was my guardian, as well as my tutor. We saw a great many countries."

"But none equal to this country, I'll wager?"

"None equal to this country for an American."

"Seems to me I heard the governor say something about a mine or mines of yours down in Mexico."

"I have a mine in the State of Sonora, Mexico. This projected Central Sonora Railroad will assist me greatly in handling the products of that mine."

"I see. Have you been in Mexico much?"

"Quite a lot."

"How do you like the people down there?"

"Well, you know that about two-thirds of the country's population consists of Indians. They are the descendants of the once mighty Aztecs, but there is nothing very warlike about the most of them. They seem crushed, poverty-stricken, and sad. They labor like slaves for a mere pittance when they work at all, and their condition is truly pitiful."

"But the progressive citizens, the ruling class—what do you think of them?"

"I have met some very pleasant people among them."

"I know a fellow from the City of Mexico."

"Do you?"

"Yes; he's here in New York now. His father sent him here to learn something about our ways of doing business. He seems like a pretty fine fellow, too. I invited him out for dinner to-day, but I'm not sure he will come. He knows he's welcome to drop in any time."

"What's his name?"

"Carlos Mendoza. His father is a great gun down in Mexico."

"The Mendozas form an important family."

"I hope he comes out, for I'd like to have you meet him."

Less than ten minutes later Carlos Mendoza himself knocked at the door of that room.

"I came right up, Arthur, my dear friend," he laughed, showing his handsome teeth as he entered.

"That was right," said Hatch. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Merriwell, Carlos. Mr. Merriwell, the friend I mentioned, Mr. Mendoza."

The young Mexican straightened up, and looked at Merry with an expression of the keenest interest.

"Mr. Merriwell," he said, "I am happy to know you. I believe I have heard of you before."

There was nothing of genuine American heartiness in the handshake he gave Frank.

Mendoza had the atmosphere of his race, easy and languid. He dropped gracefully on a chair and reached out for the cigarettes, the open case of Arthur Hatch being near.

"Forgot my papers," he smiled, "so I can't roll one of my own. I won't rob you, Arthur?"

"You'll not rob me if you take them all."

"You're always generous."

"Nothing generous about that, old man."

"Oh, I know cigarettes are inexpensive, especially to the son of an American money king; but——"

"I shall not want those things any more," said Art, as if determined to let his new visitor know without delay of his resolutions. "I have quit smoking, Carlos."

The Mexican lad lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"Quit?" he questioned. "Are you joking?"

"No; I'm in earnest. I've knocked off for good."

"How foolish!" laughed Carlos. "Why, how can you bear to deprive yourself of such a comfort and luxury? Oh, the enjoyment of a good cigarette! Nothing can take its place. A fellow loses a great deal if he doesn't smoke. Next thing you'll tell me that you have stopped drinking."

"I have."

Mendoza almost dropped his cigarette.

"What?"

"I don't wonder that you stare, but it is true. I have sworn off."

"Pardon me for smiling!" exclaimed the young Mexican, lifting his slender hand to his mouth. "I fear it is not good breeding, but I can't help it."

Young Hatch flushed.

"That's all right, Carlos!" he exclaimed. "I have a right to knock off any of my bad habits if I wish to, I suppose."

"Oh, why do you call them bad habits? I see no sense in that, Arthur. Every one smokes and drinks, you know. Down in my country——"

"Not every one," interrupted Arthur. "Merriwell does not."

Mendoza shrugged his shoulders like a Frenchman.

"Then he doesn't know what he's missing. Oh, stop if you wish, Arthur; you'll be at it again within a week."

"I'll bet you ten dollars on that!" cried Hatch warmly.

"You'd lose. But be careful; perhaps Señor Merriwell is so very scrupulous that he does not believe in betting. Perhaps he never bets. Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter of Mendoza was most irritating.

By this time Frank's dislike for the fellow was most pronounced. In Mendoza he saw one of the companions of Arthur Hatch who was bringing to bear a most evil influence on the boy. It was the laughter and ridicule of such fellows as this that Arthur dreaded.

"I do not believe in betting," admitted Merry, at once. "By that I mean that I do not believe in betting for the purpose of making profit, and particularly am I opposed to betting on games of chance."

"I am afraid," said Carlos, with sarcasm, "that you're a trifle too good, Señor Merriwell, for association with the rest of us. Did you never bet?"

"Yes," admitted Frank, "I have done such a thing."

"Ah! Then you have reformed? You've had your fun, and now you think others should not have theirs. Did you never play cards?"

"Yes."

"For money?"

Frank admitted that he had played for money.

"Then you have not always been a saint," observed Mendoza, in that same irritating manner. "You have really lived—a little."

The insolence of the fellow in talking to Frank in such a manner was felt by Hatch, who hastened to check him.

"Mr. Merriwell is no softie!" he exclaimed, seeming to feel that Frank needed defending. "He was a famous athlete at Yale College. He made a great reputation as a baseball and football player."

"Baseball—paugh!" cried Carlos. "I have seen the senseless sport you call baseball. Sport! There is no sport in it. It is tame. Football is better, but that is not much. For real sport, Señor Merriwell, you should see a Mexican bullfight."

"That is what you consider real sport, is it?" asked Frank.

"It is—it is grand sport! It is fine to see the bullfighters in the ring, to see the bull charging one after another, to see them fleeing on their horses, to see the horses gored and brought down, while the riders barely escape by a hair, and at last to see the chief bullfighter meet the charge of the bull and slay the creature. You should witness a bullfight, Mr. Merriwell."

Frank smiled into the face of the callow Mexican lad. No wonder he smiled, for, years before, in Spain, as a mere boy, while traveling with Professor Scotch, Frank had leaped into the ring at a bullfight in order to save the life of Zuera, the lady bullfighter of Madrid, and with a sword dropped by a frightened espada had himself slain the bull.

"Mendoza," he said, "I have seen your Mexican bullfights, and I once witnessed such a spectacle in Madrid. A Spanish bullfight is bad enough, but a Mexican bullfight is the most disgusting and brutal thing imaginable. Usually your bull is frightened and runs around seeking some avenue of escape from the torturers who pursue him, assailing him with their banderillos. At last he may be goaded and driven to a sort of desperate resistance. When he turns on his tormentors they permit him to gore the wretched old horses which have been provided as a sacrifice to glut the thirst of the populace for the sight of blood.

"I have seen three or four of those poor beasts dying in a Mexican bull ring at the same time, some lying on the ground, and feebly trying to rise, or staggering weakly around with their bodies ripped open. I have seen the bull at last stand exhausted and cowed while the one chosen to dispatch him walked up and did the job. I have heard the crowd roar with delight as the sword was plunged into the neck of the bull and the creature's blood gushed forth. Don't talk to me about such sport!"

Frank's words and manner seemed to scorch the Mexican for a moment, but he quickly recovered, snapping his fingers.

"Like most Americans, you quail and grow sick at the sight of a little blood," he sneered. "We hear about the courage of Americans, and, of course, some of them are brave; but I doubt the courage of any man who gets sick over the sight of a little good, red blood."

"Gentlemen," cried Hatch, in dismay, "I hope you are not going to——"

"Don't worry, Arthur," interrupted Frank. "It is plain that Mendoza and I hold quite different views. It is the difference between two races. There will be no further discussion."

Mendoza sprang up.

"You are right," he admitted; "it is the difference between my people and your people. We do not understand each other. If I have been hasty in anything, forget it. I presume Señor Merriwell is right—from his standpoint. Let it pass."

Hatch was relieved.

"Let's go out for a little air," he suggested. "I wish to show Merriwell round the place."

"A lovely place," nodded the Mexican lad. "The home of my good friend Arthur Hatch, who, although an American, is a man I do not believe would turn squeamish at sight of a little blood."

Frank was quite willing and ready to go out.

The sun was hanging low in the west, its last rays shimmering upon the surface of the broad Hudson. The air was chilly and rapidly growing colder.

"It's fine here in the summer," said Arthur, as they strolled about; "but I prefer the city just now. Later, when there is ice boating, we have some great sport up here. Yes, that is real sport! Making a mile a minute on an ice boat is enough to satisfy any one. I'd like to have you up here for some of that, Merriwell."

"I know I would enjoy it," smiled Frank. "I've done a little ice boating; but not on the scale that it's done up here."

As they walked about, Mendoza gradually fell behind.

"I'm afraid your friend is sulking," said Merry.

"Let him sulk!" exclaimed Arthur, in a low tone. "He had deuced bad taste in making the talk he did, and I'm rather sore on him. Don't pay any attention to him."

Thus it happened that Carlos was left behind and dropped out of sight.

He was passing a thick hedge, when suddenly from the opposite side rose the head and shoulders of a boy nearly his own age, and somewhat resembling him in general appearance. This boy whistled a soft signal and called the name of Carlos, who turned in surprise and saw him.

For a moment Mendoza stood staring in a surprised and bewildered way. Then his eyes gleamed, and he exclaimed:

"As I live, it is Felipe Jalisco!"

The boy beyond the hedge spoke in Spanish.

"I have been watching for you, Carlos, for I saw you enter that house. Join me quickly."

There was an opening in the hedge, and through this Mendoza hastened, the two boys falling into each other's arms like long-lost brothers.

"How comes it that you are here?" questioned Carlos, still betraying his amazement.

"Come away into the wooded hollow down yonder," invited Felipe. "I will then tell you. I do not wish to be seen by any one but you."

Together they descended into the little hollow through which ran a stream that was spanned by a rustic bridge. They sat down on the bridge staring at each other with a strange expression of delight and affection in their eyes.

"I knew it would surprise you to see me," said Felipe.

"Is that strange? When last we met it was thousands of miles away in our own country. I told you then that my father had promised to send me here to learn some of the business ways of these miserable gringos."

"I remember; and I told you that I had found an old document that would make me very rich."

"Yes, Felipe. Are you rich now?"

"Not yet; but I shall be soon."

"I am glad, for you are my dearest friend. Did your search for riches bring you so far?"

"Yes."

"But you told me the old document would give you much land in Mexico."

"So it should, Carlos; but the document was never recorded. It was made when Mexico first came to be a republic, and then there was much confusion and little method. It gives me a great strip of land in Sonora, and on that land, as I have learned, is one mine alone rich enough to provide me all the money I could ever desire. But that mine is held and is being worked by a cursed gringo. It was to find him that I came so far."

"And have you found him?"

"Yes, and demanded what is rightfully mine."

"His answer——"

"Was to laugh at me! All I wished was that he should pay me well. Why should he not, when he is getting richer and richer from property that is mine? Had he given me my right, I could have everything I need. I meant to let him go on working the mine if he gave me one-half it produces; but first I sought to frighten him by demanding a great sum. I asked for five hundred thousand dollars. I showed the document. He told me not one dollar would he ever pay me. Carlos, this gringo even told me the document was a forgery!"

"It is like them all! I hate them, Felipe! Not one have I found that I can really care for. Still I take pains not to let them know what I really think of them. It is to learn their business ways and tricks I am here, and I will succeed. This day I am visiting Arthur Hatch, who thinks me his friend. Ha, ha! I took pains to make his acquaintance because his father is one of the great business men I wish to watch. I want to find out how it is he succeeds so wonderfully. But there are other reasons why I stick close by Hatch. He spends much money, and he knows many gringos it is good for me to meet. Sometimes I feel like telling him what a great fool I think he is; but it would not be wise."

"When I came up here to-day," said Felipe, "I did not once dream that I should find you. I have some friends in New York, but none like you, Carlos—not one. I came here because of the American who has my mine. He has sworn never to give me a dollar of what is rightfully mine, but to his face I told him he must pay or I would kill him."

"That was right. Did he turn pale?"

"Not at all; he laughed."

"It will do you no good to kill him."

"It would give me the greatest pleasure, but then I could not frighten him into paying me what I will have. It is to begin to frighten him I am here. I wish him to know his life is in danger all the time. I will follow him night and day, and make him understand in time. I saw him shortly before you came along by the hedge."

"Did you, Felipe?"

"Yes; he was with the boy whose father lives in that house."

Carlos was surprised.

"Do you mean Frank Merriwell?"

"He is the one! It is he who is robbing me of what is mine. He laughed at me when I demanded

money. I hate him!"

"Felipe, I love you more because you hate him! I have seen and talked with him, and my pleasure would be to put a knife between his ribs!"

Again those boys embraced.

"Carlos, you can help me," said Felipe.

"How?"

"If we could meet him together in the dark and fall upon him. Together we could beat him down and nearly kill him. Then I would tell him that next time Felipe Jalisco would finish the job unless he paid to me that money. The gringos are cowards. They laugh and pretend they are not afraid; but when real danger comes they have no courage at all."

"It would do me good to help you," said Carlos. "Have you a plan?"

"Could you not induce him to walk down here after dark? I would be waiting here, and would spring on him from behind."

"He does not like me. I fear he would not walk with me at all. I don't think it can be done."

"I must find a way to strike at him my first blow to-night."

"Wait," said Mendoza. "He will stay here overnight."

"Yes?"

"So will I."

"What of it?"

"I think I know the room he will have. I can point it out to you. If you could attack him in that room and give him a great fright——"

"How is it possible?"

"It will be cold to-night, but you are wearing your heavy coat. If you could wait until all had gone to bed, then I might let you into the house. I might show you his room. But, Felipe, you would not kill him to-night?"

"Not to-night."

"Then, if you wish, I will dare it. I will let you into that house, but you know what it means if you should be caught there. Will you take the chance?"

"Can it be arranged so that I may get out quickly and easily?"

"I believe it can."

"Then I will dare anything that I may let him know Felipe Jalisco means to keep the oath he has taken."

CHAPTER XVII.

EVIL INFLUENCE.

It was a pleasant dinner hour at the home of Warren Hatch when Frank met Mrs. Hatch, who proved to be a strangely modest, motherly sort of woman. Merry decided that she had been a country girl, and that the change in fortune that had lifted her from humbleness to her present position as the wife of a very wealthy man had not changed her character in the least.

Mendoza was exceedingly agreeable at table. He was not forward, but seemed to take just the proper interest and proper part in the flow of conversation, and not once during the meal was he offensive in the slightest degree. But for his first unpleasant impression of the fellow, Merry might have fancied him quite a decent chap.

The Mexican was very frank in stating his desire to learn everything possible about American methods of business while he remained in New York, and he asked a few questions of Mr. Hatch, but never pressed a point when the gentleman seemed reticent over it.

"I don't presume you are looking for a business opening here?" questioned Hatch. "Why, Americans have their eyes on Mexico, which they say is very rich and offers innumerable opportunities for the man of brains, business, and capital. You have fine plantations, splendid ranches, and some of the richest mines in the world. Are you going to let Americans open up all your mines and work them?"

"Oh, no," laughed Carlos. "Americans have not all our mines, by any means. Many Americans have obtained mines in my country to which they have no legal right. For instance, there were the great Santa Maria Mines, which were secured and operated by a syndicate of Americans.

They thought they had a claim to those mines that could not be disputed, and they laughed at any one that suggested the possibility of trouble over them. One day a man by the name of Casaria came along and told them that the property was his, and that they must either pay him well for the privilege of working them, or get out. They told him to go away. He went. Then he began proceedings against them, and in less than a year they were ousted and compelled to abandon every building they had constructed, every piece of machinery they had put in, and all that. Casaria had beaten them, and he turned round and leased his property to another company that pays him well for the privilege of working it. The same thing is likely to happen to other Americans in Mexico."

Frank surveyed Mendoza keenly, wondering if the boy had told this for his benefit; but apparently the lad was wholly innocent that it might apply to any one present.

After dinner Merry spent the evening with Mr. and Mrs. Hatch, while Arthur and Carlos retired soon to Art's room.

Finally Mr. Hatch asked Frank if he wished to retire, and Merry expressed a desire to do so.

It happened that Frank's room was not far from that of Arthur Hatch. As he followed Mr. Hatch past Art's open door, Mendoza called to him.

"Going to bed so soon, Mr. Merriwell?" he inquired. "Come in for a moment before you retire."

Having been shown to his room, Frank decided to accept Mendoza's invitation. It was a queer feeling that impelled him to do so, for Arthur had said nothing.

As he entered Art's room, he detected a quick movement on the part of young Hatch, who hastily rose to his feet, asking Frank to sit down. His face was unnaturally flushed, and there was a peculiar expression in his eyes.

Carlos was smoking a cigarette, and the air of the room was heavy with smoke. About him there was a certain air of suppressed satisfaction.

There seemed no particular reason why the boys should wish Frank to drop in before going to bed. Indeed, Arthur seemed ill at ease and talked little. He seemed to be making an effort to appear natural.

It was not long before Merry divined Mendoza's object in calling him.

The Mexican had induced Arthur to break the pledge recently made to Frank.

Although Carlos was smoking, on a little ash receiver beneath the table near which Hatch had been sitting lay a freshly lighted cigarette, from which a vapory bit of blue smoke was rising.

Arthur had been smoking and drinking with Carlos.

The young Mexican had wished Frank to see that his power over the boy was strong enough to make him break his pledge.

Having decided on this, Frank felt like seizing Mendoza and giving him a thorough shaking up. Inwardly he was angry with the fellow, but outwardly he was undisturbed.

Carlos took special delight in trying to induce his host to talk, apparently hoping Hatch would make some sort of a break.

Frank knew it would do no good to talk to Arthur Hatch then. Instead, it would almost surely anger and shame him to such an extent that he would become resentful, announce himself as his own master, and declare his perfect ability to look out for himself, without the advice or assistance of any one.

"The smoke is somewhat too thick for me here, boys," said Merry. "I think I'll turn in."

"Sorry you can't sit up with us a while longer," said Arthur, but he could not hide his relief and satisfaction.

He was glad Frank was going, and Merry knew it.

"As in other things," smiled Carlos, "you seem to have some old-fashioned ways about sleeping. I don't believe any man half lives who sleeps too much at night. Ah! New York and upper Broadway is the place! There something is doing nearly all the night."

"If the occasion demands," said Merriwell, "I can stay up with any of them; but just now I feel like bottling up a little sleep, as the expression goes."

"I hope you may enjoy your rest," said Carlos. "I hope nothing may disturb you. Good night, señor."

"Good night," said Frank. "Good night, Arthur."

In his room Merry fell to thinking of the two boys as he undressed.

"Carlos Mendoza is Arthur's evil genius," he decided. "The influence of the fellow on Hatch is wholly bad. What is the best course for me to pursue? Had I better warn his father? Is there not some other way to open Arthur's eyes? If I go to Warren Hatch, the man may become angry, and

give his son a raking down that will do more harm than good."

After getting into bed, Merry continued to meditate on the matter, finding it was not easy to decide on a course.

He thought of many other things. The memory of his recent encounters with Porfias del Norte haunted him. He thought of the manner in which he had been trapped by Del Norte up in the Adirondacks, and thanked his lucky stars that O'Toole, the Irishman, out of gratitude, had aided him to escape from the murderous Mexican.

"Poor O'Toole!" he murmured. "When he became my friend he was faithful unto death."

The memory of his own desperation and distress on learning that Inza Burrage had fallen into the power of Del Norte caused him to twist and turn on the bed. Only for O'Toole, he might have been baffled in following Inza's captors. Through the acquaintance and friendship of O'Toole with Red Ben, Del Norte's Indian guide, had come the rescue of Inza.

Once more Frank seemed to be standing in the depths of the Adirondack wilderness at the foot of the mountain, and again he seemed to hear the shriek of terror which escaped the lips of the Irishman as he fell from the precipice, and came crashing through the treetops to strike the ground a short distance away. Then Merry lived over once more his knife duel with Del Norte on the cliff, the escape from the cave, and the struggle to get away from the landslide, when, with superhuman efforts, he had carried Inza in his arms to a place of safety.

"Del Norte is dead," he muttered; "but he seems to be reincarnated in Felipe Jalisco. I have not seen the last of Jalisco. That man Hagan is dangerous, too. Without the backing Hagan will try to give, Jalisco would give me little trouble in regard to the mine. His claim is a forgery beyond doubt; but he seems to think it genuine. Were it not for Hagan, I might do something for the boy, if his demands were anywhere near reasonable. Hagan is determined to get his finger into the pie, and he'll want a large slice. He'll get nothing."

Finally Frank slept; but he was awakened by something that pressed sudden and hard across his throat. He tried to start up, but that thing across his throat held him helpless.

Besides that, there was a sudden weight on his breast, as of a hand that thrust him back.

Through the window of his room came a dim light, by which he discerned a dark figure that seemed crouching on the edge of the bed.

He knew instantly that some person was there. Through the gloom a pair of gleaming eyes, like those of an animal, seemed to look into his.

"Be still!" came a hissing whisper. "Make a sound and you shall die!"

By this time Frank was wide-awake, with every sense aroused.

