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FRANK MERRIWELL'S ALARM

OR,

DOING HIS BEST

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of the famous MERRIWELL STORIES.

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FRANK MERRIWELL’S ALARM.

[CHAPTER I.—ADRIFT IN THE DESERT.](#)

Once more the bicycle boys pushed on westward, and it must be said that in spite of all their perils they were in the best of spirits.

The beautiful valley in Utah was left behind, and some time later found them on the edge of the great American Desert.

Water was not to be had, and they began to suffer greatly from thirst.

The thirst at last became so great that nearly all were ready to drop from exhaustion.

Toots was much affected, and presently he let out a long wail of discouragement.

“Land of watermillions! mah froat am done parched so I ain’t gwan teh be able teh whisper if we don’ find some warter po’erful soon, chilluns! Nebber struck nuffin’ lek dis in all mah bawn days—no, sar!”

“You’re not the only one,” groaned Bruce. “What wouldn’t I give for one little swallow of water!”

“We must strike water soon, or we are done for,” put in Jack.

Toots began to sway in his saddle, and Frank spurred to his side, grasping him by the arm, as he sharply said:

“Brace up! You mustn’t give out now. The mountains are right ahead, and——”

“Lawd save us!” hoarsely gasped the darky. “Dem dar mount’ns had been jes’ as nigh fo’ de las’ two houah, Marsers Frank. We don’ git a bit nearer ’em—no, sar! Dem mount’ns am a recepshun an’ a delusum. We ain’t nebber gwan teh git out ob dis desert—nebber! Heah’s where we’s gwan teh lay ouah bones, Marsers Frank!”

“You are to blame for this, Merriwell,” came reproachfully from Diamond. “You were the one to suggest that we should attempt to cross instead of going around to the north, and——”

“Say, Diamond!” cried Harry; “riv us a guest—I mean give us a rest! You were as eager as any of us to try to cross the desert, for you thought we’d have it to boast about when we returned to Yale.”

“But we’ll never return.”

“Perhaps not; still I don’t like to hear you piling all the blame onto Merry.”

"He suggested it."

"And you seconded the suggestion. We started out with a supply of water that we thought would last——"

"We should have known better!"

"Perhaps so, but that is the fault of all of us, not any one person. You are getting to be a regular kicker of late."

Jack shot Harry a savage look.

"Be careful!" he said. "I don't feel like standing too much! I am rather ugly just now."

"That's right, and you have been the only one who has shown anything like ugliness at any time during the trip. You seem to want to put the blame of any mistake onto Merry, while it is all of us——"

"Say, drop it!" commanded Frank, sharply. "This is no time to quarrel. Those mountains are close at hand, I am sure, and a last grim pull will take us to them. We will find water there, for you know we were told about the water holes in the Desert Range."

"Those water holes will not be easy to find."

"I have full directions for finding them. After we get a square drink, we'll feel better, and there'll be no inclination to quarrel."

"Oh, water! water!" murmured Browning; "how I'd like to let about a quart gurgle down past my Adam's apple!"

"Um, um!" muttered Rattleton, lifting one hand to his throat. "Why do you suppose a fellow's larynx is called his Adam's apple?"

"Nothing could be more appropriate," declared Bruce, soberly, "for when Adam ate the apple he got it in the neck."

Something like a cackling laugh came from Harry's parched lips.

Diamond gave an exclamation of disgust.

"This is a nice time to joke!" he grated, fiercely.

"The matter with you," said Rattleton, "is that you've not got over thinking of Lona Ayer, whom you were mashed on. You've been grouchy ever since you and Merry came back from your wild expedition into the forbidden Valley of Bethsada. It's too bad, Jack——"

"Shut up, will you! I've heard enough about that!"

"Drop it, Harry," commanded Frank, warningly. "You've worn it out. Forget it."

"Great Scott!" grunted Browning. "I believe my bicycle is heavier than the dealer represented it to be."

"Think so?" asked Rattleton.

"Sure."

"Then give it a weigh."

Browning's wheel gave a sudden wobble that nearly threw him off.

"Don't!" he gasped. "It's not original. You swiped it from the very same paper that had my Adam's apple joke in it."