He wondered if it was a burglar.

"Don't cry out!" again commanded his assailant. "One little cry from you will be your last! Do you feel this?"

Something keen pricked Merriwell's throat.

"It is my knife," declared the unknown. "With a single stroke I can open the vein in your throat, and nothing in all the world can save you."

The situation was one to send a thrill through the strongest nerves.

"What do you want?" asked Merry, in a low tone.

"Softer than that!" hissed the fellow with the knife. "Don't speak louder than a whisper if your life to you has any value."

"What do you want?" whispered Merry.

"Ha! That is right! Now let me warn you further. There is a stout cord across your neck, and you cannot lift your head if you attempt it so much as your strength will admit. The cord is made fast to both sides of the bed beneath you. You are perfectly helpless. First it is that I want you to know. Even if the cord should not be there, with my knife I could kill you when you tried to struggle. Now should you with your hands grasp me you would be like a child to destroy."

"Having made all this plain, go ahead and tell me what you are after," urged Merriwell.

"Are you not afraid? I expected to hear your teeth chattering together like castanets. I expected to feel your body shaking, as if with a great chill."

There was disappointment in these whispered words.

"What good would it do me to be afraid?"

"Can you reason like that in a moment when your life is in the most terrible danger? Have you ice in your veins?"

"Why should you do me an injury? If you are here to rob me——"

"I am not! I am here to make you stop from robbing me. I told you I would have my right or kill you. You laughed at me. Now you do not laugh!"

"Felipe Jalisco!"

"It is my name," was the bold confession.

Frank was amazed.

"How did you get into this house?"

"I find the way. When I told you that, night or day, asleep or awake, there would never be one moment that you would not be free from the peril of death at my hand, you laughed. You do not laugh now!"

"This isn't my time to laugh," confessed Frank. "Only fools laugh at the wrong moment."

"You were a fool when you defied me. You did not know me. You did not know the blood of the Jaliscos in me. To-night you thought yourself safe from harm. You did not dream it possible that Felipe Jalisco might strike his knife into your heart while you slept. When I told you that not one moment would you be safe, you thought it the foolish talk of a boy. Now you see."

"It is too dark for me to see very well."

"I am here to make you swear to give me what is mine. If you do it not, then you die!"

"And you will go to the electric chair at Sing Sing. Should you kill me to-night, Jalisco, you would be executed for murder."

"Paugh! I fear it not."

"Do you fancy you could escape?"

"I could."

"How little you reckon on the power of the law in this country. For you there would be no escape. You threatened my life, and that threat was heard before many witnesses. Those witnesses are all rich and powerful men. Should I be killed here and now, the first thing those men would do would be to bring all their combined influence to bear on having you arrested immediately, and convicted of that murder. Even if you were not guilty, and by some chance an unknown party should murder me, you would find it almost impossible to escape punishment for the crime. All those men would believe you did it, and they would bend every energy and the influence of their great wealth to carry you to the death chair. Did you attempt to prove an alibi, with all their influence and their wealth they would overthrow the proof, and show your witnesses were liars and perjurers. You cannot harm me without bringing destruction on yourself."

In this manner Frank forced the belief that he spoke the truth upon Felipe. Although he could not see the dark face of the Mexican, he felt that Jalisco had received his check.

"I have not come to kill you now," confessed the boy. "I want you to know I can do it. I want you to feel the constant danger. I want you to understand that when I am ready to strike I can do so, and strike to destroy. Perhaps not in New York or any great city like this shall I do it. I will follow you like a shadow. Where you go, there I will be. Unless you give me what I demand, I will some day kill you, having chosen the spot and time. Then I will escape, and no power may stop me. Fool of a gringo, you must give me my own! I will leave you in possession of the mine, but you must pay me one-half of all the money you make from it. It is the only thing that will save you. Señor Hagan asked for a big sum all at once, as he thought thus to get his share right away. I would have had him accept half the profit. Swear now that I shall have it! Swear you will pay——"

"Not a cent!" answered Merry grimly. "You have taken the wrong method of getting anything from a Merriwell. Not a cent shall you ever have!"

Felipe swore in Spanish.

"Then you are doomed!" he panted.

Suddenly he paused and lifted his head. A sound had reached his ears from some distant part of the house. It seemed that some one was stirring.

"Lie still!" he hissed. "If you try to follow, at the door you shall die!"

He sprang away with the soft step of a cat, and darted out at the door.

In a twinkling Merry slipped from beneath the cord, leaped from the bed, and made the house echo with the shout he uttered.

Unmindful of Jalisco's threat, he was out of that room and after the fellow in an amazing hurry. It must have been amazing for Jalisco, for the fellow was overtaken by Merry at the head of the stairs. He whirled and struck at Frank's breast, but the strong arm of the young American swept the blow aside.

Merry seized his foe, and together they went bounding and rolling the full length of the stairs.

When they landed at the bottom, Frank was on top, and the Mexican was pinned to the floor.

By this time the whole house was in commotion. Voices were calling, and lights were beginning to gleam.

"This way!" cried Frank. "I have him!"

He heard a sound on the stairs behind him, and supposed some one was rushing to his assistance. There was a patter of feet, and then the smothering folds of a blanket were flung over his head, and he was dragged backward to the floor, his hold on Felipe Jalisco being broken.

When Merry succeeded in flinging off the blanket, he found some one had turned on all the lights of the house. He saw Mr. Hatch, Arthur, Carlos Mendoza, and one or two servants near at hand. The front door stood wide open.

"A thousand pardons!" cried Mendoza, in apparent consternation and distress. "It was a sad mistake I made!"

"You flung that blanket over my head and dragged me off the fellow!" said Merry. "You permitted him to escape!"

"A thousand pardons! I thought you were the other. I thought he had you down. It was dark. I could not see."

"You deliberately aided him to escape."

"No, no; I swear I made a sad mistake—I swear it!"

"And lie when you take the oath!" retorted Frank, unable longer to restrain his feelings toward the fellow. "Mr. Hatch, you have a snake in your house, and there he is!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE POLICE RAID.

Felipe Jalisco made good his escape that night, thanks to the assistance of his friend, Carlos Mendoza.

The following morning Frank swore out a warrant for the arrest of Jalisco, and this he took with him in order to have it ready when the proper time came.

He was determined to get back at the fellow without delay.

Believing Jalisco was stopping in New York, Frank gave a description of him to the police, and set them on the lookout for the fellow. He likewise told them that Jalisco might be found in company with Bantry Hagan sooner or later.

Two days passed without the apprehension of the Mexican lad being made or any trace of him discovered. On the forenoon of the third day Frank suddenly came face to face with Bantry Hagan in front of the Vendome Hotel, on Broadway.

The moment he saw Merry, the Irishman stopped, planting himself fairly in Frank's path.

"Sure it's a word I'd like to have with you, young man," he growled, frowning blackly.

"Well, I have little time to waste on you," retorted Merry.

"I want to know what you mean by it!" said the Irishman.

"By what?"

"By giving me the devil's own annoyance with the police. For two days I've had some of them following me round in plain clothes, and I'm tired of it. Call them off, me boy—I warn ye to call them off!"

"When they find Felipe Jalisco I think they'll not bother you further."

"So you're going to have the boy arrested? It's a bad mistake you're making by putting the coppers after him, for he has a nasty temper, and next time he gets you under his knife he's certain to cut your throat. I've warned him against it, but when you get through talking to one of those Mexicans they're worse than when you began. If it's sensible you are, you'll listen a bit to the boy's just demand. It may save your life if you listen."

"If there was a particle of justice in his demand, I would not refuse to listen. If anything happens to me it's pretty certain you'll find yourself arrested as the accomplice of Jalisco."

Then Frank passed on.

That night, after leaving a theatre which he had attended, Merry encountered, at Herald Square, a plain-clothes man, whom he knew, an officer by the name of Bronson. He had paused to speak with this man when he noticed on the opposite side of the street several youngsters who seemed to be having something of a hilarious time.

"They're pretty well started," observed Bronson, noting Merry's glance; "but they're still able to keep out of trouble. One chap is pretty full."

"I know him," said Frank. "I know the fellow who has him by the arm."

He had recognized Arthur Hatch and Carlos Mendoza. Arthur was unsteady on his feet and rather boisterous.

Frank's first inclination was to cross the street immediately and to get Arthur away from his companion; but something caused him to decide on a different course.

"See here, Bronson," he said, "have you any particular duty on hand just now?"

"No, sir; not just at present. I'm on the lookout for crooks and sharks along here. You know we have orders to keep this part of Broadway clean of them."

"Can you come with me? I wish to follow those chaps. The one who appears to be in the worst condition is the son of Warren Hatch, the banker, and his associates are helping him go to the dogs as fast as possible. I'd like to find a way to break up his friendship with that crowd."

Bronson was willing to accompany Merry, and they followed the boisterous young men down Sixth Avenue some distance. Finally the boys disappeared into a cigar store.

"Hanged if they haven't gone into Spice Worden's!" said Bronson.

"Who is Spice Worden?"

"The proprietor of a gambling house. I know him, but I've been tipped to let him alone. There's graft in it for somebody, and I fancy I know who gets the rake-off, though I wouldn't like to say."

When they looked into the cigar store Hatch and his companions had disappeared.

"The entrance to the gambling house is through the store," explained Bronson. "Do you wish to go in?"

"Yes."

"Come on."

They entered the store. A young man behind the counter looked startled when he saw Bronson, and made a motion that the plain-clothes man checked.

"Don't bother with the buzzer, Tommy," said the officer. "There's nothing doing to my knowledge. This friend of mine wants to reach a chap who's inside. Call Worden, will you?"

A moment later Spice Worden himself appeared, and Bronson quickly convinced him that it was "all right." Worden seemed fearful that they were getting evidence, but the officer assured him to the contrary, upon which they were conducted behind the rear partition, through a dark passage, up a flight of stairs, and finally admitted to Worden's gambling joint.

The place was not luxurious, although it was comfortably fitted and furnished. The air was heavy with tobacco smoke, and a great crowd of men were playing roulette, faro, and other games.

Frank quickly discovered Arthur Hatch, who was "bucking the tiger," his recent companions around him.

But what was more interesting was the discovery of both Felipe Jalisco and Bantry Hagan in the group.

In a moment Merry had pointed Jalisco out to Bronson, and placed the warrant in the hands of the officer. Then he strode forward, pushed into the group, placed his hand on the shoulder of young Hatch, and said:

"Come, Arthur; you're going to come out of this place with me."

Bantry Hagan gave a cry of surprise and anger.

"It's Merriwell!" he shouted. "Jump him, boys! Do him up!"

Felipe Jalisco drew a knife, but suddenly found his wrist seized, the knife taken from him, and a pair of handcuffs snapped on his wrists, while Bronson said:

"I'll have to take you with me, young fellow. Better not make a row unless——"

"Don't let him arrest Felipe!" cried Carlos Mendoza. "Take him away from the cop! Come on!"

At this moment, however, there came to the ears of all a sudden hammering and crashing, together with the whirring sound of a buzzer. Instantly the entire place was in confusion.

"A raid!" was the cry, and the men started on a rush to get out.

There came further crashing at the door of that room, which fell before the blows, and a squad of officers with drawn clubs poured in.

"Oh, goodness!" gasped Arthur Hatch, horrified and sobered. "We'll all be pinched and locked up. The governor will hear of it! If my mother finds out—— What shall I do?"

He was on the verge of collapsing.

"I'll try to get you out," said Merry. "But you must swear to cut your bad companions and to forever quit drinking and smoking."

"I swear it!" panted the boy. "Anything to get out of here. I'll keep the oath, too!"

In the meantime, the gamblers had rushed, and shouted, and struggled, and fought to escape; but all their efforts were useless. They were captured to the last man of them.

Spice Worden was arrested in his own gambling den. In the grasp of an officer he came face to face with Bronson, who had Jalisco.

"I didn't think it of you, Bronson!" he said, his face pale. "I thought you a square man."

"I swear I knew nothing of this raid," said Bronson. "I have my game here. I never lied to any man yet."

Frank and Arthur were close at hand, and Merry appealed to Bronson.

"How are we going to get clear of this trap?" he asked. "I don't fancy going to jail with a lot of gamblers."

"I'll take care of you," promised Bronson.

"And my friend here, too?"

"Your friend, too."

He turned Jalisco over to another policeman, and told Frank and Art to follow him. There was a back door that was guarded. When this door was reached, Bronson held a short, low-spoken conversation with the officer in charge there, after which he motioned to his companions, and the three descended the stairs and finally came out upon a street that ran from Sixth Avenue to Broadway.

"Here you are, Mr. Merriwell," said Bronson. "Sorry that raid happened just then, but I reckon there's no harm done. I suppose you'll be on hand to appear against Jalisco in the morning?"

"Without fail," said Merry. "Good night, Bronson. This has been a fortunate night for me."

"And for me!" exclaimed Arthur Hatch, as Bronson departed. "Good Lord! but I was frightened when those officers came! I saw myself scorned by my father! I saw my mother broken-hearted! In one moment I realized what my bad habits had brought me to. I broke my first pledge to you, Frank Merriwell; but, with the help of God, I'll keep my second one!"

Frank Merriwell had just taken his cold plunge the next morning, when the telephone in his apartments rang.

Immediately Merry answered the summons.

"Hello!" he called into the phone.

"Hello!" was the answer. "Is this Frank Merriwell?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm Sam Bronson."

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Bronson."

"I'm afraid you'll not be so good-natured, Mr. Merriwell, when I tell you what has happened."

"Eh? What's the matter? Anything gone wrong?"

"I should say so! You know that Mexican that I arrested on the warrant you gave me?"

"Of course."

"Well, I turned him over to the rest of the boys who had the whole crowd rounded up, while I helped you get your friend, Hatch, out of the place, you know."

"Yes. I am to appear against Jalisco in court this morning."

"You don't have to appear."

"Why not?"

"He wasn't with the bunch locked up last night."

"Impossible!"

"It's true, unfortunately."

"How could that be? I don't understand it."

"Nor I. I'm doing my best to get at the bottom of it. Neither he nor Bantry Hagan were locked up. Both got away somehow."

Frank was more than vexed over this information.

"There's something crooked about this, Bronson!" he exclaimed. "Why, you put the irons on Jalisco."

"I know I did, and I'm shy a good pair of bracelets."

"He could not have escaped from the handcuffs unless they were removed by an officer. I should say this thing needs investigating, Bronson! And Hagan was not locked up either?"

"No. Neither Jalisco nor Hagan was with the bunch when it was rounded up at the station house last night. Both got away somewhere between Worden's and the station house. You know this man, Hagan, is pretty well known to the police, and he has influence. I'm going to make a roar over the business, and somebody's head will come off if I can fix the blame anywhere. It's the best I can do. I'm sorry, but I know you can't blame me."

"I'm sure you were not to blame, Bronson. This is bad business. I wanted to teach Jalisco a lesson. He's a dangerous young thug, and he's taken an oath to kill me unless I cough up a lot of cash to him. Do your best to get at the bottom of the matter and to get track of Jalisco at the same time. If you set eyes on him again, pinch him at once."

"Leave that to me," said Bronson. "I'm pretty sore over it. I'll call round to see you in an hour or so. Thought I'd phone you and let you know what had happened."

"Thank you, Bronson. Good-by."

"Good-by."

Frank hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER XIX.

ALVAREZ LAZARO.

That morning Watson Scott had a visitor who gave his name as Alvarez Lazaro.

Lazaro was a slender man of medium height, with snow-white hair and face that seemed to indicate he had passed through great suffering of some sort, for it was strangely drawn and deeply lined. His age seemed uncertain, but Scott, who was an excellent judge, would have placed him well along in the fifties, although his step and carriage was like that of a much younger man.

He was expensively dressed, wore a big sable overcoat, and had on his fingers a number of rings set with precious stones.

Old Gripper surveyed the visitor with unusual interest. There was something about the man that fascinated him—something that attracted, yet repelled.

"I'll not take up much of your time, Señor Scott," said Lazaro, in a soft, musical voice. "I know you are a very busy man. I have called to make inquiries about this railroad they say is soon to be built in my country. I hear you are president of the company."

Scott knitted his heavy brows. "Where had he heard that voice before?" he asked himself.

"You are from Mexico, Mr. Lazaro?" was his question.

"I am, señor."

"What do you wish to know about the Central Sonora Railroad?"

"It is settled that the road will be constructed?"

"Yes. Every preparation is being made to begin work upon it."

"The company is formed and the stock issued?"

"The stock is not yet issued."

Lazaro had taken a seat on a chair toward which Scott had motioned him.

"But it will be——"

"As soon as we think proper."

"You are confident that the road will pay?"

"If I did not think so, I'd not be so deeply interested in it."

"Naturally not, for I understand you are a very shrewd man of affairs, señor."

The complimentary words of the Mexican were wasted on Scott, who believed a man usually dealt in compliments when he was seeking something to his own advantage.

"Who are your intimate associates in this great project, if I am not presuming too far by asking, Señor Scott?"

"Mr. Warren Hatch, Mr. Sudbury Bragg, and Mr. Frank Merriwell are in the company."

"It seems that I have heard of Señor Merriwell. Has he not a rich mine down there somewhere in Sonora?"

"He has."

"Then it is likely he will be the one most benefited by the building of this road?"

"It certainly will be a great thing for him."

Lazaro nodded slowly. He knew Watson Scott was surveying him in a puzzled manner, but he seemed wholly unconscious of the fact.

"The stock of this company you think will be a profitable investment for those who may purchase it, señor?"

"I believe so."

"Of course your company intends to retain a controlling interest in the road?"

"Exactly."

"Does Señor Merriwell intend to hold a large amount of the stock?"

"I believe he has pledged himself to take a certain amount of it."

"I have heard that he has other valuable mines besides the one in Mexico."

"You seem very much interested in him?"

"Not particularly, although to my ears there has come a rumor at some time that his claim to the mine in Mexico is a very flimsy one and that he may lose it."

"Wind, sir—nothing more. The rumor was founded on the claims of a countryman of yours, Señor Porfias del Norte, who held an old and worthless land grant to the territory in which Merriwell's mine is located. The grant had been revoked, and Del Norte could have done nothing had he lived."

"Then he is dead?"

"Dead and buried so deeply that nothing but the horn of old Gabriel can ever bring him up."

"Then it is likely that Señor Merriwell may escape some annoyance, at least. I think he will be glad of that."

"I'm not sure about it," said Old Gripper, with a flitting smile. "Merriwell is a fighter, and he seems to enjoy trouble. But we are not progressing. You have asked me a lot of questions, but have not yet stated your business."

"I am contemplating investing in Central Sonora when it is placed on the market."

"Ah!"

"Yes, señor. I have some money I wish to invest in something solid and promising. I presume you will be ready enough to put out much of that stock, and it may start a little slow. On your assurance that you believe it a good thing, I will take some shares."

"How much do you contemplate investing?"

"What will be the par value of the stock?"

"One hundred dollars a share."

"Then," said Alvarez Lazaro, with perfect nonchalance, "you may put me down, if you are willing, for one thousand shares."

Old Gripper blinked.

"That is one hundred thousand dollars," he said.

The Mexican bowed.

"Which will be as much as I care to invest in a single enterprise."

The interest of Watson Scott was at a high pitch now.

"It happens that I know nothing whatever about you, Mr. Lazaro," he said. "I have had other men come here and make similar propositions; but have found, on investigation, that they had not a dollar behind them. If you can produce credentials or letters from——"

"I can produce plenty of letters, señor. I have them from many notable men of my country, including President Diaz. I do not carry them with me, you understand; but I can produce them whenever I choose. If you wish, I will make an appointment with you, at which I'll satisfy you beyond a doubt that I am exactly what I represent myself to be. If it is possible, I should like to have you dine with me to-night at the Waldorf. I hope you may find it convenient to accept my most urgent invitation, señor."

Now, under ordinary circumstances Watson Scott would not have contemplated such a thing. Lazaro had appeared unheralded and unannounced, and Scott knew absolutely nothing of the man. Yet all through that interview Scott had experienced an almost mastering desire to know something about him. He could not understand why he should take such unusual interest in the stranger, but from the moment the man had entered the office Old Gripper was beset by a conviction that this was not their first meeting.

"I don't know," he said, in a hesitating manner that was wholly unnatural with him who was generally so settled and decisive. "I suppose——"

"You will accept," nodded Lazaro, as if it were decided. "At what time will it be most convenient for you to come."

"Why—er—when do you dine?"

"Whenever Señor Scott chooses," bowed the man with the snowy hair. "Any hour from six to nine will please me."

"Well, I'll be along between six and half-past," said Scott, and then wondered why he had said it.

"It is well," bowed Lazaro, rising. "I will now intrude no more on your precious time."

Scott stood up.

"Hang it all!" he exclaimed. "I'd swear I know you! Isn't it possible we have met before. I can't seem to remember your face, but your eyes and your voice seem to stir some forgotten memory within me."

The Mexican slowly shook his head.

"I have traveled much," he said, "and have met many people; but I am certain it has never been my good fortune to be presented to you, Señor Scott. Of course it is possible that you may have seen me somewhere and some time in the past; but I would swear that never until I entered this office did I place my eyes on you. Your face is one not easily forgotten."

"And yours is one no man should forget, sir. I presume I am mistaken."

Lazaro paused at the door.

"If you found it convenient to bring along one of your associates in this railroad deal, say Señor Hatch or Señor Bragg, I should be glad."

"Not likely I can. It is barely possible I might bring Merriwell."

"As I understand, he is too young, Señor Scott. I had rather meet men older and wiser. I cannot tell why, but the youth of Señor Merriwell has somehow prejudiced me against him."

"When you meet him, if you do, you'll find him wise far beyond his years and as keen as a rapier."

"No doubt you are right, señor; but I do not care to make an effort before him to establish my responsibility. I should feel that the situation ought to be reversed and that he should be seeking to satisfy me."

"I believe I understand your feeling on that point, Mr. Lazaro; but you feel that way because you do not know him. However, we'll leave him out to-night. Good day. Look for me at the time set."

"Thank you, señor. Good day."

Alvarez Lazaro bowed himself out of the office with the grace of a Frenchman.

Old Gripper stood quite still a number of moments, frowning deeply.

"Confound it!" he cried. "The impression that I have met that man grows stronger and stronger. But where—where?"

CHAPTER XX.

THE AVENGER.

A man in a heavy overcoat and a slouch hat was walking rapidly through one of the streets of New York leading into a squalid quarter of the East Side. Twice he stepped past a corner and stood there some time, observing the persons who passed in the direction he had been walking. Once he stepped quickly into a doorway and stood there peering back along the street until he

seemed satisfied and concluded to resume his walk.

Plainly this man feared he might be followed.

Finally on a block not far from the river, where everything looked wretched and poverty-stricken, he ascended the low steps of a house and quickly entered a doorway. The uncarpeted hall was dirty and dark. The stairs were worn and sagged a little.

Two flights of stairs did the man climb, and then, in a significant manner, he rapped on a door at the back of the house. There was a stir within the room. The door was flung open by a slender, dark-faced, dark-eyed boy, who joyously exclaimed:

"Welcome, Señor Hagan! You were a great time coming."

The man stepped into the little room, and the door was closed behind him.

"Lock it, Felipe!" he exclaimed. "Take no chances of having some one walk in on us without warning, me boy."

The key was turned in the lock.

There was a bed, a chair, and a washstand in the room. The floor was uncarpeted and the walls unpapered.

"It's a poor sort of a hole you're cooped in, Felipe," observed the visitor, flinging off his hat and unbuttoning his overcoat.

"Paugh! It is vile!" exclaimed the boy, with an expression of disgust. "But here you say they will not look to find me. It was here you brought me, and here I have remained, only sneaking out at night to buy food. Tell me the truth, Señor Hagan, are the police still looking for me?"

"It's your life you can bet on it, me lad. Frank Merriwell has them rubbering for you, and it's myself who has been watched and shadowed all the time since the night we were pinched. If he had anything good and sufficient against me, Merriwell would have me nabbed in a jiffy."

"You're sure the officers did not follow you here?"

"Trust Bantry Hagan," laughed the Irishman. "I took good care of that. I fooled the plain-clothes chap who was following me round, gave him the slip, and then came to see ye. Lucky for us I had a pull with one of the bluecoats the night of the raid at Worden's. It would have been easy for me to get assistance in ducking that night; but I wouldn't go without ye, and you had the irons on. It looked bad."

"The handcuffs are yet to be made that will hold those hands, Señor Hagan," said Felipe, with a laugh.

"Sure you made me wink when you slipped your hands out of them slick and easy. Then it was not so hard to bribe the police to let us both slip away in the darkness as they marched the prisoners downstairs and out through the passage. At that we could not have done it only for my pull with Riley. It's surprised Mr. Merriwell must have been in the morning when he learned that neither of us had been locked up."

"Fiends destroy him!" cried the boy. "How I hate him! I would love to kill him!"

"It's that thing ye'd better not do, unless you want to ruin your prospect of ever handling any of the money he is making from that mine."

"I failed to frighten him that night when I had him with my knife at his throat. He told me I would not kill him, and I am sure he believed it."

"Oh, he's a nerry lad, all right," nodded Hagan. "Del Norte found that out. If he had lived——"

There was a step outside; a sharp knock on the door.

Felipe leaped back toward the window, outside of which was the fire escape. In a moment he had the window open.

Hagan stepped quickly to the door, against which he placed his solid body, at the same time calling:

"Who is it that knocks? and what do you want here?"

"It is I, Señor Hagan," answered a voice that made the Irishman gasp and caused his eyes to bulge. "Have no fear. Open the door!"

"It's the voice of the dead!" gasped Hagan, his usually florid face gone pale.

"Who is it?" questioned Jalisco.

Instead of answering, with fingers that were not quite steady, Hagan turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

Into the room boldly walked a man who wore a sable overcoat, had hair of snowy white, and eyes of deepest midnight.

Hagan stared at this man in amazement.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Alvarez Lazaro, of Mexico," was the answer, in that same soft, musical voice that had so startled the Irishman.

"But that voice—that voice!" muttered Hagan. "And those eyes! Man, ye gave me a start! Why do you come here? What do you want?"

"I have come to meet the enemies of Frank Merriwell."

"The divvil ye say!" cried Hagan, his excitement flinging him into the brogue he so nearly avoided in quieter moments. "Why do ye come here for that?"

"Because I know you both are his enemies."

"And you—if I didn't know Porfias del Norte to be dead and buried—— But even then you'd not be the man. You're thirty years older; but you have a little of his looks and his voice in perfection."

"Do you think so? Then perhaps it came through my long acquaintance with him. Dear friends sometimes acquire each other's mode of speech and little mannerisms, it is said."

"Were you Del Norte's friend?"

"His nearest and dearest friend in all the world. This may seem strange to you, considering the difference in our ages, but it is the truth. From me he never had a secret. I knew all his plans, his hopes, his ambitions—everything—everything that he knew and felt."

"Strange he never spoke to me of you," muttered Hagan.

"Not strange, for he was not given to talking freely to any one but me. And now he is dead! But I am here to avenge him. I have learned that he was buried alive in a cave, and the thought of his frightful sufferings before he died has torn my soul with anguish. They say the real cause of his death was the gringo, Merriwell. I am the avenger of Porfias del Norte, and I have sworn to make him suffer even as Porfias suffered, and then to destroy him at last. It is an oath I shall keep."

"My, but you Mexicans are fierce at revenge and that sort of a thing!" said Hagan, with a look on his face that was almost laughable. "Here's Felipe—I've been cautioning the boy and holding him in check to keep him from slicing up Merriwell."

Lazaro turned to Felipe.

"What great wrong has Merriwell done you?" he questioned.

Then Felipe hurriedly told how Frank was working a rich mine on land that had been granted to Sebastian Jalisco by the first president of Mexico, General Victoria, and how the American had declared the grant a forgery and had refused to pay a dollar of tribute to Felipe.

"Dear boy," said Lazaro, with an air of gentleness, "I do not blame you if you can compel the gringo to give you anything; but Porfias had the only real title to that property that was worthy of consideration. Had he lived, he would have wrested everything from Merriwell. Now that he is dead, I shall take his place and do the work as he would have done it."

"Of course, you think Señor del Norte's claim the only rightful one," said Felipe; "but the grant to Guerrero del Norte was made eight years after that of President Victoria to Sebastian Jalisco. Besides, señor, President Pedraza's grant was revoked by President Santa Anna, and therefore is now wholly worthless."

"There is no need to discuss it," said Lazaro, "You have my sympathy; but I must urge you, for your own sake and for mine, to attempt no harm to Merriwell. Leave him to me, and you shall have the pleasure of seeing all his plans go wrong, his fortune dwindle, his friends drop away, his sweetheart taken from him, his strength sapped, his beauty destroyed, and, at last, his life crushed out of his broken body."

"It's a big job ye've contracted," said Bantry Hagan. "I'm afraid, me man, you don't realize what you're up against."

"You think I cannot accomplish it?"

"I have me doubts, and big ones they are."

"Time will convince you. I learned of the existence of Felipe Jalisco, learned he was in this city, wished to see him, but knew not where to find him. I found you, and I said you should lead me to the boy. You did so."

"You don't mean to tell me ye followed me here?"

"I followed you, even though you fooled the officer who was watching you. I followed you, even though you stopped at corners and watched all who passed, seeking to make sure you were not followed. I saw you stand in the doorway and gaze back along the street; but you did not observe me. Thus you led me to Felipe Jalisco. To-night I strike my first blow at Frank Merriwell."

"How?"

"In my own way. First I will ruin his scheme to build a railroad in Sonora. For that purpose the first blow shall be made this night."

"You're like Porfias del Norte turned into his own father!" declared Hagan. "When you talk you are him to the life, only that you are an old man with a furrowed face and snow-white hair. He was in the very flush of vigorous youth."

A sigh escaped Lazaro's lips, and that sigh was precisely like many a one Hagan had heard Del Norte heave.

"Ah, yes," said the man, with pathetic sadness; "I have looked in a mirror, and I know I am an old, old man. But Frank Merriwell shall not find me too old to wreak vengeance upon him!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRST STROKE.

The main dining room of the Waldorf-Astoria was well filled, almost every table being taken. The place was brilliantly lighted, the guests fashionably dressed, and the scene one to impress the unaccustomed visitor. The hidden orchestra was discoursing music to suit the taste of the most critical.

Seated at a table on the Fifth Avenue side were two men who attracted more or less attention. Old Gripper Scott was known by sight to many of those present, and, being one of the great American money kings, naturally received more than cursory notice.

But it seemed that the remarkable-appearing white-haired man, who sat opposite Old Gripper, was surveyed with even more interest than that accorded the great financier. His deeply furrowed face, his snowy hair, and his black, piercing eyes gave him a remarkable look that was certain to attract the second glance of any one who chanced to observe him.

"Who is he?" was the question asked by scores of diners.

"He's a fabulously wealthy Mexican who has come on to take a hand in some of Old Gripper's deals," explained one man, who seemed to know something about it.

Watson Scott found Alvarez Lazaro the soul of polished politeness. The musical talk of the Mexican was very entertaining, yet strangely soothing.

"After we have our coffee," said Lazaro, "I will convince you beyond doubt, señor, that my pledge to take one thousand shares of Central Sonora at par may be considered by you the same as the actual deposit of the money for the stock. I never like to talk business while dining. I know you Americans have your downtown luncheon clubs, where you go to discuss business affairs while you eat; but I do not think I could ever bring myself to adopt the habit."

"It has been found necessary in order to save time," said Scott. "With the New Yorker of affairs time is money."

"I understand that, señor; but still my prejudice against it persists. It will not take me long after dinner. You can spare a little more time. I shall regret to part from you even then."

"Are all your countrymen so free with complimentary speeches?"

"Unlike you men of the North," retorted Lazaro, "we do not hide our feelings, but speak them freely. Perhaps it is a failing, for I find that Americans often become suspicious when praised or complimented; but still, what my heart feels my tongue persists in revealing before I can check it."

"All right," nodded Scott, with something like a touch of gruffness; "but don't lay it on too thick."

"One question perhaps I may ask while we are waiting for the dessert, even if it seems too much of business."

"Fire away."

"I would like to know that this scheme is assured."

"The construction of the railroad?"

"Yes, señor."

"Of course it——"

"If anything serious were to happen to important members of your company—to you, Señor Scott, we will say?"

"Why, I suppose the others would push her through."

"But if something happened to Señor Hatch and Señor Bragg?"

"Well, now you're supposing a wholesale calamity! I don't know what would happen if we were all knocked out before construction began—before the stock was placed on the market."

"It might put an end to the project?"

"It might," admitted Old Gripper.

"That would be most unfortunate for Señor Merriwell," said the Mexican, as if he almost feared something of the sort was going to take place.

Coffee was finally brought.

"Señor," said Lazaro, "I know it is impolite to turn to look behind one, but sitting at the third table back of you is a tall, thin man with a prominent nose, and I am certain I have met him somewhere, but I cannot recall his name. If you could get a look at him without too much trouble —"

Watson Scott was not given to great stiffness anywhere. He drew his feet from beneath the table, placed them at one side of his chair and half turned on the seat, looking round at the man indicated by Lazaro.

As Old Gripper did this the Mexican leaned far over the table and reached out his hand as if to touch his companion on the elbow. Instead of doing this, he seemed to change his mind; but his hand swept over the small cup of black coffee that stood in front of the other man, and something fell into that cup.

"That is Henry Babcock, of the Cuban Plantation Supply Company," explained Scott, turning back.

"Then I was mistaken," said the Mexican. "I have never met the gentleman."

They sipped their coffee, Lazaro continuing talking.

Scott emptied his cup.

"I've had a hard day, but that will keep me awake for the next four hours," he remarked. "I'm going to the theatre with a party of friends to-night, and I don't want to nod over the old play."

After a brief time a vexed look came to his rugged face, and he swept his hand across his eyes.

"Is anything wrong, señor?" questioned Lazaro.

"I'm afraid my eyes are going back on me. They're blurry now. I swear I hate to take up wearing spectacles!"

Directly he leaned his head on his hand, with his elbow on the table.

"I fear you are not feeling well, Señor Scott," said the man of the snowy hair and coal-black eyes.

"I'm not," confessed Old Gripper thickly. "Can't understand it. Never felt this way before. I'm afraid I'm going to be ill. Let's get out of here."

Already Lazaro had paid the check and tipped the waiter. They arose and started to leave the dining room. With his second step Watson Scott staggered.

In a moment his companion had him by the arm, expressing in a low tone the greatest regret and anxiety.

"I want air!" muttered Scott. "I—I'm going home. Please get my topcoat and hat for me. My check is somewhere in my pocket. Get a hansom, for that will give me a chance to breathe."

Lazaro felt in Scott's pocket and found the check, for which he obtained the man's overcoat and hat. He expressed his sorrow that this thing should happen, and, with the aid of an attendant, assisted the tottering man outside and lifted him into a hansom. Scott's wits seemed wholly muddled, for he could not give his home address; but this was not necessary, for the driver happened to know it.

The hansom turned away, and Alvarez Lazaro wheeled to reënter the hotel.

He found himself face to face with Frank Merriwell.

Lazaro halted.

Frank had stopped in his tracks, his eyes fastened on the man.

A moment they stood thus, and then the Mexican bowed, saying with cold politeness:

"Your pardon, señor. You are in my way."

That voice gave Merry a greater thrill than had the sight of the man's face. It was like one speaking from the grave, for the low, gentle voice had all the soft music of one Frank believed forever stilled by death.

And those eyes—they were the same. But that snow-white hair and the deeply furrowed face—how different!

Yet about the man's face there was something that strongly reminded the youth of Porfias del Norte.

"I beg your pardon," said Merry, in turn. "But the sight of you gave me a start. For a moment I fancied I knew you—that we had met before."

"But now you realize your mistake, señor; now you know we have never met until this moment."

"It is not likely that we have; but still you remind me powerfully of a man by the name of Porfias del Norte."

"I knew him."

"You knew him?"

"I did, señor. He was my bosom friend. Who are you that knew my friend?"

"My name is Merriwell."

Alvarez Lazaro seemed to straighten and become rigid, while into his dark eyes crept an expression of hatred which he no longer tried to hide.

"At last, Señor Merriwell," he said, the music having left his voice; "at last we meet! On the morrow I should have sought you."

"For what purpose?"

"To let you know that I have come."

"How could that interest me?"

"You will be interested before you see the last of me."

Frank recognized the threat in the voice of the man.

"What are you driving at? I don't understand you."

"Possibly not. I have said that Porfias del Norte was my bosom friend."

"Yes."

"He is dead."

"Yes."

"It was through you that he came to his death."

"He brought it on himself, and richly he merited it!" declared Merriwell hotly. "If ever a wretch got just what was coming to him it was Del Norte!"

The eyes of Lazaro were gleaming with a smoldering fire.

"Why did he deserve it? Was it because he found you usurping his privileges, enriching yourself from his property, while you refused to acknowledge his rights?"

"He had no legal rights. He was a villain, every inch of him. He proved it by his dastardly conduct. Yes, he richly merited all that came to him."

"Have you thought what a terrible death he died? Have you thought of him entombed alive, beating with his bare hands the stone walls within which he knew he must die, suffering the most frightful tortures that a human being may know? Have you thought of him smothering for want of air, his throat parched, his head bursting, his mind deranged? Have you thought of him praying to the saints, shrieking, moaning, sobbing, and dying at last in that horrible darkness? And yet you say he received no more than he merited!"

"Poor devil!" muttered Merry. "It was a fearful thing. Even though he once tried to cut my tongue out, even though he meant to torture me and then kill me, I would not have had him endure such suffering."

"You are so kind—so tender of heart!" sneered Lazaro. "Paugh!"

He made a gesture of anger that was precisely the same as Del Norte might have done. Strange there was something about this old man that so powerfully resembled the youthful Del Norte!

"You have his manner, his voice, his eyes! You might be his father."

"I am simply his friend, Alvarez Lazaro—his friend and his avenger!"

"Then you——"

"I have sworn to avenge him!"

The Mexican leaned toward Frank, swiftly hissing:

"I have sworn to ruin you, to wreck your ambitions and your life, to make you suffer even as Porfias suffered in his last moments! Now you understand me! Now you know what to expect from me!"

"You're insane! I see madness in your eyes! Be careful that you do not bring on yourself the fate that befell Del Norte."

"No danger of that. I know how to accomplish what I have set myself to do. All your great plans shall go amiss. When you see things going wrong, when you find your fortune melting away, when the very earth seems crumbling beneath your feet, think of me and know my hand is behind it all. This night I have struck the first blow!"

Then Lazaro stepped swiftly to one side, passed Merry, and entered the splendid hotel.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECOND STROKE.

Frank Merriwell and Inza Burrage were driving in Central Park the following forenoon. At this early hour there was not the great number of turnouts in the park that would be seen later when languid society came out for its airing.

"Inza," said Frank, "I no longer feel it absolutely necessary to make all haste back to Mexico. I shall take my time about it. The reports from the mine are favorable, and everything is progressing well. Hodge and Browning will return to the city to-morrow. They both expect that I'll be ready to start straight for Mexico. They'll be surprised to find I have it fixed so there is no need of haste."

"The railroad project——"

"Is settled."

"The railroad will be built without your taking an active part in its actual construction?"

"Yes; the newly organized company will look after that. Leave it to Watson Scott. I saw an item in a morning paper saying that Mr. Scott was suddenly taken ill at the Waldorf last night; but that he was resting comfortably this morning, and his physician did not apprehend any serious result. If anything serious did happen to Old Gripper, it might retard the railroad project for a time."

"Now that Del Norte is gone, it seems that you should not have any great trouble, Frank?"

Immediately Merry thought of the man with the snowy hair whom he had encountered in front of the Waldorf; but he decided to say nothing to Inza of that meeting. He did not wish to alarm her.

"Yes," he laughed; "I feel like celebrating, and I have a little scheme."

"What is it?"

"Why can't we make up a party to visit Niagara and St. Louis."

"Oh, splendid!" cried Inza eagerly.

"Then you like the idea, sweetheart?"

"I think it grand!"

"And Elsie——"

"I'm sure she'll be in for it. Although she has not said much, I know she dislikes to have Bart go away."

"Then we'll carry out my plan. You may accompany us as far as St. Louis—perhaps farther."

Inza bubbled with pleasure over this plan, beginning at once to talk of the fine times they would have.

A closed carriage was passing them, going somewhat faster, in the same direction.

Happening to glance toward the window of this carriage, Inza suddenly uttered a low cry and grasped Merry's coat sleeve.

"Look look!" she exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"That man!"

"Where?"

"In that carriage. He was looking from the window, but he has leaned back now. I looked straight into his eyes, and it gave me a fearful shock, for they seemed to be the eyes of Porfias del Norte!"

"How did the man look?"

"He had a strange face that was deeply lined, and his hair was very white."

"Alvarez Lazaro!" thought Merry. "The self-styled avenger is seeking his opportunity."

Having driven in the park for some time, they finally halted at a little restaurant, a man appearing to take charge of their horses.

Near at hand a man was stretched on the ground beneath an automobile, engaged in tinkering at it.

Merry was about to enter the building with Inza when another man appeared, approached the one who was working at the automobile, and impatiently questioned him in regard to the progress he was making.