"Well, it was simply a case of retaliation."

"I'd rather have a case of beer. Oh, say!—a case of beer! I wouldn't do a thing to a case of beer—not a thing! Oh, just to think of sitting in the old room at Traeger's or Morey's and drinking all the beer or ale a fellow could pour down his neck! It makes me faint!"

"You should not permit yourself to think of such a thing as beer," said Frank, jokingly. "You know beer will make you fat."

"Don't care; I'd drink it if it made me so fat I couldn't walk. I'd train down, you know. Dumbbells, punchin' bag, and so forth."

"Speaking of the punching bag," said Frank, "makes me think of a good thing on Reggy Stevens. You know Stevens. He's near-sighted. Goes in for athletics, and takes great delight in the fancy manner in which he can hammer the bag. Well, he went down into the country to see his cousin last spring. Some time during the winter his cousin had found a big hornets' nest in the woods, and had cut it down and taken it home. He hung it up in the garret. First day Stevens was there he wandered up into the garret and saw the hornets' nest hanging in the dim light. 'Ho!' said Reggy. 'Didn't know cousin had a punching bag. Glad I found it. I'll toy with it a little.' Then he threw off his coat and made a rush at that innocent looking ball. With his first blow he drove his fist clean through the nest. 'Holy smoke!' gasped Reggy; 'what have I struck?' Then the hornets came pouring out, for the nest was not a deserted one. They saw Reggy—and went him several better. Say, fellows, they didn't do a thing to poor Reggy! About five hundred made for him, and it seemed to Reggy that at least four hundred and ninety-nine of them got him. His howls started shingles off the roof of

that old house and knocked several bricks out of the chimney. He fell down the stairs, and went plunging through the house, with a string of hornets trailing after him, like a comet's tail. The hornets did not confine themselves strictly to Reggy; some of them sifted off and got in their work on Reggy's cousin, aunt, uncle, the kitchen girl, the hired man, and one of them made for the dog. The dog thought that hornet was a fly, and snapped at it. One second later that dog joined in the general riot, and the way he swore and yelled fire in dog language was something frightful to hear. Reggy didn't stop till he got outside and plunged his head into the old-fashioned watering trough, where he held it under the surface till he was nearly drowned. The whole family was a sight. And Reggy—well, he's had the swelled head ever since."

Rattleton laughed and Bruce managed to smile, while Toots gave a cracked "Yah, yah!" but Diamond failed to show that he appreciated the story in the least.

However, it soon became evident that the spirits of the lads had been lightened somewhat, and they pedaled onward straight for the grim mountains which had seemed so near for the last two hours.

The sun poured its stifling heat down on the great desert, where nothing save an occasional clump of sage brush could be seen.

Heat shimmered in the air, and it was not strange that the young cyclists were disheartened and ready to give up in despair.

Suddenly a cry came from Diamond.

"Look!" he shouted. "Look to the south! Why haven't we seen it before? We're blind. Water, water!"

They looked, and, at a distance of less than a mile it seemed they could see a beautiful lake of water, with trees on the distant shore. The reflection of the trees showed in the mirror-like surface of the blue lake.

"Come on!" hoarsely cried Jack, as he turned his wheel southward. "I'll be into that water up to my neck in less than ten minutes!"

"Stop!" shouted Merriwell.

Jack did not seem to hear. If he heard, he did not heed the command. He was bending far over the handlebars and using all his energy to send his wheel spinning toward the beautiful lake.

"I must stop him!" cried Frank. "It is a race for life!"

Frank forgot that a short time before Jack Diamond had accused him of leading them all to their doom by inducing them to attempt to cross the barren waste—he forgot everything save that his comrade was in danger.

No, he did not forget everything. He knew what that race meant. It might exhaust them both and render them unable to ride their wheels over the few remaining miles of barren desert between them and the mountain range. When Diamond learned the dreadful, heart-sickening truth about that beautiful lake of water it might rob his heart of courage and hope so that he would drop in despair and give himself up to death in the desert.

Frank would save him—he must save him! He felt a personal responsibility for the lives of every one of the party, and he had resolved that all should return to New Haven in safety.