"There is Mr. Hatch," said Frank. "I'll speak to him. I'll join you inside in a few moments, Inza."

He turned back and approached Warren Hatch, who was standing and frowningly watching the efforts of the one who was tinkering at the automobile.

"Good morning, Mr. Hatch," said Merry.

The face of Hatch cleared a little, and he shook hands with Frank.

"Glad to see you, Merriwell. Did you just drive up? Should have been away from here thirty minutes ago, but something happened to this old machine, and Casimer is having a dickens of a time fixing it. I've been to see Scott."

"How is he?"

"A sick man—a mighty sick man."

"What is the matter?"

"That's the queer thing about it. Doctor hasn't told. Don't believe he knows."

"It is rather queer."

"First the doctor fancied it might be something like paralysis or apoplexy; but it's not. You know Scott was taken while dining at the Waldorf with a man who claims to be interested in the Central Sonora project and expresses a desire to take on one thousand shares of the stock."

"I didn't know about that."

"Yes. I talked with Scott. He's weak and almost helpless. Can barely wiggle a finger, but he can talk, and his mind is not affected."

"Why, the paper said he was very comfortable this morning."

"He may be; but I'd rather see him more frisky."

"You do not apprehend a serious termination?"

"I hope not. Scott has a constitution like iron, and he won't die easily. Still, I shall be worried if he shows no signs of improvement to-day. Do you know, he told me that the man he dined with last night was a Mexican. I haven't much use for them. Found one here talking to Casimer a short time ago—a fellow with the whitest hair I've ever seen."

Frank started.

"I believe I've seen that man," he said. "He passed us in the park."

"He was parley vooing with Casimer and bothering him," said Hatch. "I politely informed him that I was in a hurry, and asked him not to bother my chauffeur. Say, he turned and looked at me with a pair of black eyes that seemed as dangerous as loaded pistols. 'I beg your pardon, señor,' he purred. 'If I have bothered your chauffeur or delayed you in the least, I am very sorry. I trust you may get started soon and meet with no more serious accident to-day than this little breakdown.' I swear there was something in his manner so offensive that I felt like hitting him, and yet he was the very soul of politeness."

Frank nodded, and Hatch noted a singular expression on the face of the youth.

"What are you thinking of?" he inquired. "Something is running through your head."

"It is. Did you ask Mr. Scott the name of the man with whom he dined last evening?"

"Yes."

"It was——"

"Alvarez Lazaro."

"I thought it!"

"Why, how did you know any——"

"The white-haired man you met here is Alvarez Lazaro."

"No?"

"And this Lazaro has boldly informed me that he was once the bosom friend of Porfias del Norte and is now his avenger."

"What's that?" gasped Hatch. "Why, what does he propose to do?"

"He has threatened all sorts of things. Look out for him, Mr. Hatch. So he dined with Mr. Scott, did he? And Mr. Scott was taken ill at the Waldorf! Mr. Hatch, when I leave here I shall call on Mr. Scott's physician and have a talk with him. My suspicions are thoroughly aroused."

"You don't suspect foul play, do you?"

"As I have said, my suspicions are thoroughly aroused. This whole affair is queer."

At this moment the chauffeur uttered an exclamation of satisfaction, backed from beneath the machine, wrench in hand, and announced that the breakdown was remedied at last.

Frank remained until the machine was ready to start and Warren Hatch had stepped into it. Mr. Hatch waved his hand and was soon lost to view down the splendid park road.

Just as Merry was on the verge of entering the restaurant, Inza, pale and agitated, came hurrying to him.

"That man is here!" she said, her voice shaking. "I don't know why he frightens me so. I was seated inside, glancing at a magazine, when I happened to look up, and there he stood not more than five feet away. I had not heard a sound, but he was there, and those eyes were fastened on me in a manner that made my blood turn cold. I gave a cry and sprang up. Then he spoke, and, if possible, his voice terrified me even more than his eyes, for it was the voice of your bitterest enemy, Porfias del Norte. Of course, I know Del Norte is dead, Frank; but this man alarms me all the more because of that."

"What did he say to you?"

"He begged my pardon and said he had not meant to alarm me. He was very courteous, just the same as Del Norte. Can he be a relative of your enemy?"

"I don't think so, Inza. Where is he now?"

"He left at once by the door on the opposite side."

"I'd like to see him a moment," said Merriwell grimly.

"Keep away from him, Frank!" implored Inza, grasping his arm. "I don't understand it, but I have a feeling that he will bring some trouble to us."

It was not an easy matter to fully reassure her, but Merry laughed at her and declared she was getting superstitious and whimsical.

At the first opportunity he went in search of Lazaro, but was just in time to see the closed carriage he believed occupied by the Mexican disappearing in the direction of Fifth Avenue.

Central Park is crossed by four sunken transverse roads, running east and west. These roads are mostly used by heavy trucks and wagons carrying merchandise. The park roads cross above them on massive foundations of arched masonry. Almost everywhere the pleasure roads of the park are guarded on either side by protecting walls at such places as might be productive of accident by permitting a frightened horse to plunge over into one of the sunken roads.

On the return drive Frank and Inza came upon a gathering of curious persons at the end of one of these walls. They were gazing down toward the road below.

On reaching the spot, Frank saw a wrecked automobile lying down there. Evidently the machine had veered from the road, shot past the end of the wall, plunged down the bank, and leaped off into the road, in its final plunge turning completely over.

Something caused Merry to pull up and inquire if any one had been hurt.

"Yes, sir," answered one of the bystanders. "An officer told me that the owner of the machine was badly—perhaps fatally—injured. The chauffeur jumped right here as the machine left the road, and he escaped with a few slight bruises."

"Seems to me that was strange behavior for the chauffeur. As a rule, drivers stick to their machines to the last. Who was the owner?"

"Why, it was Mr. Warren Hatch, the——"

"Mr. Hatch?" gasped Frank.

"Do you know him, sir?"

"Yes. Where have they taken him?"

"To some hospital. The officer yonder will tell you, I think."

On arriving at his hotel, Frank found a letter addressed to him. He tore it open and read as follows:

"The first and second blows have been struck!

"THE AVENGER."

CHAPTER XXIII.

OLD SPOONER.

Felipe Jalisco always leaped to his feet like a cat when a knock sounded on his door. He could tell in a twinkling if it was Hagan who knocked. This time he knew it was not. The rap had been faltering and feeble.

Jalisco's hand sought the knife he always carried.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

The reply to this question was a repetition of the hesitating knocking.

"Who are you? and what do you want?" sharply cried the Mexican lad.

"I am very sorry to disturb you," said a cracked, unsteady voice. "I have the next room. You can do me a favor."

Now Felipe was lonesome. Staying hidden in that squalid room had made him wretched and homesick. He longed to talk to some one, and he cautiously opened the door.

Outside stood a man bent as if with age, leaning heavily on a crooked cane. He was the picture of poverty. His threadbare clothes had been mended in many places. His dirty, gray hair was long and uncombed. The soles of his shoes were almost wholly worn away, and the uppers were broken in two or three places. He brushed his hair back from his eyes with a trembling hand that seemed unfamiliar with soap and water.

"I hope I have not disturbed you," he said meekly. "I have torn the sleeve of my coat on a nail. I would like to borrow a needle and thread to mend it. I must keep myself looking as well as I possibly can, for my lawyer may call any moment to inform me that I have won my suit and am a very wealthy man."

"I am sorry, señor," said Felipe; "but it is not my fortune to possess a needle and thread."

The old man lifted one trembling, curved hand to the back of his ear, which he turned toward the speaker.

"I didn't quite get your answer," he said. "I am a trifle deaf—only a trifle."

Felipe raised his voice.

"I have not a needle and thread. I would willingly assist you if I had. I am sorry."

"I am sorry, too," sighed the old man, looking regretfully at the rent in his sleeve. "I should be greatly mortified if my lawyer came and found me in this condition."

The boy felt that this wretched old man would be better company than none at all.

"Won't you come in and sit down?" he asked.

"Eh?"

"I would be pleased to have you come in, señor."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not dressed for calling. But then, as we room near each other, I presume you'll see me often in my working clothes."

He entered the room and lowered himself upon the chair that Felipe placed. The boy sat on the bed.

"Did I understand you to say, señor, that you have the next room?"

"Eh? A little louder, please."

Jalisco repeated the question.

"Yes, yes," answered the old man. "I have just taken it. Had to pay a week in advance, and it happens that it took all my money, therefore I'm unable to purchase a needle and thread. But," he quickly added, "in a very few days, when the law gives me my rights, I shall have money enough to purchase all the needles and all the thread in this city without realizing that I have spent anything at all."

"Then you expect to come into an inheritance, señor?" questioned the boy loudly.

"Not just that," was the answer. "I shall obtain my rights. I shall be given a just reward for the invention that was stolen from me and has made other men rich."

Between the old man and the boy there seemed to be a bond of sympathy which the latter felt.

"So you, too, have been robbed?" he cried.

"Basely robbed!" declared the visitor nodding his trembling head. "My name is Roscoe Spooner. I invented what is known as the Guilford Air Brake. The product of my brain was stolen from me by Henry Guilford, who has made so much money from it that he is now a very rich man. But everything he possesses, his splendid home, his carriages, horses, and his yacht, are rightfully mine. He has enjoyed his stolen wealth a long time, but it will not be his much longer. My suit against him must be decided in my favor, and then I shall come into my own."

Felipe was interested.

"How long ago did you perfect this invention?"

"How long? It seems almost a hundred years; but it really was not fifteen."

"How was it stolen by this Guilford, señor?"

"I trusted him. He told me he would furnish the capital and would place my invention on the market. I believed him an honest man. I permitted him to have my model. He patented it, calling it the Guilford Air Brake. When I demanded my just share of the profits, he laughed in my face and called me a crazy old fool. He even had me arrested for annoying him. And my invention has filled his pockets with hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"That was in truth a most dishonest thing, old gentleman. What then did you do?"

"I found a lawyer to take the case and brought suit against him."

"I would have killed him!"

"I have thought of that. Once I did borrow a pistol and go in search of him; but when we met I could not bear to think of the terrible thing I had contemplated, and he never knew how near to death he was."

"It is not my way. At least, had you tried, you might have frightened him into giving you something."

"Had I tried that, it would have cost me my liberty. I am sure he would have lodged me in prison."

"Perhaps so," muttered Felipe. "You're a simple old fool, and you wouldn't know how to work it."

"What did you say?" asked the old man, who had seen the boy's lips move, but apparently had not understood his words.

"This Guilford must be a very wicked man. Your suit against him was useless?"

"The verdict favored him, but I appealed. In the end I shall win. My lawyer has told me so. He may appear to-day, or to-morrow, or the next day, and inform me that I have won. I am looking for him any time."

"And he'll never come," muttered the boy.

"I shall not stay here long," asserted the old inventor. "My room is very poor, but when I think that it is only for a short time that I must occupy it, then I am contented. I had a room in another place, where it cost a great deal more: but I decided to move and economize while waiting for my rights."

Felipe wondered how the old man existed, deciding at once that he must pick up a meagre living by begging.

"I, too, am waiting here until I come into my rights," said the boy. "Like you, I have been robbed. Unlike you, I'll not wait so long. Either I'll have what is mine, or I'll kill the man who has robbed me."

"'Thou shalt not kill.' To have the stain of blood on one's hands must be terrible."

"The Jaliscos belong to a family that kills."

At this juncture there came another knock at the door, but this time Felipe knew who it was.

He had the door open in a moment, and Bantry Hagan walked in.

"Oh, it's company you have, me boy!" exclaimed the Irishman, looking wonderingly at old Spooner.

"A gentleman who has the next room. He dropped in to borrow a needle and thread."

"It's careful you'd better be, Felipe."

"Never fear; it is all right."

The old man dragged himself up from the chair.

"I'll go back to my room," he said. "I hope I have not taken up too much of your time."

"Not at all, señor. I shall be pleased to have you come again."

When old Spooner was gone and the door closed, Hagan observed:

"What cemetery did you dig him from, Felipe? Who is he, me boy?"

"A deranged old man, who thinks he has invented something and that it was stolen from him. He expects to recover his rights and become very rich. He has the next room."

"Then it's careful we'd better talk, for he may hear."

"No danger, Señor Hagan, for he is extremely deaf. I am glad you came, for I was tired shouting to make him understand me. What is the good news you bring?"

"Things are moving, Felipe. By my soul, I believe this vengeful being is really keeping his oath to make it warm for Frank Merriwell. When I was here last night I told you that old Gripper Scott had been taken ill and that Warren Hatch was in the hospital from a smash-up that had broken several of his ribs."

"*Si, señor.*"

"Felipe, my eyes have been opened since last night. Alvarez Lazaro dined with Watson Scott the night the latter was taken ill. He talked confidentially with the chauffeur of Warren Hatch a short time before Hatch was smashed up in his automobile."

"You think, Señor Hagan, you think—what?"

"Whist! Don't be after breathing that I told you; but it's a fancy I have that Señor Lazaro could tell us the cause of the mysterious illness of Watson Scott, and could explain just why the automobile of Warren Hatch plunged down an embankment and smashed him up, while his chauffeur leaped and escaped. Lazaro is striking first at the railroad builders."

"And I am cooped here!" cried the boy. "I'll stay no longer! Why should I? I'm going out! I'm going to have a part in this!"

"And it's pinched you'll be in a minute."

"The police——"

"Are looking for ye now, just the same. Besides that, this Merriwell is doing his best to get track of ye. I didn't wish to worry you, so I didn't tell how he tried to follow me last night when I came here."

"Did he? Did he?"

"Sure he did. I don't know just where he ran across me, but first I knew he was tracking me through the streets."

"You came just the same."

"When I had neatly given him the slip. Oh, I fooled him, Felipe. I left him to wonder where I had gone."

"Lazaro followed you here."

"Because I did not get my eye on Lazaro, as I did on Frank Merriwell. Don't worry, boy; he'll never find ye through me."

"If he came here, he'd not get away alive!" hissed Felipe.

"Make no mistake about him, me lad; he can fight with the best of them. Some friends of his have arrived in town, and I think they're taking up the most of his attention now. It's planning some sort of a trip they are."

"I can't stay here in this place much longer, Señor Hagan. I shall go mad!"

"Wait a little. I met Lazaro this morning on Broadway. Says he, 'If you see Felipe to-day, tell him I will come and cheer his heart with good news this night.' I'll drop round myself, so it's not lonesome you'll be."

"Well, I will wait a little longer," said Felipe.

Had it been possible for Hagan and Felipe to look into the next room just then they would have been greatly surprised by the singular conduct of old Spooner.

Between the two rooms there was a door, one panel of which was cracked. No longer bent and shaking, the man in the adjoining room was standing with one ear pressed close to the split panel. In spite of the fact that he had seemed quite deaf while talking with the Mexican lad, his appearance just now was that of one listening intently.

Shortly after Hagan left, Felipe heard the door of old Spooner's room open and close, following which there was a faltering, shuffling step on the stairs and the thump, thump, thump of a cane, growing fainter until it could be heard no longer.

"The old man has gone out to beg," thought Jalisco.

After leaving the house, old Spooner faltered along the street, turned several corners, and finally arrived at another house, which he entered.

Ascending one flight of stairs, he unlocked a door and disappeared into a hall room, closing and locking the door behind him.

Fully thirty minutes passed before that door was unlocked and opened again.

Out of that room stepped a tall, straight, clear-eyed, manly looking youth, who bore not the remotest resemblance to the tottering old man who had entered.

This youth ran down the stairs, left the house, and turned westward, swinging away with long strides.

"Merriwell," he muttered, as he walked, "I almost believe you could have been a successful detective had you chosen that profession."

Some time later he arrived at a Broadway hotel and found assembled in a suite of rooms several persons, who greeted his appearance with exclamations of great satisfaction.

"We were getting worried about you, Frank," declared Inza, hurrying to meet him and giving him both her hands. "We had almost decided that something serious had happened to you."

"Didn't know but this new freak with the snowy hair had gobbled you up," said Bart Hodge.

"Told you he was all right," grunted Bruce Browning, who was lounging on the most comfortable chair in the place.

"You were so weary you didn't want to bother about going to make inquiries for him," said Elsie Bellwood. "Mrs. Medford was on the point of applying to the police."

"According to all the stories I hear," put in Mrs. Medford, "I believe it best for you to get out of this wicked city just as soon as possible, Frank."

Frank laughed.

"If everything goes well," he declared, "we'll be ready to start by day after to-morrow."

"Tell us just where you have been and what you have been doing," urged Inza.

"I've been doing a little character work."

"Character work?"

"Yes. I can't get over my old penchant for acting."

But, although they were very curious, he evaded making a complete explanation then.

A little later he found an opportunity to speak with Bart and Bruce without being overheard by the girls or Mrs. Medford.

"Look here, you two," he said, "I'm going to need you to-night. Don't make any plans about dinner or the theatre. Provide yourselves with pistols, for you may have to use them. Be ready when I want you."

"This is rather interesting," said Hodge. "What's the game, Frank?"

"The game will be to capture a nice little bunch of human tigers."

"Human tigers!" grunted Browning. "That sounds like the real thing, old man. Can't you put us wise a little more?"

"Not now. I'm going to call up my friend Bronson, the detective, and get him into it, for I believe he will be needed. I hope that this night I'll be able to effectually checkmate some very dangerous rascals."

Merry did not use the phone in the suite, but went down to the booths in the hotel lobby. There he called up police headquarters and asked for Bronson.

"He's just come in," was the answer. "Have him to the phone in a moment."

Directly Bronson himself inquired what was wanted.

"This is Merriwell," explained Frank. "Is there anything that will prevent you from giving me your services to-night?"

"Well, nothing that I know of, if the business is important; but I'll have to know what's doing in order to make it right here."

"I don't like to explain over the phone," said Frank. "If you can wait, I'll jump into a cab and come

right down to tell you all about it."

"I'll wait," was the assurance.

Merry lost no time in taking a cab for police headquarters, where he found the plain-clothes man waiting for him.

"Bronson," said Merriwell, "I've found Felipe Jalisco."

"Have you? Well, it will give me some satisfaction to again get my hands on that slippery chap."

"But I believe I have found something far more important. You know I told you that I was convinced of foul play in the Watson Scott affair, and also in the seeming accident that happened to Warren Hatch."

"Which seems entirely improbable to me."

"I think I'll be able to convince you to-night that I was not mistaken in either case. Further than that, I hope to place within your grasp the wretch who drugged Scott and bribed Hatch's chauffeur to bring about that accident."

"If you can do that, and if we succeed in securing the villain, it will be a corking piece of work. I think it will prove the sensation of the hour."

"Listen," said Frank, "and I will tell you my plan."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FLAMES DO THEIR WORK.

Early that evening old Spooner returned, accompanied by an even more disreputable-looking old man than himself.

Felipe heard them slowly and laboriously fumbling their way up the dark stairs, recognized the sound of Spooner's cane, and flung open the door of his room that the light of his oil lamp might aid them.

"Bless you, boy!" panted old Spooner. "These stairs are dark—heathenishly dark."

"I see to-night you have with you a friend, señor," observed the Mexican boy.

"Yes, poor fellow. I have seen him much on the streets. He stays with me frequently. He is deaf and dumb."

"Two beggar cronies," muttered Felipe, in Spanish, as he closed the door after they had vanished shufflingly into old Spooner's room. "Now I know quite well how the old man lives, but it is a poor living he gets."

Once or twice Felipe fancied he detected faint, suspicious sounds in the hall; but when he listened at the door he heard nothing more.

He did not see a number of shadowy figures which came up those unsteady stairs in a marvelously silent manner and vanished into the room occupied by old Spooner.

It was quite late when the listening boy fancied he heard a familiar step on the stairs. In a twinkling he was close to the door. Two persons were coming.

Then sounded a sharp, familiar knock, upon which Felipe flung open the door, crying:

"Welcome, señores! I had begun to fear you would not come to see me this night."

"Oh, we're here, me boy," chuckled Hagan, as he entered, with Alvarez Lazaro at his heels. "It's suspicious our friend Lazaro became on account of a queer thing. He's been shadowed by the police since yesterday. Now you can't guess why he grew suspicious?"

"I cannot," confessed Jalisco, closing and locking the door.

"The coppers stopped watching him," laughed the Irishman. "Although he tried to discover some one chasing him about, not a soul took the trouble. When I met him all ready to come here, he told me the action of the police worried him and made him suspicious."

"Had they continued to watch me," said Lazaro, "I could have given them the slip and laughed; but when I could discover no one watching, I knew not what to do."

"It's all right," nodded Hagan, as he took a seat on the bed. "Devil a soul followed us here."

Lazaro did not sit down, although the boy offered the only chair and urged him to take it.

"No," he said; "I choose to stand. I shall not remain long, but I came to give you news that will cheer your heart. Señor Hagan says he has told you of the sudden illness of Señor Watson Scott and of the accident which happened to Señor Warren Hatch. Thus you see, Felipe, already two of

the great men who were going to build Frank Merriwell's railroad in Sonora are flat on their backs, and why both of them are not dead is more than I can understand. Señor Scott must have a constitution like iron, for he drank all the coffee in which I dropped a powder that should have ended his life."

"Then it was you who did it?" cried Felipe.

"Yes; I have begun the work of ruining Merriwell's plans, bringing him to poverty and wretchedness and destroying him at last. Did I tell you once that I was the bosom friend of Porfias del Norte? I am Del Norte himself!

"Del Norte, a youth, died in that cave; but Del Norte, the old man you see before you, rose from it. I am Del Norte, the old man; but to the world I am Alvarez Lazaro, the avenger of Del Norte. I have sworn to destroy Merriwell and make him suffer even as I suffered. I am losing no time. I began with the purpose of blocking Merriwell's railroad scheme. Human life is nothing to me.

"I poisoned Watson Scott. I bribed the chauffeur of Warren Hatch to send him crashing over the bank. Next I will strike Sudbury Bragg. My plan is made. I am ready. The railroad shall not be built. Great accidents shall happen in Merriwell's mine. An evil spell shall fall on it. Men will die or flee from it in terror. All Merriwell attempts shall fail. In the end I will mock him and bring him to a terrible death."

Barely had Lazaro spoken these boastful words when the door fell with a crash, and Frank Merriwell himself, with his friends behind him, stood in the doorway. He had cast aside the wig and a part of his disguise, and the startled trio of rascals recognized him before he spoke.

"Lazaro," he cried, "your tongue has betrayed you, and your vile plotting is done. Even if Scott and Hatch live, you'll get twenty years, at the very least. The house is surrounded by police. There is no escape! Surrender!"

With a furious oath, Del Norte rushed at Frank, drawing a knife. He struck at Merry's heart, but his wrist was seized and the knife was twisted from his grasp.

Hodge and Browning crowded into the small room. A struggle followed, in the midst of which there was a crash and a flare of fire.

The oil lamp had been overturned. Burning oil was flung all over the room, and the flames leaped up eagerly.

In the midst of this excitement Bantry Hagan managed to get out of the room. He saw policemen coming up the stairs, and he ran along the hall, intending to flee up another flight. In the hall he struck against Merriwell, who had Lazaro pinned to the floor.

Frank was knocked aside and his hold on the villain broken.

At the same moment he heard a cry of distress from Browning.

"Great heavens! Hodge is afire! He'll be burned to death!"

Hodge, Frank's dearest friend, was in frightful peril. That cry caused Merry to leave Lazaro, thinking there could be no escape for the man. Browning had torn some of the bedding from the bed, and this he wrapped about Bart, assisted by Frank. Thus the flames were quickly smothered and Hodge was saved.

"That's a bad fire in this coop!" cried one of the police. "The old trap will go."

"Get the people out!" shouted Frank. "Save the people, even though Lazaro escapes!"

"He'll not get out without being nabbed," declared Sam Bronson.

The whole building was in an uproar now. Men were shouting, women shrieking, and children crying. They came swarming down the stairs, falling over one another, pushing, shoving, fighting to get out.

In the room where the fire started, which was now a sea of flames, Frank saw a figure groping with outstretched arms, clothing all ablaze.

Merriwell rushed in there, dragged the fellow out, beat at the fire with his bare hands, stripped off his coat, muffled some of the flames and finally extinguished them, just as he was swept down the stairs in the midst of a human river. In his powerful arms he carried the one he had rescued at the peril of his own life.

Out into the open air Merry was thrust. He clung to the moaning chap he had dragged from the flames.

"Send in an ambulance call!" he cried to a policeman. "This boy has been badly burned."

The eyes of Felipe Jalisco stared at him in wonderment, for all of the agony the lad was suffering.

"Why did you do it—you, my enemy?" he marveled. "Why didn't you leave me there to die? Then I would be out of your way and could give you no further trouble."

"That's not my way of doing business," said Merry, as he carried the Mexican lad to a place of safety and sat holding him in his arms until the ambulance came.

Fire engines shrieked and roared their mad way to the scene of the conflagration. The firemen hastened with their work, but the building was doomed.

When Jalisco had been removed in the ambulance, Merry sought for Bronson, and finally found him.

"Did you get Lazaro?" he asked.

"Couldn't find the fellow," was the regretful answer. "In that mad turmoil it was impossible to do a thing."

"I wonder what has become of him?" said Frank.

"There is your answer!" shouted Bruce Browning, clutching Merry's arm with one hand and pointing with the other to one of the upper windows of the doomed tenement.

A man appeared in that window. Behind him was a glare of fire, and the red light showed the man distinctly. His hair was white as the driven snow.

For a moment it seemed that the man contemplated leaping. Those below shouted for him to wait, and the firemen hastened with a ladder. He was seen to turn and shade his face from the heat with his lifted arm. Then he disappeared from the window.

Barely had this occurred when some of the inner portions of the building fell and the flames poured forth from a score of windows. Within thirty seconds the whole place was a roaring furnace.

"That's the last of Alvarez Lazaro!" said Bart Hodge, who had escaped serious injury and was watching in company with Browning and Merriwell. "His murderous plotting is finished. He'll never trouble you again, Frank."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PATIENT AND THE VISITOR.

In a private ward of a New York City hospital lay Felipe Jalisco so hidden with bandages that scarcely more than his eyes could be seen. The patient's hands and wrists were likewise hidden by bandages.

The door of the room opened gently, and a white-gowned, white-capped, soft-footed nurse stepped in.

"A visitor to see you," she said, in a low tone.

She was followed at once by Frank Merriwell, who stepped quickly to the side of the cot, a look of deep sympathy and regret in his brown eyes as he gazed down at the patient.

The dark eyes that looked back at him seemed filled with wonderment and surprise.

Stooping over the cot, Merriwell spoke in his gentlest tones.

"How are you, my poor boy?" he said. "They would not let me see you before, saying it was best that you should be quiet and unexcited."

From amid the bandages a soft voice answered:

"They tell me I shall get well, Señor Merriwell, but I shall be horribly scarred during all the rest of the life which I may live. It is good to live, but it is terrible to be hideous."

"I am sorry for you, Felipe," declared Merry, in a tone that told of the utmost sincerity.

For a single moment it seemed that the boy on the cot doubted.

"Why should you for me be sorry?" he asked. "It was I who swore to kill you."

"Because you thought yourself injured and your passionate nature longed for revenge. To you it seemed that I refused to give you justice. You thought me powerful, and arrogant, and selfish, and you were aroused against me until your heart was filled with fire."

"It is true my heart within my bosom burned," admitted the boy. "Since the fire from which you dragged me I have thought much. You knew I hated you, you knew I claimed your mine, you knew I meant to make you trouble, you knew I might kill you—yet you beat out the flames, smothered them, lifted me, carried me from the burning building, saved my life. Why didn't you leave me to die and get me out of your way? I do not understand."

Merry sat down beside the cot.

"I will try to make you understand. I sought to look at the whole matter from your standpoint, and I fancied I knew how you felt about it. To you I was a villain and a wretch. Instead of hating you because you hated me, I longed to justify myself in your eyes. I longed for the opportunity to

show you that I was not the scoundrel you thought me."

"To me it seemed you did not care. I thought at me you laughed and sneered."

"You see now that you were wrong, Felipe. It was not you I scorned; it was your companion and adviser, Bantry Hagan, a scheming rascal, every inch of him. Hagan is a fighter, and he does not acknowledge defeat. When the plot of Porfias del Norte failed and Del Norte was buried by the landslide in the Adirondacks, it seemed to Hagan that he had been defeated, and the taste was bitter to him. When chance led you across his path, he saw an opportunity to renew the battle against me, and he used you to do so. Behind you I saw Hagan all the while."

"But you—is it now true that you deny the justice of my claim, Señor Merriwell. It was to defy Señor Hagan that you denied it? Ah! I understand at last."

"I am afraid you do not quite understand," said Merry, shaking his head. "You have in your possession a document that seems to prove your right to a certain tract of land, granted to your great-grandfather by President Victoria in eighteen twenty-four."

"*Si, señor.*"

"It happens, Felipe, my boy, that I have made a close investigation and study of the records in regard to that particular territory. I learned by doing so that President Pedraza did make a grant of such land to Guerrero del Norte in eighteen thirty-two; but that the grant was afterward annulled when Guerrero was proclaimed a bandit by Santa Anna. That disposed of the claim of Porfias del Norte, for had he lived he could not have induced the Mexican government to reaffirm the old grant. But, Felipe, there is no record that President Victoria ever made a concession or grant of such territory to your great-grandfather."

"I have the proof! I have the document!"

"Unrecorded and worthless. Listen, my boy. Since you appeared and made your claim I wired my agents in the City of Mexico, and they have been investigating your right to any Sonora territory. To-day I received from them a message which I have here. When you are better you shall read it."

"It says what?" eagerly asked Felipe.

"It says that Sebastian Jalisco was at no time a colonel in the Mexican army. That after his death certain parties did attempt to get possession of valuable territory in Sonora by producing a forged land grant; but that the rascals were soon forced to take to cover to save their lives, after which nothing more was heard of 'Colonel' Jalisco's claim to Sonora land."

Frank spoke slowly, in order that the boy might understand every word.

Felipe Jalisco lay quite still some moments, his breast heaving.

"If this, then, is the truth," he finally said, in a tone that was scarcely audible, "it is I who am wholly in the wrong. The document is worthless."

"It is worthless, Felipe, I give you my word of honor. I felt sure of it after examining the document the first time. Had I believed it of the slightest value, you would have received different treatment at my hands."

Felipe moved his bandaged hands in a fumbling manner, and in his dark eyes there was a peculiar look of mingled disappointment and satisfaction.

"All the dreams I have had are done," he breathed. "Perhaps it is well. I believe you. There is truth in your eyes. You saved me from death. There is mercy in your heart. Even knew I my claim to be just, I could not strike at one who had saved me from death. Perhaps for me it would have been best to die!"

There was deepest pathos and despair in the final words.

"Oh, no, Felipe!" exclaimed Frank.

"For what shall I live now?"

"For your father and mother."

"I have neither."

"For your friends."

"I have none."

"Then let me be your friend," argued Merry. "I'll try to find something that shall make life worth living for you."

"Enough trouble I have been to you already. You save my life! You send me here! I am not in the free ward; I am where it costs. I ask who pay. They tell me Señor Merriwell pay for everything. Then I think and think a long time. First I think you do it because you know you have wronged me much, and it is your conscience that compels you. Now I know it is not that. Now I know it is your good heart. Still, I do not quite understand. What more for me would you do? The debt I cannot now pay."

"Don't look at it in that light. I need a trusty fellow in Mexico—one who speaks Spanish and the patois of the half-blood laborers. Maybe you will help me. You might become invaluable to me. I will pay you——"

The Mexican lad quickly lifted one of his bandaged hands.

"Pay me!" he exclaimed. "How is it that by working all my life I can pay you? For me do not speak of pay."

"All right," laughed Merry cheerfully. "We'll fix that after you get on your feet again."

Felipe fumbled beneath the pillow, as if searching for something.

"It is here," he murmured.

"What do you want?"

"This."

He drew forth a creased, yellowed, tattered, time-eaten paper.

"It is the land grant to Sebastian Jalisco," he said. "Please for me tear it up now. I have kept it here all the time. Please destroy it, Señor Frank."

Frank took the paper.

Instead of doing as he was urged, after glancing at it, Merry carefully refolded it and placed it in a leather pocketbook.

"I'll not destroy it, Felipe—at least, not now."

"Why not?"

"Some day you may change your mind."

"No, no!"

"Some day you may wish for it again."

"No, no!"

"You can't be sure, my boy. I will take care of this paper, and you may have it on demand at any time. Were I in haste to destroy it, your doubts might creep back upon you and give you regret and pain. I will place it in a private vault with my own valuable papers, where it will remain safe and undestroyed."

"It is trouble too much for a worthless old paper," said Felipe.

His estimation of its value had undergone a most profound change.

"No trouble at all," smiled Merry; "and it is worth preserving as a curiosity, if nothing more. At any time you may have it. By preserving it and holding it ready for you on demand I may save myself from suspicion some future time when somebody shall try to convince you that the document is really valuable."

Frank had settled that point.

"Now, Felipe, my lad," he smiled, "let me warn you to look out for that man Hagan, through whom you came to this trouble. But for Hagan you would not have resorted to certain measures to frighten me, I fancy. You have found him a bad adviser. Had you succeeded in getting money out of me, Hagan would have obtained the lion's share. That was his game."

"Señor Hagan escaped from the fire?" questioned the boy.

"Oh, yes, he got out all right."

"But not Señor Lazaro?"

"I think Señor Lazaro ended his career right there. After the engines came, at a time when the building was wrapped in flames, he appeared at an upper window. The smoke cleared for a moment, and the glare of the fire showed him plainly. He seemed to look straight down at me with hatred in his black eyes. Then he whirled and rushed back from the window, as if seeking some means of escape. A few moments later the old building collapsed and fell. His bones must be buried in the ruins."

"For you, Señor Frank, I am glad," declared the Mexican boy. "He did hate you with terrible hatred, and he would have ruined you. The work of it he had begun."

"Yes, the snake! I heard his boast that he was the reincarnated spirit of Porfias del Norte, whom he would avenge. The man talked like a maniac, for at the last moment he even asserted that he was Del Norte himself."

"For you it is good he did not escape," said Felipe.

"Had he escaped from the fire, the detectives would have nabbed him. The confession we overheard him make was enough to give him a good, long time behind the bars, for he boasted

that, in his plot to ruin my plans, he poisoned Watson Scott and bribed Warren Hatch's automobile driver to wreck the machine in hopes of killing Hatch. Sudbury Bragg would have fallen next. That Scott stands a chance of recovering comes wholly through his remarkable stamina and fine physical condition. That Hatch was not killed is a marvel. Alvarez Lazaro was a human fiend, for, in order to injure me, he was willing to murder innocent men—he even attempted to murder two of them."

"Even I of him was afraid," confessed the Mexican boy. "It is not my way to strike the innocent in order to reach the guilty."

"I believe you, Felipe. You did not even wish to strike me if you could frighten me into giving you what you thought to be your just due. I learned that the night you stole into the room where I slept at the home of Warren Hatch and tried to shake my nerve by pressing your knife against my throat."

"But nothing could frighten you," said Felipe. "You told me then I would not kill. I am glad now that I did not. I shall never cease to be glad."

"Not even when Bantry Hagan again finds an opportunity to talk to you? Hagan is slick, and he has a seductive tongue."

"Thanks for the compliment, me boy," said a voice at the door, and a stout, florid man stepped heavily into the room.

"Señor Hagan!" cried Felipe.

"The same, me lad," was the cool answer. "I thought I'd come to see how you were coming on, and this is the first time I could see ye. I find you have a visitor already. It's slick he calls me, but I'll bet me life he's been playing a slick game of his own with ye. Careful, me lad, or he'll have that document in his fingers, and never again will you see it at all."

"He has it now!" exclaimed the Mexican boy defiantly. "I gave it to him."

"Then it's too late I came. A poor fool you are, Felipe!"

The patient became greatly excited and rose to a sitting position, crying:

"Go you away! I want to see you no more! I will not listen to you!"

Hagan surveyed Merriwell.

"How you do it I can't say," he confessed; "but you have the trick of making friends of any who may give you trouble. It's proud I am to say you can't fool Bantry Hagan and turn his backbone to jelly. Del Norte is dead, but Hagan is alive, and he'll keep you on the jump for a while."

Frank stepped past Hagan to the door. Looking out into the long corridor, he called a young doctor who happened to be passing.

"Doctor," he said, "a serious mistake has happened here. Take a look at this man who has forced his way in here. He is no friend of the patient, and you can see for yourself that the patient is greatly excited and wrought up by his intrusion. For the sake of the patient, will you see that this man leaves at once, that he is observed at the door, and that instructions are given to refuse him admittance if he has the cheek to call again."

"Take him away! Take him away!" cried Jalisco.

Immediately the doctor addressed Hagan.

"I think you had better come, sir," he said.

"Oh, I'll go!" grated the Irishman, giving Merry a savage glare. "I'll make no trouble about that. Good day to ye, Mr. Merriwell. Make the best of your success now, but remember that Hagan is no easy mark, and he'll get a rap at you yet."

His face purple with rage, the schemer strode out of the room and soon left the hospital.

Outside the gate he paused, removed his hat, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. Although it was nipping cold, he seemed to be burning with the heat of an inward furnace.

"I'll walk a bit to cool off," he said, and set out, his head down, his face grim, his manner absorbed.

As he was crossing a street a cab whirled up beside him and stopped. He swore at the driver for his carelessness, but his profanity ended abruptly when the door of the cab swung open and he saw a pair of midnight eyes looking at him.

"By all the saints," gasped Bantry Hagan, actually staggering, "it is the dead alive again!"

The man in the cab lifted a hand and motioned to him. In a low, musical voice, he said:

"Señor Hagan, get in quickly. Come."

A moment the Irishman paused, seeming to hesitate; then he stepped forward and entered the cab.

The door slammed, the driver whipped up his horses, and the cab rumbled away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SURPRISE FOR FIVE THUGS.

Frank left the hospital on foot. He might have taken a car, but he preferred to walk. Always when thinking deeply he chose to walk, and he often became utterly oblivious to his surroundings, even on the crowded streets of a city.

He now set out without regard to direction. His talk with the Mexican boy had set him to thinking of Porfias del Norte and Alvarez Lazaro, between whom there had seemed to be some mysterious connecting link. The nature of that link was something to puzzle over, even though both men were dead.

Many times Frank had thought of the strange declaration of Lazaro that he was the avenger of Del Norte, even that he was Del Norte himself. Such an assertion seemed that of a madman.

Still Lazaro was in appearance Del Norte grown old, his face time-furrowed, his black hair turned snowy white. More than that, for all of Lazaro's aged appearance, he had seemed to possess the vigor and vim of a very young man. His eyes burned with the fire of youth, and they were exactly like the eyes of Del Norte. His voice also was the voice of Del Norte.

Dusk was gathering in the streets of the great American metropolis, the street lights were beginning to gleam, laborers were homeward bound from their toil.

Quite unconscious of the fact, Merry had wandered into a disreputable quarter, and suddenly, without warning, he was set upon by a number of men. One of them struck at him, while another attempted to sandbag him from behind.

The attack in front caused Frank to dodge with a pantherish spring that was most astonishing in its quickness, considering the fact that a moment before he had seemed totally unsuspecting and unprepared. This leap saved him from being stretched unconscious by the sandbag.

An instant later he was engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter with five thugs who had marked him as their prey. A well-dressed young man like Merry was sure to attract attention in such a quarter, and these ruffians had singled him out as a chap worth plucking.

His sudden and astounding change from total unwariness to a fighting youth with every sense on the alert was something for which they were unprepared.

He struck one fellow a terrible blow, which sounded clear as the crack of a pistol and sent the man turning end over end into the street, where he sprawled. He seized another by the left wrist with his own left hand, gave him a forward jerk to one side, at the same time striking him a swift, sharp blow with the outer edge of his open right hand, which landed on the fellow's neck just under the ear and turn of the jaw.

This man dropped like a stricken ox, and lay quivering on the broken curbing of the sidewalk.

Ducking low, one of the men attempted to seize Merry about the waist.

The young American athlete leaped backward, his foot came up, the toe of his boot struck the man under the chin, and over the ruffian went, flat on his back, his lips cut and bleeding, and choking over several teeth he had suddenly lost.

The street light at the corner sent a ray that gleamed on an uplifted knife.

With a squirming movement, Merry escaped the stroke, which cut a slit in his coat sleeve near the shoulder.

Then the man with the knife was seized, whirled round till his back was toward the youth attacked, and flung clean over Merry's head, striking on his head and shoulders on the flagging of the sidewalk.

The fifth thug paused in astounded hesitation. What sort of a chap was this who could dispose of four men with the rapidity of lightning, using only his bare hands? More than that, they had attacked him when he seemed quite unaware and unprepared, yet they had brought upon him not the slightest harm.

Frank's hand went toward his hip pocket.

With a yell, the fifth thug turned and ran for his very life, dodging into a dark alleyway.

From the opposite side of the street a strapping big man came hurrying toward Merry, crying:

"Give it to 'em! That's the stuff!"

Wondering if the fellow was another of the thugs, who might try to get at him, Merry held himself on the alert, ready for anything.

The dim light showed that the big fellow had a beardless, youthful face. He was dressed plainly, but his appearance was not that of a ruffian.

He paused, thrust his hands into his pockets, and surveyed the fallen thugs, who were beginning to bestir themselves.

"Well," he said, with a laugh, "you certainly got away with that bunch in a hurry. I saw them jump on you and made tracks to give you a hand, expecting they would down you before I could get here. Instead of downing you, they went down so fast that they looked as if they were falling before a machine gun. Your style of fighting is much like that of a chap I knew at college. It's the goods."

"Thank you," said Merry. "But I wasn't expecting trouble, and I came near getting mine, all right."

"Eh?" cried the big fellow. "Your voice sounds familiar. It can't be that——"

He stepped nearer, peering into Merry's face.

Suddenly Frank recognized him.

"Hello, Starbright!" he exclaimed, in delight.

"Frank Merriwell!" shouted the big fellow, leaping forward and grasping Merry's hand. "Oh, eternal miracles! Am I dreaming?"

Such a handshaking as it was! Here was Dick Starbright, the big Yale man, who had good cause to remember Frank with emotions of the deepest gratitude and friendliness.

"What in the world are you doing here, Merry?" asked Dick.

"What in the world are you doing here?" was Frank's counter question.

"Why, I'm a newspaper reporter. Been digging up the facts in regard to the Poydras murder. That brought me into this quarter. Now you own up."

Frank explained as briefly as possible.

"Want these fellows?" questioned Starbright. "They're getting in condition to sneak."

Indeed, two of the thugs had "sneaked" already, having improved the opportunity while the attention of Merry and Starbright was wholly absorbed by the surprise of their unexpected meeting. Another fellow was on his feet, and he ran the moment he heard Dick's words. The fourth was on his hands and knees, apparently seeking strength to rise.

"I see no officer near," said Merry. "We might tackle a difficult job if we tried to drag even one of them along until we could find a cop."

"That's right. His pals would be down on us, a dozen of them, at least. I fancy they'll let us alone now if we don't linger here. Let's sift along."

The last of the ruffians to rise to his feet staggered to the nearest wall, against which he leaned, gazing after the two young men who were walking away.

"Talk about choin-loightning!" he muttered. "It ain't in it wid dat cove! He coitinly done der whole gang, an' done dem good. He was sloidin' along in a trance when we went at him, but der way he come outer dat trance was a shock to der bunch. He's got more foight in him dan any ten blokes I ever seen before."

"I'm mighty glad I ran across you, Merry," said Starbright as they walked away. "You are just the fellow to straighten Morgan up and set him on the right track."

"Morgan?" questioned Frank.

"Yes, Dade Morgan. I can't seem to do anything with him, and he's fast getting in a bad way."

"Is he in New York?"

"Oh, yes; and it would be better for him if he was anywhere else."

"What's he doing here?"

"He isn't doing much of anything now, and that's one thing that is the trouble. You know what a proud, high-strung chap he always was. Well, he's up against it, and it has completely upset him."

"How is he up against it?"

"Why, he hit the pike pretty hard when he came here. He had some ready money, and he lived uptown at the Imperial. You know lots of sports and bloods hang out round that hotel. Dade fell in with some of the bunch. He got some tips on the races and made a few thousand dollars. It was the worst thing that could have happened to him. Next he took a flyer in stocks, trading on margins. He made some more money. I tell you, he was flying high just about then. He thought he had the world by the scruff of the neck. You should have heard him when he ladled out the talk to me. Told me what a howling chump I was to plug away on a newspaper on space. Offered to steer me right to coin money the way he was doing. I tell you, Merry, it was tempting. There he was

rolling in boodle and living on the fat of the land, while I had a three-fifty hall bedroom and was eating round at cheap restaurants. Some weeks I made as much as twenty-five, and then I was rich; but perhaps the very next week it would be seven or eight, and before long I was poor again. Reporting on space is a mighty hard mill to go through; but a man learns something at it."

"Go on about Morgan," urged Frank.

"There isn't a great deal to tell. The cards turned on him. He struck the toboggan and he went down with an awful thump. All he had made was wiped out at a single swipe. He followed it up, and in less than a week he was dead broke. Had to give up his rooms at the Imperial. Came down to a cheap hotel, and he's there now. He plays the bucket shops with every dollar he can get, hoping the tide will turn. I don't think he eats enough to keep a sparrow alive. The only thing that keeps him from drinking is that he spends all the money he can get gambling."

"How does he get money?"

"Why, he—he—he gets it somehow—I don't know—just—exactly—how."

Frank felt that he could forgive the big fellow the fib. He knew well enough that Dade Morgan was getting his money from Richard Starbright, who, in order to earn anything, was working like a dog on a newspaper. The fact that he was helping Morgan along Starbright wished to conceal.

Instantly Merry knew the situation was one to be investigated. Starbright had told him enough for him to realize that Morgan was on the road to ruin and very near the brink.

In the old days at Yale, Dade had been for a time Frank's bitterest enemy, having been taught from early boyhood by his uncle and guardian to loathe the very name of Merriwell; but in the end Merry's manliness, bravery, generosity, and nobility had conquered Morgan's hatred and had finally made the fellow Frank's friend.

Starbright was right in saying Dade Morgan was proud and high-strung. He was not the fellow to long endure poverty and humiliation without doing something desperate.

"Take me to him right away, Dick," urged Merry.

Suddenly Starbright seemed to hesitate.

"I don't know as Dade will ever forgive me for showing him up in his poverty," he said. "He hasn't let any of his friends at home know of his reverses. Keeps writing to them in the most cheerful manner, and I'll bet they think he has New York at his feet."

"I'll make it all right with him," assured Merry. "Don't worry about that, Dick. Let's get to him without the loss of a moment."

They had now reached Third Avenue, and they boarded a car southward bound, which at that hour was comparatively empty, while the cars bound in the opposite direction were packed.

While they were on the car Merry told Starbright something of his great plan to build a railroad in Sonora that should tap his mining property, and of his battle with Porfias del Norte and Alvarez Lazaro.

"Whew!" exclaimed Dick. "But you have been engaged in strenuous affairs."

"Rather," nodded Merry. "But the sky is pretty clear now, and I feel like taking a little relaxation. I have a plan that I will unfold after we find Morgan. Inza Burrage, Elsie Bellwood, Bart Hodge, Bruce Browning, and Harry Rattleton are in town, and they——"

"Great Scott!" palpitated the young reporter. "This is great! I'll have to see them all if it takes me away from the paper long enough to get me fired. Here we are. We get off here."

They had reached the Bowery.

Leaving the car, Starbright led the way to one of the cheapest downtown hotels, over the door of which was a sign which stated that rooms could be secured there for fifty cents a night, beds for fifteen and twenty-five cents.

They mounted a flight of dirty stairs and came into the office, where a number of poverty-stricken men were sitting about, reading papers, smoking, and talking. Some of the men looked like hobos, and all wore on their faces the stamp of blighted lives. A single glance made it plain that drink had caused the downfall of nearly all of them.

Merriwell shrugged his shoulders as his eyes ran swiftly over the hotel office and the loungers gathered therein.

"Dade Morgan stopping here!" he mentally exclaimed. "The immaculate, almost æsthetic, Dade in such a wretched place! It seems impossible."

There was no clerk behind the desk.

"Come on," said Starbright. "I know how to find Morgan's room. This way."

They turned from the office and mounted another flight of stairs, darker and dirtier than the first. There was no carpet on the bare floor of the corridor above, where a weakly flaring gas jet made a sickly break in the gloom. There was a peculiar smell about the place that was distinctly

offensive. The door of a room stood open. Inside two filthy-looking men, minus their coats, were arguing loudly and drunkenly about "labor and capital," while a third man lay sleeping on a dirty bed.

A man shuffled along the dark corridor and stared at Frank and Dick with suspicious, resentful eyes. He was low-browed, sullen, and vicious in appearance; just such a man as one would not care to meet alone on a dark street late at night.

From another room came the sound of maudlin singing, and in still another a man was swearing horribly.

Merry grasped Dick's arm.

"Haven't you made a mistake?" he asked.

"A mistake? Why——"

"Dade Morgan can't be stopping in a place like this."

"I know it doesn't seem possible," said Dick. "But he is here—at least, he was last night."

They came to a door, which Dick unhesitatingly pushed open.

A sickly gas jet was burning within the room. Stretched across a wretched bed lay a dark, silent figure.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DUEL OF EYES.

Starbright leaped forward and bent over the form on the bed, clutching at it.

"Dade!" he called, his voice full of alarm.

The figure stirred, and the big, yellow-haired youth drew a breath of relief.

"What's the matter?" asked a dull, mechanical voice. "Oh, is it you, Starbright, old man? Gods! I'm glad you came! Been getting some bad fancies into my head. If I'd had money enough to buy a pistol, or even a little poison——"

"What in the world are you talking about, Dade? Have you gone daffy?"

"No; but what's the use? This is the limit, and—— Who's that?"

Morgan saw Frank for the first time.

"I think you know me, Dade," said Merry, advancing.

The young man on the bed leaped up.

"Merriwell!" he gasped.

"Yes," said Starbright. "I ran across him by accident and brought him here to see you."

Morgan lifted his clinched hand and placed his arm across his eyes for a moment, the attitude being one of intense humiliation and shame.

"What made you bring him?" he muttered huskily. "I—I didn't want any one but you to—to know anything about——"

Frank grasped the hand of the humiliated youth.

"You know I'm your friend, Morgan," he said earnestly. "I urged Dick to bring me along. What if you have been up against hard luck? Every fellow is pretty certain to face it sooner or later."

"But I—I——"

Morgan choked and was unable to go on. It was a terrible ordeal for him.

Merry understood, and the few words he uttered were deeply sympathetic and earnest. Then, in a moment, his manner changed. He seized Morgan by both shoulders, gave him a shake, and laughed in a manner that was both encouraging and soothing.

"Why, it's a good thing for a fellow to get a taste of genuine hard luck. It softens him, mellows him, and makes him more sympathetic for other unfortunates—that is, if he's made of the right stuff. Let a chap slip through the world without ever encountering misfortune and he cannot sympathize with those who have to struggle hard to keep their heads above the surface. Besides that, it stiffens and braces the right sort of a fellow to overcome misfortune and rise in the world through his own efforts. I know, Morgan, for I've seen my share of bad luck."

The flickering gaslight revealed the fact that a bit of color came into Morgan's cheeks.

"I—I suppose that's right," he confessed. "But I never dreamed I'd come to—this! It was the suddenness of the fall that took the sand out of me, too. I ought to be ashamed—I am ashamed—for I actually thought of suicide! You see, Merry, no one but Dick here knew I had gone to the bottom like this. I've been writing home, telling all about my good fortune and success. The thought of any one ever finding out what a wretched failure I had made was more than I could endure. I tell you, Merriwell, this town is a bad place for a fellow who happens to fall in with the swift set. It was a fast bunch I dropped into, and I—well, I made a confounded fool of myself. Result, I blew all my money, acquired a taste for champagne, went broke, and I've been drinking beer and whisky since to keep my courage up. Might as well make a clean breast of it. Dick's been staking me lately, and I've been trying to hit it lucky with the ponies in order to get a start. To-day I decided that luck had set in to run against me for fair, and I felt like ending it by cashing in my chips for good."

Morgan seemed to feel a little better after making this confession.

"Glad I had a streak of luck that brought me along at this point," smiled Frank. "You're going to get such foolish thoughts out of your head right away. What you need is a change of air and scene. I can make use of you."

"You can?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Let's sit down a moment. I'll tell you about it."

There was one broken chair in the room. This Morgan hastily placed for Merriwell, after which he and Starbright sat on the bed.

Frank made plain the events which had brought him to New York in connection with the Central Sonora railroad scheme.

"Now that the business is practically settled, I have a little scheme that I propose to carry out," he said. "I am going to organize an athletic team, made up of my friends and comrades and make a tour."

"Great!" cried Starbright.

"It's a splendid scheme," nodded Morgan. "Can you get the fellows together?"

"I think so. Hodge, Browning, and Rattleton are right here in New York. Jack Ready and Joe Gamp are in Chicago. That makes six. With you and Starbright I shall have eight, and——"

"Not me!" cried Morgan.

"Yes, you."

"Impossible! I'm out of condition. Besides that, I'm broke, and I couldn't——"

"Don't worry about the money question, Dade. You know I have made several athletic and sporting tours, and never yet has it cost me, or any man connected with me, a dollar of our own money. I count on taking enough gate money to pay all expenses and more. I don't think there is a possibility of failure in this respect. I want you, Morgan, and you must agree to become one of my new athletic team."

"But my condition——"

"We'll see about that. We'll see what you can do in the way of getting into condition. You used to be hard as iron and supple as a willow. I think I can take hold of you, and put you into fairly good condition in a short time. As for Starbright, if I'm not mistaken, he is in the very pink of condition."

"I am," agreed Dick; "but I—I'd have to give up my work, and——"

"You told me all about your poor success thus far. You've been drilling at it through the summer months, and it's time to have a change. I don't believe you'll lose anything. In fact, I happen to have some influence with one or two Western papers, and I'll see that you get a chance to show what you can do out there any time you wish to go back to the work. Unless you think it will be a positive injury to you to let up here, I'll not take no as an answer."

"I'm with you!" exclaimed Dick suddenly. "You may count on me."

"Then it is all settled, for——"

"Not yet—at least, not as far as I'm concerned," interrupted Morgan. "I wouldn't be worth a rap to you, Merry. I must confess that I have acquired some bad habits in recent years, and I—well, I'm afraid I haven't enough backbone to make one of your crowd, even if I could get into shape for it, which is doubtful."

"Let me be the judge in regard to that last point," smiled Frank. "You're going to come with me, Morgan. There is talk about an all-American football team playing the best college teams of the country. I'd enjoy pitting my boys against this all-American team, even if we were defeated. Don't

say another word, Morgan. Let's get out of here. I want you to buy some clothes and——"

"I have the pawn tickets for my own clothes," said Dade, in a low tone.

"Good! We'll have your wardrobe out of hock in a hurry. We'll have you looking like yourself in short order. Day after to-morrow we'll start for Chicago, stopping off a day at Niagara, as Inza Burrage and Elsie Bellwood will accompany us as far as St. Louis, and both wish to visit the falls. Fellows, it will be great sport! Makes me feel sort of bubbly and flushed all over."

"You've mentioned only eight fellows in all," reminded Dick Starbright. "Eight will not make a football team."

"That's all right," assured Frank. "Received a message from Buck Badger this morning. He'll join us at St. Louis, and he thinks Berlin Carson will be with him. If Carson is with Badger when we get there, we'll have ten men. I expect to hear from two or three more of the old gang at any time. Don't you worry, for I'll have eleven men and three or four substitutes. Leave it to me, fellows—leave it to me."

"I'm perfectly willing to do that," nodded Starbright, beaming in anticipation of the pleasures to come.

"So am I," said Morgan, who had cast off his despondency and now seemed much like his old self. "But I wish one of you would stick me with a pin or something. I want to make sure I'm not dreaming. It's too good to be true."

"It's true, Dade," laughed Merry. "The troubles I've been through in the last few weeks have been enough to make me feel the need of a little relaxation. Why, it will be old times over again!"

Dade suddenly stared upward over Frank's head at the transom above the door. His manner caused Merry to glance up quickly.

The transom was open, leaving an aperture of about three inches.

Through this aperture could be dimly seen the upper part of a face, with a pair of coal-black eyes, which were fixed with an ominous and steady stare upon Merry.

In those midnight eyes there was a gleam of unspeakable hatred, savage malevolence, and deadly rancor. They were the eyes of one who longed to do murder.

The awful look in those terrible eyes seemed to freeze both Morgan and Starbright and turn them to stone. For some moments they remained motionless and breathless.

As for Frank, he met that look squarely, and between him and the eavesdropper at the transom a silent battle took place.

Dade and Dick suddenly knew this battle was occurring. They felt the strain and intensity of it, and they seemed to realize that the master mind would conquer. Neither of them moved, fearing to break the spell. Both felt that they could not move if they so desired.

For at least a full minute the duel of eyes continued. The mysterious man outside seemed putting all his strength of soul and will into the struggle.

Was it a flickering flare of the gas jet, or did the midnight eyes waver the least bit?

Without moving his head or his body, Dade Morgan turned his glance toward Merriwell. What he saw in Frank's face gave him a feeling of relief and unspeakable satisfaction.

Merriwell wore the look of a conqueror. He was the same undaunted, undismayed Merry as of old. He was master of this mysterious foe beyond the closed door.

Again Morgan lifted his eyes to the midnight orbs beyond the transom. A sensation of triumph thrilled him like an electric shock.

The deadly eyes wavered!

The silent duel was ended!

Something like a muttered curse and a choking cry of rage came from the lips of the man beyond the door.

Then the deadly eyes suddenly vanished.

There was a thud, as if some one had leaped down from a chair on which he had stood.

At the same instant Merriwell sprang up and attempted to open the door.

It was locked.

On entering the room Morgan had left the key in the lock, and this key had been softly turned by the mysterious eavesdropper.

There was the sound of fleeing feet in the corridor and a soft laugh, which trailed away and grew fainter in the distance.

Frank Merriwell stepped back from the door and flung his shoulder against it with fearful force.

With a splintering crash, the door gave way before the shock, and Merry staggered into the corridor. He was followed by Starbright and Morgan.

Recovering his equilibrium, Frank straightened up and whirled to follow and overtake the mysterious unknown if possible.

The man of the midnight eyes had disappeared.

The smashing of the door had startled and aroused others in adjacent rooms, and they now came swarming into the corridor. One of them clutched at Frank, but was flung aside; others dodged back to let him pass.

Merry ran to the head of the stairs, down which he leaped.

A man was coming up the second flight.

"Anybody run past you just now?" asked Frank.

"Naw. Wot's der matter?"

Merriwell did not pause to answer the question, but whirled into the office.

He was met at the door by a man in shirt sleeves, who grabbed at him and demanded to know what was "doing."

One glance about the place was sufficient to convince Frank that the eavesdropper had not fled in there.

Starbright appeared, followed by Morgan. The latter was known to the man who had grabbed Frank, and his hasty explanation was sufficient, although the "clerk" declared that some one must settle for the smashed door.

"I'll do that," said Merry promptly. "The spy has escaped. Come back with us, take a look at the door, and estimate the damage."

Merry had no trouble in settling to the satisfaction of every one, but he could not repress his regret over the escape of the man who had been peering through the transom.

Morgan had paid in advance for his room at the hotel, and therefore he was at liberty to leave any time he wished. Merry and Starbright lost no time in getting him out of the place.

Dick drew a breath of relief when they reached the open air.

"That place will serve for the class of men who patronize it," he observed; "but I'm glad Morgan has left it for good."

"So am I!" exclaimed Dade. "The only thing I regret is that the fellow who peered through the transom made his escape. Who could it have been? Have you an idea, Merry?"

"Never yet have I seen but two men with such eyes," declared Merriwell. "One man is dead. The other man, Alvarez Lazaro, claims to be Del Norte's avenger. I thought him dead, but it must be that he escaped from the burning building on the East Side. How he escaped I cannot tell; but, as it was not Del Norte who peered through the transom, it must have been Lazaro."

"Look out for him, Frank," urged Starbright. "I saw murder in those eyes."

"I'll have the police raking the city for him without delay," said Merry. "Let's go directly to police headquarters."

This they did, and Merriwell told his story. As it was known that Lazaro had tried to poison Watson Scott and had bribed the driver of Warren Hatch's automobile to wreck the machine with Mr. Hatch in it, Merriwell's story was listened to with the greatest interest, and he was given the assurance that, in case Lazaro still lived, no stone would be left unturned in the effort to capture him.

From police headquarters the three friends of college days visited several pawn shops, where Morgan recovered his clothing and trinkets.

Two large suit cases were purchased and the recovered articles packed into them.

Merry called a cab, and they proceeded uptown. A room was engaged at the Hoffman House, and Morgan reveled in the luxury of a bath and a shave. In due time he appeared clothed in a respectable manner, and looking wonderfully changed. There was color in his cheeks, life in his eyes, and springiness in his step.

"Now," said Frank, "we'll away to Hotel Astor. Starbright has sent in some copy by messenger to his paper, at the same time giving notice that he has quit, and so things are pretty well arranged to my satisfaction."

A few minutes later they were again in a cab, northward bound.

"I'll leave Lazaro to the police," said Merry. "Now that they know the man is not dead, having proof that he tried to murder Scott and Hatch, they'll either capture him or make New York hot to hold him. I'll take care that Felipe Jalisco has every attention. But I don't propose to let anything upset my plan of an athletic tour."

Upper Broadway was blazing with light. Morgan laughed with satisfaction as they were carried along the street; but he grew sober suddenly as his eyes fell on the Imperial Hotel.

"I made the mistake of my life there," he said; "but I think it taught me a lesson I'll not soon forget."

They reached Long Acre Square and stopped in front of Hotel Astor.

"Here we are, boys!" said Merry, as he sprang out and paid the driver.

"Yes, and you've been gong enough letting here—I mean long enough getting here," said a voice, as Harry Rattleton hurried forward. "Browning is nearly starved. He's entertaining the girls. Hodge and I have been watching for you the last hour, and we— Great Halifax! is this Stick Darbright and Made Dorgan—er, I mean Darb Stickbright and Morg Dadean—er, er, no, I mean—I dunno what I mean! It's um! Oh, thunder! what a jolly surprise! This is great—great!"

Rattleton had Starbright with one hand and Morgan with the other, and he astonished and amused people in the vicinity by dancing wildly and whirling them round as he wrung their hands.

"Look out, Rattles," laughed Frank. "If you're seen going through such gyrations by a policeman he'll surely pinch you."

Bart Hodge advanced and tore Starbright from Rattleton, which gave Morgan an opportunity to break away, and he did so laughingly.

"The same old Rattleton," he said. "Harry, you haven't changed a bit."

"Yes, I have," contradicted the curly-haired chap. "I'm more dignified and danly—I mean more dignified and manly. See how sedate I am. Oh, ginger! isn't this a jolly surprise! I believe even Browning will now forgive Frank for being late to dinner."

Hodge shook hands with both Dick and Dade, and they all followed Frank into the hotel.

A bellboy saw Merry and hastened to notify him that he was wanted at the desk.

"Here is something for you, Mr. Merriwell," said one of the assistant clerks. "It was just left here by a messenger boy, who stated that it was very important and must be given to you personally."

He handed Frank an envelope on which his name was written.

Merry tore it open and drew forth a single sheet of paper, on which was written the following ominous words:

"You fancied Porfias del Norte perished in the Adirondacks and that Alvarez Lazaro was destroyed by fire. Neither Del Norte nor Lazaro is dead. Both live in one, and that One pens these lines. I am Del Norte and I am Lazaro. I am likewise the avenger of both. My one object in life is to make you suffer as Del Norte suffered before he escaped from his living tomb, coming forth an old man with snow-white hair. It is my object to make you face the torture of fire here on earth, even as Lazaro faced it. I know you have again set the police on my trail, but I laugh at them and defy them all, even as I laugh at and defy you. I want you to feel the fear of torture and death; I want you to know it is coming and that you cannot escape, and, therefore, I write this. Be constantly on your guard, but know that all your precautions cannot save you. You are doomed!

"THE AVENGER."

"What is it, Merry?" asked Hodge, seeing Frank frowning over it.

"Nothing but ridiculous nonsense," was Merriwell's smiling answer, as he thrust the paper into his pocket. "Let's get the ladies and have dinner."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT NIAGARA FALLS.

The trolley car from Buffalo, bearing Frank Merriwell and his friends, was approaching Niagara Falls. The entire party was bubbling with that enthusiasm and eagerness felt by all "sightseers" who find themselves drawing near to this great natural marvel of America. Eagerly they peered from the car windows in their desire to obtain the first glimpse of the falls.

"I can see some mising rist—that is, some rising mist," spluttered Harry Rattleton.

"Get off my pet corn!" growled Bruce Browning, jerking Harry back into his seat, from which he had partly risen. "If you step on that corn again you'll see stars!"

"It just takes an awful long time to get there," said Elsie Bellwood.

"Awful long," agreed Inza.

"I don't think you'll see anything of the falls until we leave this car," said Merry.

"Girls, do be dignified," urged Mrs. Medford, who was chaperoning them. "You are making the passengers smile at you. I greatly dislike having any one smile at me."

"You can supply all the dignity for the party, Aunt Lucy," said Inza. "We're not going to try to be dignified to-day. We're just going in for the best time we can have, and let people smile all they wish."

"That's proper," laughed Dick Starbright, giving Inza an admiring glance. "Two much dignity robs the world of half its fun."

Hodge and Morgan were the silent ones, but there was a light of eagerness in their eyes, and Dade's thin cheeks were flushed.

The car entered the streets of Niagara, swung round a curve, slipped into a huge, covered building and stopped.

"All out," called the conductor.

"Here we are!" said Merry.

"What'll we do now? What'll we do now?" eagerly asked Inza, grasping his arm.

"The very best thing to do is to take a Belt Line observation car, which will carry us over to the Canadian side and round the gorge, giving us a chance to stop off wherever we like."

"This way to the Belt Line cars," called a man who had overheard Merry's words.

They passed from the building to the street beyond, where the car they wanted was waiting. Tickets were purchased without delay, and soon the car was moving.

"But where are the falls?" palpitated Elsie. "I don't see the falls anywhere."

"You will in a few moments," assured Hodge.

"But I want to right off. I can't wait! I've waited too long now!"

However, she was compelled to restrain her impatience until the car descended a steep grade and bore them out on the great steel arch bridge, when suddenly upon their view burst a spectacle that caused them to gasp and utter exclamations of delight.

"Oh, look, look!"

"At last!"

"There they are!"

"Isn't it perfectly grand!"

Then they became silent, stricken dumb with the unspeakable admiration they felt.

Above them and quite near at hand were the American Falls, with the sun shining on them and a cloud of pure white mist rising in an ever-shifting veil from the gorge into which plunged and roared the mighty volume of water. Then came Goat Island, with Horseshoe Falls beyond, shooting forth great boiling fountains of white spray and sending heavenward billow after billow of mist. Beneath them rushed the broad river, writhing and twisting, as if still suffering agonies after its frightful plunge over those dizzy heights to be rent and torn to tatters on the rocks below.

Inza's gloved hand crept into Frank's, and he felt it quiver a little in his grasp.

With a single exception, every one on the car seemed to regard the falls with interest. Even the motorman and conductor took a look at them.

The exception was an old man, who wore a long cloak and carried a crooked cane. His hands rested on the handle of his cane, and his gray head was bowed on his hands. He did not once look up or turn his face toward the falls while passing over the bridge. To Frank this seemed remarkable, but Merry decided that he must be some one who was familiar with the spectacle and to whom the sight no longer appealed.

Having crossed the bridge, the car turned upward toward the falls, and at the point where the wonderful horseshoe began they got off.

Approaching the iron railing, they leaned on it and gazed in continued and increasing wonderment. They were now where they could hear something of the continuous thunder of the falls, and at intervals a little of the spray fell in misty rain upon them.

"Oh, see!" breathed Inza, grasping Frank's arm. "Look at the beautiful rainbow."

In the mist of the American Falls a gorgeous rainbow could be seen.

"I see it," said Frank; but at that moment his eyes were following the strange old man in the black cloak, who had left the car with them and was walking toward the very brink of Horseshoe Falls,

leaning heavily on his crooked cane and seeming quite feeble.

"I was wrong about him," thought Merry. "He is interested in the falls—he is fascinated by them."

The old man pressed forward until he was within the very edge of the cloud of mist that rose from the depths below. He seemed totally unconscious of the presence of others in the vicinity. At that point there was no iron railing, and he leaned forward, planting his cane on the wet stones beneath his feet, and peered downward, apparently watching the little steamer, *Maid of the Mist*, which now came swinging out of the spray at the foot of the American Falls and headed toward the Canadian side.

"If he should slip there," thought Frank, "it would be all over with him in a moment. I wonder that he ventures so near."

A sudden feeling of anxiety for the old man possessed him, and he suggested to Inza that they should move up toward the brink of the falls.

Leaving the others so absorbed in watching the tiny steamer far below that the move of Merry and Inza was not observed they approached the point where the old man stood.

"What is he doing?" questioned Inza, in surprise. "It must be very dangerous there. Call to him, Frank; tell him to come away."

But Merriwell feared to startle the old man, and therefore he did not call.

Above them the rapids came sweeping down toward the falls, the water rushing with such volume and force that it created a feeling of dread, for it was plain that anything once fairly caught in its clutch must be carried, in spite of all human endeavor and strength, over the brink to destruction.

"Remain here, Inza," advised Frank, being compelled to raise his voice in order to make himself understood above the roar of the water. "I'm going to step down there a little nearer. He may slip."

Reluctantly she permitted him to leave her. He did not know that she followed him to the very edge of the rushing water a short distance above the falls. Cautiously he approached the silent figure of the old man, but just as he was on the point of stretching out a hand to grasp the man's arm the latter turned, keeping his back toward Merry, and moved along the edge of the rushing rapids.

Merry refrained from touching the stranger, but followed him as the man approached Inza.

Apparently the old man did not see the girl until he was right upon her.

Then he slightly lifted his head, gave her a glance, and stepped to one side, as if to pass.

This brought her between him and the rapids.

As he was passing his foot slipped on one of the wet rocks, he flung up his hand with the cane, and the staff swept through the air in a half circle directly at Inza's head!

Struck such a blow with the cane, Inza Burrage would be sent headlong into the seething water, which would carry her over the falls in a twinkling!

Fortunately Inza had been watching the old man with anxious eyes. Fortunately, likewise, she was no common girl. Many a time she had demonstrated the fact that she was wonderfully quick-witted and resourceful.

Frank was a bit too far away to clutch the old man's arm and check the sweep of his heavy cane.

Inza's fate lay wholly with herself. She saw the cane coming directly at her head, and, like a flash, she "ducked."

Over her head swept the cane, brushing the plumes on her hat.

For an instant she tottered, seeming to sway toward the rapids in the effort to regain her equilibrium.

In that instant Frank Merriwell's strong right arm had sent the stranger, with one great surge, reeling to his knees some feet from the water's edge, and then his left arm encircled Inza's waist and drew her from the perilous spot.

She was white as the mist that rose in a great cloud close at hand.

"Inza!" cried Merry chokingly. "Thank Heaven you had presence of mind and dodged!"

"Oh, Frank!" she murmured; "I nearly fell into the water after that!"

He gave her all his attention.

"That old man must be crazy!" he said. "No one at his age that is not crazy or foolish would prowl about at the very edge of the river here, where a misstep means almost certain death. He should be locked up!"

Then he turned to look for the stranger, but saw the bent form at a distance. Without having

paused to utter a word of explanation, apology, or regret, the man was hastening away.

"Further proof that he's daffy," muttered Frank.

He longed to hasten after the stranger, but felt Inza clinging to him in weakness, which prevented such a move.

And now their friends, having discovered for the first time that something was wrong, came hurrying to the spot, asking many questions.

It was some time before Inza recovered, but in the end she flung off her weakness with a sudden show of resolution, forced a laugh, and declared that she was all right.

"Where is the chundering old bump—I mean the blundering old chump?" spluttered Harry Rattleton. "Didn't stop to say a word? Well, somebody ought to say something to him! I'd like the privilege. It would do me good to give him an unvarnished piece of my mind."

The old man, however, had disappeared. Morgan said he had taken a carriage after hastening from the immediate vicinity of the falls.

"I'm glad he's gone," declared Inza. "I'm sure he was frightened. Perhaps he didn't know what to say under the circumstances."

"I'm afraid this terrible adventure will spoil your enjoyment here, Inza," said Mrs. Medford.

"Not at all," was the answer. "It's all over now, and we'll forget it. What shall we do next?"

It was agreed that the proper thing was to resume their trolley ride around the gorge, and so they took the next car bound down the river.

This ride was one that none of them could ever forget. The tracks ran close to the brink of the great gorge, so close at times that they could look directly downward from the side of the car into treetops far beneath them and see the fearful rush of the river through its choked channel. It was a spectacle almost as impressive as that of the falls, and in some ways, as the car skimmed along the brink of these mighty precipices, it was even more "shuddery," as Elsie expressed it.

But the part that affected them the most was the return journey through the gorge, after they had recrossed the river five miles below the falls.

The car descended until it was running at the very edge of the river that rushed through the channel between the two great bluffs. As the whirlpool was approached the rush and swish of the water became fiercer and more terrible. It was fascinating yet fearful to look upon, and Elsie Bellwood shuddered and drew back, more than once averting her eyes.

The whirlpool itself was a wonderful sight, but the rapids above it proved the most awesome of aspect. There the water hissed and seethed with a blood-chilling sound as it raced, and foamed, and whirled along its course. The suggestion of terrible power possessed by this mad river was simply appalling. The sound of the hissing water put one's nerves on edge. In places the river boiled, and surged, and raged over hidden rocks, leaping upward in mighty waves of white foam. There were thousands of eddies and whirlpools, all suggestive of destruction.

The girls were genuinely relieved when the car began the ascent that would take them out of the gorge.

"It was great," said Inza, as they finally reached the level above. "I enjoyed every moment of it, but it made me feel so dreadfully mean and insignificant. I'm glad we took the ride, but I don't think I'd care to take it again to-morrow. Where shall we go now, Frank?"

"We'll stroll over onto Goat Island," said Merry.

They left the car when it finally reached the place from which they had started on the American side.

Barely had they started toward the island when a carriage stopped beside them and the driver importuned them to let him take them round.

"You couldn't take all of us in that carriage," said Merry.

"I'll call another in a moment," said the driver, and started to do so.

"Hold on," said Merriwell. "We prefer to walk."

"Not I," said Browning. "How much is it?"

"Twenty-five cents each," was the answer. "I'll take you round and show you all the points of interest."

"Cheap enough," said Bruce, and he promptly climbed in.

In vain the driver urged others to get in. He was even somewhat insolent in his insistence. Finally he drove off with Bruce lazily waving his hand from the rear seat of the carriage.

Frank laughed softly.

"Browning will get enough of that," he declared. "Those fellows urge you to get in for a twenty-

five-cent ride, promising to show you numerous points of interest; but almost before they get you over to the island they begin suggesting a longer drive that will cost you a dollar, two dollars, or even three dollars. They keep harping on it until they destroy all the pleasure and enjoyment of the twenty-five-cent ride, and if they find they cannot inveigle you into taking a longer ride they become absolutely insulting and offensive. That fellow will be sore when he learns that Bruce has been over to the Canadian side and round the gorge."

There was plenty of time, and the party enjoyed the walk over the bridge to Goat Island. Midway on the bridge they paused to watch the rush of the rapids, where the water came bulging over a distant ridge, and swept toward them with a hissing, roaring sound that was quite indescribable.

Having reached the island, they proceeded to cross the little bridge to Luna Island, from which a near view of the American Falls was obtained. Here again they saw a portion of the beautiful rainbow in the rising mist.

From Luna Island they retraced their steps, and then sauntered along the iron-railed lower edge of Goat Island. They were strongly tempted to visit the Cave of the Winds under the falls, but Merry knew the waterproof clothing furnished would not be sufficient to keep them from becoming uncomfortably damp, and this, together with the fact that the afternoon was rapidly turning cold, caused them to decide to refrain from descending the wonderfully long stairway and crossing the spray-dripping bridge to the cave.

From the outer extremity of Goat Island they obtained another fine view of the Horseshoe Falls.

Deciding to visit the upper end of the island for the purpose of viewing the wonderful rapids above the falls, they had not proceeded far before they came upon Browning, who was sitting on a bench and looking very sour and disgusted.

"Why, hello, Bruce!" called Frank. "All through with your drive? That's odd."

The giant made a rumbling sound in his throat.

"Don't talk to me about that!" he exploded. "Why, that chap just bored me to death trying to induce me to let him drive me over to the Canadian side and around to other places. Couldn't choke him off. Told him I'd been across. He kept it up. Asked me if I'd seen this, and that, and the other. I said yes, yes, yes! Then I invited him to shut up. First thing I knew he was taking me back off the island. He had closed up like a clam. Asked him where all the places were that he was going to show me, and he informed me I had seen twenty-five cents' worth. Then I was ruffled. I admit I was ruffled. I stood up, took him by the collar, and agitated him a little. The agitation shook some of the dust out of his clothes. Then I got out and permitted him to proceed. I've been sitting here meditating, and if you don't walk too fast I think I'll stick by you until you get through seeing things."

The manner in which Browning related this was decidedly amusing, and all laughed over it.

They followed the walk, and proceeded on their way toward the upper end of the island. Near the upper end they approached three small islands, known as the Three Sisters. A massive anchored bridge permitted them to cross to the first of these islands. Beneath this bridge the water swept with a continuous rushing roar, and the sight of it gave Elsie a renewed feeling of nervousness, which was increased by the fact that the great bridge swayed and moved beneath their feet.

Having crossed by other bridges to the outermost of the Three Sisters, they now obtained a near and awe-inspiring view of the great rapids above the Canadian Falls.

At a distance up the river the water seemed pouring over a great semi-circular ridge. It swept down on the Three Sisters as if seeking to overwhelm them. It tore past on either side with the velocity of an express train, hissing and snarling in anger because the islands dared defy and withstand its furious assault.

Elsie stood with clasped hands, her eyes dilated, as she stared at the rapids which stretched far, far away to the Canadian side.

"Isn't it grand!" cried Inza in Elsie's ear, her face flushed and her dark eyes shining.

"It's grand," admitted the golden-haired girl; "but it's terrible, and it frightens me."

The little party had divided, seeking various vantage points from which views of the great rapids could be obtained.

Frank and Bart lingered with the girls.

Mrs. Medford had remained on Goat Island, declining to cross the first bridge, and asserting that she preferred to rest on one of the benches. She refused to permit any one to remain with her, urging and commanding them all to see everything worth seeing.

"A human being would have absolutely no chance if ever caught in the edge of that current," said Hodge. "The instant he was swept off his feet he would be doomed."

"It's fascinating, fascinating!" exclaimed Inza. "I almost seem to feel something pulling me toward the water."

"It's a very dangerous feeling," smiled Merry. "You know that an average of sixteen suicides a

year take place here at the falls. People cannot resist the fascination of the rushing water. Many times no real reason can be given for these acts of self-destruction. You know there are moments when every human brain falters and seems touched by the fleeting finger of insanity. People who stand on great heights often feel an almost irresistible longing to fling themselves down. Here they are attacked by a mad longing to cast themselves into the clutch of the rapids."

"Oh!" exclaimed Elsie, pale to the lips. "Let me get away—farther away!"

Inza offered assistance, but Elsie forced a laugh and declared she was all right. However, she leaned on the arm of Bart, and they retreated from the immediate edge of the rapids.

Frank watched them, unaware that Inza had stepped out on a stone that lifted its damp crest in the edge of the water.

Suddenly he was startled by a cry.

He whirled, and saw something that sent his heart into his mouth.

Inza was lying across the rock, with both feet in the water.

A man in black, the cape of his long cloak flapping about his shoulders like demon wings, was running from the spot, flourishing a stout, crooked cane.

As he passed Frank, fully fifteen feet away, the fleeing man—whom Merry knew as the same one who had so nearly accomplished Inza's destruction on the Canadian shore—cast at the youth one piercing look.

The eyes of the man were black as blackest night, but in their recesses gleamed a baleful fire of hatred and triumph.

The same eyes had glared at Merry through the transom of the Bowery hotel, in New York.

They were the eyes of Alvarez Lazaro, the avenger!

But they were also the eyes of Porfias del Norte!

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN CONSTANT PERIL.

The frightful peril of Inza commanded Frank's whole attention. He leaped toward her. He saw her slipping from the damp rock.

The eddying, swirling, hissing water was dragging at her feet. Inza's gloved fingers clutched vainly at the rock. She could obtain no detaining hold upon it.

She turned her white, bloodless face toward Frank, horror and despair in her dilated eyes. He reached her, swung out with one long stride to the rock, stooping and clutching her just as she must have been swept away.

His fingers closed on her arms with a grip like iron. He swung her to her feet and flung her into the hollow of his left arm. Then he turned and leaped back to the solid ground.

Inza had not fainted. She was limp and nerveless, but still conscious.

Of course, just then Frank's attention was given entirely to her; but the moment he realized she did not need him, he placed her gently on the ground and turned to look for the man in black who had fled past him.

By this time the attention of Bart and Elsie had been attracted. They saw something was the matter, and they hastened toward Inza.

"What is it—oh, what is it?" palpitated Elsie.

Frank turned to Hodge.

"Did you see that man?" he hoarsely asked.

Bart was startled and astounded by the terrible look on Merriwell's face and the glare in his usually kindly eyes.

"What man?"

"The one in black—the old man who nearly knocked Inza into the river over on the Canadian side."

"Was it him? I saw some one running, among the trees yonder. What happened, Merry? How did —"

"Look out for the girls—guard them," commanded Frank.

Then he sprang away with the speed of a deer, quickly disappearing from view in pursuit of the mysterious man, for he now knew that twice that day had that man made an attempt on the life of Inza Burrage.

In the meantime, Elsie was kneeling on the ground, her arms about Inza, trying to learn what had taken place.

"Your feet and the bottom of your skirt are dripping wet, dear," she said. "Did you slip? Did you fall into the water?"

Inza covered her colorless face with her hands. The fingers of her gloves were torn from her efforts to obtain a hold on the rock where she had fallen. She was shuddering all over.

"Tell me—tell me how it happened," urged Elsie.

"That man——" gasped Inza.

"The one Bart saw running away?"

"Yes, yes!"

"What did he do?"

"He pushed me!"

"Pushed you?" cried Bart, astounded and horrified.

"Pushed you?" burst from Elsie.

"With his cane," shuddered Inza.

"The monster!" cried Elsie.

"I had stepped out on that rock," explained Inza.

"Where was the man then?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him until I turned to look back. Then I saw him close by the edge of the water. I think he must have leaped out from behind the thick cedars yonder. He looked at me, and the expression on his face—— Oh!"

The quivering girl was overcome by the memory.

"Heavens!" palpitated Bart. "The old wretch tried to murder you! Is it possible he did, Inza?"

"I saw murder in his eyes," whispered Inza. "They were the most terrible eyes. He was a man with snow-white hair, yet he did not seem so very old. And his face—I have seen it before! Where? When?"

"You saw him on the Canadian side."

"I did not see him plainly then. I did not get a good look at his face. I know I have seen those eyes before. He seemed to laugh horribly as he lifted his cane, but no sound came from his lips. I thought he was going to strike me with the cane. Instead of that, he thrust the end against me and tried to give me a push that would send me from the rock into the rapids."

Elsie's arms tightened about her friend, and she trembled all over with the thought of such a thing.

"Like a flash I understood what he meant to do," continued the dark-haired girl. "I twisted about so that the full force of his thrust was lost; but in doing so I lost my balance. I thought it was all over, and I uttered a cry. At the same time, even as I was falling, I sought to drop on the rock. I succeeded in doing so, and there I lay, with my feet in the water. I could feel the water dragging at them! I felt myself slipping, slipping, slipping!"

She choked and covered her face with her hands.

Some of the others now approached and were startled to learn what had taken place.

The moment he heard about it a most astounding change came over Bruce Browning. The big fellow had been loitering along, apparently so weary that only by the greatest effort could he drag his feet; but in a twinkling he awoke to astonishing animation, asked which way Merry had gone, and a second later bounded away, covering the ground in mighty leaps.

Starbright and Morgan followed. Rattleton remained with Hodge to look after the girls.

There were other visitors on the islands. Soon the boys learned that the strange white-haired man in black had fled across the bridges to Goat Island, followed a few moments later by a young man.

When Goat Island was reached another man informed them that he had seen the old man in black leap into a waiting carriage, upon which the driver whipped his horses and sent them off at a great pace.

Merriwell had reached the spot a few moments later and had rushed across through the woods in an effort to head off the fugitive.

While Browning was making inquiries he was overtaken by Starbright and Morgan.

"There's only one way to get off this island," reminded Dade. "Come on!"

They raced through the leafless woods, causing all who saw them to turn and stare after them in astonishment.

When the bridge to the mainland was reached they paused once more to make inquiries.

A man and a woman had just crossed from the mainland. They had seen Merriwell dash over the bridge and were sure a rapidly driven carriage had preceded him by a brief space of time.

Frank was finally found talking to an officer in front of the Tower Hotel.

"He slipped me, boys," confessed Merry, with an expression of regret; "but the police have been notified, and they promised to do their best to nab him. How is Inza?"

"She's all right," assured Starbright. "Of course, her nerves received a great shock; but you know how quickly she recovers, so I don't think you have any reason to worry about her. Hodge and Rattleton are looking out for her and Elsie."

"Look here, Merry," said Browning, placing his hand on Frank's shoulder and mopping his flushed face with a handkerchief, "who was the lunatic that tried to push her into the river?"

"I think you have justly called him a lunatic," nodded Merry. "I am confident the man is deranged. Boys, I believe—nay, I have no doubt—that it was Alvarez Lazaro, the crazy Mexican who claims to be the avenger of Porfias del Norte. I did believe Lazaro had perished in that fire in New York; but now I am certain he escaped in some unaccountable manner, and never until he is captured and punished can I or any one of my friends know a real moment of safety. There is no telling what the next move of this maniacal avenger will be. We must all be on our guard, night and day."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF PORFIAS DEL NORTE.

Frank's party returned to Buffalo, and, for all of the startling affair at the falls, enjoyed a splendid dinner at the hotel where they were stopping.

Inza had recovered in a remarkable manner, betraying not a trace of nervousness, despite her late terrible experience. She was the life of the party at dinner.

After dinner nearly all of them gathered in Merry's room to chat. Dade Morgan was an exception. He was strangely restless and uneasy, and he improved an opportunity to slip away without attracting attention.

Slipping on his overcoat, he sauntered forth for a stroll along the principal street of the city.

As he was passing the Iroquois Hotel some one struck him a heavy blow on the shoulder, and a voice exclaimed:

"Dade Morgan, as I live! Well, wouldn't this jostle you some!"

A young man who looked something like a swell, yet had a dissipated appearance, grasped Morgan's hand and shook it warmly.

"This is a surprise!" he declared. "Saw you last at the Imperial in little old New York the night after the ponies hit you such a bump. You had accumulated a large load and were in a pretty mushy condition. Lost track of you after that. Couldn't find you, you know. Didn't anybody seem to know what had become of you. Was afraid you'd done something rash. You're looking fine as a daisy. What brought you to this town? Come in and have a drink and tell me about it."

The talkative young man forcibly pulled Morgan into the hotel, but Dade finally stopped him, saying:

"I'm glad to see you again, Cavendale; but you'll have to excuse me from drinking. I've cut it out."

"Oh, come, old man, don't—"

"It's straight goods," asserted Morgan grimly. "No more of the lush for me."

"I can't believe it! And you were such a hot bunch! Well, come in to the bar and watch me lap up something."

He insisted until Morgan finally consented to accompany him to the bar. When they arrived there Cavendale renewed his urgent invitation, but Dade stood firm as far as liquor was concerned.

"Well, have something for old times' sake," said Cavendale. "I'm going to look on the rye. Take a lemonade, a ginger ale, anything to be sociable. I want you to tell me about yourself."

Dade took a lemonade.

Although Cavendale had stated that he wished Dade to tell about himself, he rattled off a rambling statement of his own affairs, claiming that he was "in on a big deal" that meant thousands to him.

"It's a snap," he asserted. "It's the greatest thing I ever struck. I'm bound to come out with my clothes lined with money. Hated to leave New York, but the people I'm in with are running things, and I go where they say."

Then he shivered as he saw Dade sipping the lemonade.

"That's rotten stuff for cold weather," he said. "Gives me a chill just to see you taking it. What happened to you, anyhow? Did you get a fit of remorse? Old Colonel R. E. bothers me sometimes, but I take a few bracers and he vanishes. Tell me why you quit, old man."

Morgan suddenly decided to do so.

"I quit through the influence of a friend," he explained. "I went broke in New York, Cavendale; but when I got hold of any loose coin I generally spent a part of it for booze. I'm not going to tell you all that happened to me, but I was clean down to the bottom when Frank Merriwell found me."

Cavendale started.

"Seems to me I've heard of Merriwell," he muttered. "I'm sure I have. So you're pretty chummy with him now?"

"You might call it so."

"Know all about his plans, I suppose? Sort of a bosom comrade, eh?"

"I believe Merriwell would trust me fully, although he found me pretty near in the gutter in New York."

"Well, that's fine! Old college chums, and all that. Still I want you to know I always had a liking for you, Morgan, old fellow—more than a liking. When I saw you a few minutes ago, I said: 'The very chap; I'll pull him into this deal and make a carload of money for him.' I believe I can do it, too. I suppose you're ready to make a stake? It's easy money and plenty of it."

"Why, every young man is looking for an opportunity to make money."

"Sure thing. Wait a moment. I want you to meet a friend of mine. He's stopping right here in this hotel. He's one of the main guys in our big game."

"But you haven't told me what the game is."

Cavendale tapped his lips with one finger.

"Discreetness," he grinned. "It's all on the level, but it doesn't do to talk too much to outsiders. If my friend likes you, he may unfold some of it to you. Oh, it's great! I expect to pull out forty or fifty thousand as my share in a year. If you're taken in, you'll do as well."

"That sounds too good to be true," said Dade, with an incredulous smile.

"You wait," nodded Cavendale. "I want to step to the telephone. Be back in a minute. Don't stir. I'll have Mr. Hagan—er—Mr. Harrigan right down."

Cavendale hurried from the barroom.

"What did he say?" thought Morgan, who wondered over the manner in which Cavendale had faltered over the name of the man he was going to call. "He said Hagan, and then he changed it to Harrigan. Hagan, Hagan—why, that's the name of the Irishman Merry told me about! That is the name of one of Frank's enemies! Can it be Hagan is here? Why not? The other man who calls himself Lazaro, is here—or was at the falls to-day. I scent something! Oh, if Merriwell were here! If I could get word to him!"

At this moment something happened that filled Dade with unspeakable satisfaction.

Dick Starbright looked into the room, saw Morgan, and hurried toward him. Dick's face was pale, and he looked greatly concerned.

"What are you doing, Dade?" he demanded, with a touch of anger. "Been looking round for you. Was afraid I'd find you at a bar. And you're drinking! Is this the way you—"

"Now, cut it right there," interrupted Morgan. "Smell of this! Taste it! It's lemonade. I can't explain how I happened here. No time. Something doing. I want you to hustle back to the hotel and tell Frank that I'm here. Tell him I'm about to be introduced to a man by the name of Hagan. I don't know who this Hagan is, but I have my suspicions. Tell him I'll try to hold Mr. Hagan right here long enough for him to arrive. He's good at following anything up. If it's the right Hagan, Merry may find some one else by shadowing him. Now skip. Don't waste a second."

"But—"

"I tell you to skip! Hagan may be here any moment. Wouldn't have him see you for anything."

Don't want him to know I've spoken to a soul since. That's right! Dig! You'll have to hurry."

Starbright was somewhat bewildered, but he followed Dade's directions and hastened from the Iroquois.

A few moments later Cavendale returned and announced that "Mr. Harrigan" would be right down.

Five minutes after that a stout, florid-faced man walked into the room, saw Cavendale and Morgan, and advanced toward them.

"Mr. Harrigan," said Cavendale, "I want you to meet a particular friend of mine, Mr. Morgan."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Morgan," declared Harrigan, as he shook hands with Dade. "What's in the wind, Wallace? You insisted that I should come down right away."

"Because I know you are anxious to get hold of another young man on whom you can rely implicitly, and I believe Morgan is the man you want. I know him. He's a hustler. I give you my word that he's the very man for you."

"You know him well, do you, Wallace? Of course there are plenty of young men we can get, but we're looking for the right one. If you say Mr. Morgan is——"

"I do. I give you my word for it."

"That is enough. Your word goes with me, but, of course, Mr. Morgan will have to see the chief. He leaves Buffalo in the morning, and to-night is the last opportunity to see him here."

"But hold on," remonstrated Dade. "I'd like to know what this thing is that I'm going into. I haven't been able to get anything definite out of Cavendale. Will you kindly clear it up for me, Mr. Harrigan? I'm not going to plunge into anything, no matter what the inducement, with my eyes blindfolded."

"Quite right, me boy," nodded Harrigan. "That's wisdom, and I like it."

Then he began to talk of great railroad projects and rich mines, and kept it up in a rapid, yet rambling, manner, apparently explaining fully, but actually making no explanation at all. All that Dade could get from his talk was that the business involved mighty projects in railroading and mining, and that all concerned in carrying the things through would reap rich rewards.

"But still I'm in the dark," protested Morgan. "I may be dull, but I confess that I need a little more light on this matter before I plunge."

Cavendale and Harrigan exchanged glances.

"The thing to do," said Harrigan, "is to have you see the chief. He'll make it clear."

Dade demurred. He had not yet seen anything of Merriwell, although it seemed that Frank had been given plenty of time to arrive. He plied his companions with questions, sparring for more time.

And while he was doing so a door behind Harrigan's back swung open a little. It was enough to give Morgan a glimpse of Merriwell outside. Frank made a signal, and then the door closed.

Immediately Morgan seemed suddenly to agree to the proposals of his companions.

"Oh, all right," he said carelessly. "If you won't make the matter clear to me, then take me to this gentleman you call the chief. Perhaps he'll enlighten me."

"He will, me lad," nodded Harrigan. "Come on. We'll call a cab."

"Then he's not stopping in this hotel?"

"Never a bit of it," said Harrigan. "He has a prejudice against hotels. He's stopping with a friend at a private house."

They went to the office, where a cab was ordered.

As they left the Iroquois and entered the cab Dade looked round in vain for a glimpse of Frank, but he was not to be seen.

It was a long drive through the streets of Buffalo. At first Dade tried to keep track of the course, but soon the many turns and changes of direction confused him, and he gave it up.

They stopped at last before a small, detached house near the outskirts of the city. The house seemed dark and deserted.

Morgan began to wonder if he had been wise in accompanying the men, but he quickly decided that there could be little or no reason for doing personal injury to him, and so he unhesitatingly followed Cavendale up the steps, while Harrigan came behind.

The cab rumbled away.

Cavendale pressed the push-button of the electric doorbell in a peculiar manner. After a time there sounded from the inner side of the door an odd knocking. Cavendale answered in a similar

manner.

There was a sound of shooting bolts, but the rattle of a chain followed, and the door was opened only a short distance. Plainly the chain was still on.

Cavendale whispered to some one within. The door closed again, the chain rattled once more, the door re-opened, and into the house of mystery they walked.

The hand of Cavendale guided Dade through the dark hall, through a room beyond and finally into still another room, which was dimly lighted.

"Here we are," said Cavendale, with affected cheerfulness. "Let's have these lights up. The chief was abed, but he'll be down directly."

The lights were turned up. The room was plainly furnished, and had but one window. That window was so heavily curtained that no gleam of light could be seen from it by any one on the outside.

Hagan pretended to joke and talk in a lively manner, but his jokes were forced and mirthless.

After a few minutes a soft step sounded outside, and a striking-looking man in black entered the room. This man was slender and graceful, his figure being that of a young man, but his face was one that proclaimed him nearing seventy, and his hair was white as driven snow. One glance at his eyes was enough for Dade, who knew instantly that they were the same eyes he had seen peering through the transom of the Bowery hotel.

This was Frank Merriwell's deadly enemy, a monster who would hesitate at no crime in order to injure the youth he so bitterly hated. This was the man who had twice attempted to destroy the life of Inza Burrage. This was the man who had poisoned Watson Scott at the Waldorf and had nearly brought about the death of Warren Hatch in an automobile smash-up.

Morgan had good nerves. He managed to keep his face impassive as he was introduced by Hagan, who said:

"Mr. Brown, this is Mr. Morgan, a young man who is willing to join us and work with us when he is satisfied that the business is legitimate and the reward sufficient."

"I am very glad to know you, Mr. Morgan," said "Brown," clasping Dade's hand and looking into his eyes.

The voice was low and musical, but Morgan felt a thrill at the touch of that hand, and in the steady, piercing glance of those eyes there was something that caused a queer sensation of helplessness to creep upon him.

"Sit down," was the invitation. "I will tell you all about it. Sit here, where the light will not fall in your eyes."

He was urged into a chair. The man sat down before him, and on those wonderful black eyes the light fell fairly.

The strange man began to talk in that low, soothing voice of his. He talked—as had Harrigan—of mines, and railroads, and great projects. His voice had an accent that was pleasant to hear, and at times the formation of his sentences was peculiar. All the while, as he talked, he looked steadily into Dade's eyes. At last, he leaned forward and took Morgan's hands, continuing to talk.

Suddenly Dade realized that a spell was stealing over him. He was growing drowsy. The man before him was telling him that he was tired and should rest.

Morgan realized that he was being hypnotized!

Instantly he aroused all his will power to fight against it. At the same time he resolved on a crafty course. He determined to pretend that he was succumbing to the hypnotic spell.

This he cleverly did, his head sinking against the back of the chair and his eyes closing. By closing his own eyes he shut out the view of those terrible eyes, which he feared might conquer him.

There was a brief silence, and then the triumphant voice of the mysterious man said:

"I have him now, and he is mine. From this night he shall do my bidding. And he is the trusted friend and companion of Frank Merriwell! Ah! through him I will strike Merriwell, even as I promised to strike him. I told him I would ruin his beauty. Through this friend of his I will accomplish the deed. Here I have a vial of vitriol. I always carry several vials of poison with me. This one I will place in this chap's pocket, and with it he shall do my command."

Then Morgan felt the man thrusting something into a pocket of his vest. A moment later the soft voice spoke to him.

"Do you hear me?" it asked.

Morgan had witnessed hypnotic exhibitions, and so he answered in a low, mechanical manner:

"Yes, sir."

"Good! I am your master, now and forever. Do you recognize and acknowledge me as your master?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sleeping or waking, wherever you are, you must obey my commands. You cannot refuse. What I tell you to do, while in your present state, you must do while in a normal condition. You will obey me!"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. In your pocket I have placed a vial containing a liquid. To-night, after returning to your hotel, you will seek Frank Merriwell's room. If you find him in bed, all the better. You must take him unawares. You must uncork that vial and fling the contents into his face. This you will do!"

Although filled with indignation and horror, Dade answered:

"I will."

"Good! It is enough. I——"

He stopped speaking, interrupted by the furious ringing of a bell. Then came another man rushing into the room, shaking with excitement, who announced that there were many men at the door and others all round the house. Apparently they were officers.

"Frank has turned the trick!" exultingly thought Morgan. "He has the wretch trapped!"

But he remained motionless.

Hagan and Cavendale were greatly excited. They hurried from the room, followed by "the chief."

The ringing at the doorbell continued. Then heavy blows fell on the door, resounding through the house. There was the sound of smashing wood.

"Come on, Merry!" laughed Morgan. "You have him this time! Don't let him get away!"

He had leaped up. He heard the door burst open. He heard some one approaching on the jump. With a spring he concealed himself behind a high-backed chair in the corner.

Hagan burst into the room, followed by "the chief."

"It's caught ye are, Mr. Lazaro!" said the disgusted Irishman. "They have us all! It's bad for me, but for you it means life behind the bars."

"Never!" was the retort. "See this vial, Señor Hagan? It contains poison. I shall swallow——"

A policeman appeared in the doorway.

The man of the terrible eyes and snowy hair placed the vial to his lips and swallowed the contents. Then he flung the empty vial at the officer, staggered to a chair, dropped upon it, and laughed a horrible laugh that ended with what seemed a death rattle.

Morgan had risen. In a dazed condition he saw officers swarm into the room, saw Hagan—who had been introduced to him as Harrigan—handcuffed, saw Frank Merriwell bending over a limp, still form and declaring the man was Lazaro.

"He has swallowed poison!" cried Dade, arousing himself at last, and rushing forward. "I saw him do it!"

The eyes of Lazaro—those fearful eyes—were lifted to the face of Frank Merriwell for a moment. A haze seemed spreading over them. The lips of the man moved. Silence fell on the room, and all present heard him say:

"Merriwell, you have brought death to me at last. To escape you and to escape imprisonment, I die at last. Even yet you shall not escape me. I shall haunt you after death! I will bring you at last to your miserable end! *Adios!*"

Then the lips were still, the eyes partly closed.

"He is dead!" said an officer.

"Not until I hear him proclaimed dead by a reliable physician will I be satisfied," said Frank. "Bring in a doctor."

A short time later a doctor appeared. The physician knelt beside Lazaro and made a careful examination, silently watched by the others. At last the doctor rose to his feet, saying:

"There is no question about it, the man is dead."

THE END.

[**Transcriber's Note:** This advertisement originally appeared at the front of the text, and has been moved to the rear for this electronic edition.]

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140. Frank Merriwell's Happy Camp
141. Dick Merriwell's Influence
142. Dick Merriwell, Freshman
143. Dick Merriwell's Staying Power

In order that there may be no confusion, we desire to say that the books listed below will be issued during the respective months in New York City and vicinity. They may not reach the readers at a distance promptly, on account of delays in transportation.

To be published in July, 1926.

1. Dick Merriwell's Joke
2. Frank Merriwell's Talisman

To be published in August, 1926.

1. Frank Merriwell's Horse
2. Dick Merriwell's Regret

To be published in September, 1926.

1. Dick Merriwell's Magnetism
2. Dick Merriwell's Backers

To be published in October, 1926.

1. Dick Merriwell's Best Work
2. Dick Merriwell's Distrust
3. Dick Merriwell's Debt

To be published in November, 1926.

1. Dick Merriwell's Mastery
2. Dick Merriwell Adrift

To be published in December, 1926.

1. Frank Merriwell's Worst Boy
2. Dick Merriwell's Close Call

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK MERRIWELL'S PURSUIT; OR, HOW TO WIN ***

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