"Stop, Jack!" he shouted again.

But the sight of that beautiful lake had made Diamond mad with a longing to plunge into the water, to splash in it, to drink his fill till not another swallow could he force down his throat.

Madly he sent his wheel flying over the sandy plain, panting, gasping, furious to reach the lake.

How beautiful the water looked! How cool and inviting was the shade of the trees on the other shore! Oh, he would go around there and rest beneath those trees.

Frank bent forward over the handlebars, muttering:

"Ride now as you never rode before!"

The wheel seemed to leap away like a thing of life—it flew as if it possessed wings.

But Frank did not gain as swiftly as he desired, for Diamond, also, was using all his energy to send his bicycle along.

"Faster! faster!" panted Frank.

Faster and faster he flew along. The hot breath of the desert beat on his face as if it came rushing from the mouth of a furnace. It seemed to scorch him. Fine particles of sand whipped up and stung his flesh.

He heard a strange laugh—a wild laugh.

"Heaven pity him!" thought Frank, knowing that laugh came from Jack's lips. "The sight of that ghostly lake has nearly turned his brain with joy. I fear he will go mad, indeed, when he knows the truth."

On sped pursued and pursuer, and the latter was still gaining. Frank Merriwell had engaged in many contests of skill and endurance, but never in one where more was at stake. His success in overtaking his friend meant the saving of a

human life—perhaps two lives.

Now he was gaining swiftly, and something like a prayer of thankfulness came from his lips.

Once more he cried out to the lad in advance, but it seemed that Diamond's ears were dumb, for he made no sound that told he heard.

One last spurt—Frank felt that it must bring him to Diamond's side. He gathered himself, his feet clinging to the flying pedals as if fastened there.

A slip, a fall, a miscalculation might mean utter failure, and failure might mean death for Diamond.

Now Frank was close behind his friend. He could hear the whirring sound of the spokes of Diamond's wheel cutting the air, and he could hear the hoarse, panting breathing of his friend.

A steady hand guided Merriwell's wheel alongside that of his friend; a steady and a strong hand fell on the shoulder of the lad who had been crazed by the alluring vision of the lake in the desert.

"Stop, Jack!"

Diamond turned toward his friend a face from which a pair of glaring eyes looked out. His lips curled back from his white teeth, and he snarled:

"Hands off! Don't try to hold me back! Can't you see it, you fool! The lake—the lake!"

"There is no lake!"

"Yes, there is! You are blind! See it!"

"Stop, Jack! I tell you there is no lake!"

Frank tried to check his friend, but Diamond made a swinging blow at him, which Merriwell managed to stop.

"Wait—listen a moment!" entreated Frank.

But the belief that a lake of water lay a short distance away had completely driven anything like reason from Diamond's head.

"Hands off!" he shouted. "If you try to stop me you'll be sorry!"

Frank saw he must resort to desperate measures. He secured a firm grip on the shoulder of the young Virginian, and, a moment later, gave a surge that caused them both to fall from their wheels.

Over and over they rolled, and then lay in a limp heap on the desert, where the earth was hot and baked and the sun beat down with a fierce parching heat.

Diamond was the first to stir, and he tried to scramble up, his one thought being to mount his wheel again and ride onward toward the shimmering lure.

Frank seemed to realize this, for he caught at his friend, grasped him and held him fast.

Then there was a furious struggle there on the desert, Diamond making a mad effort to break away, but being held by Frank, who would not let him go.

The eyes of both lads glared and their teeth were set. Frank tried to force Diamond down and hold him, but Jack had the strength of an insane person, and, time after time, he flung his would-be benefactor off.

The eyes of the young Virginian were red and bloodshot, while his lips were cracked and bleeding. His cap was gone, and his straight dark hair fell in a tousled mass over his forehead.

Occasionally muttered words came from Diamond's lips, but the other was silent, seeming to realize that he must conquer the mad fellow by sheer strength alone.

So they fought on, their efforts growing weaker and weaker, gasping for breath. Seeing that fierce struggle, no one could have imagined they were anything but the most deadly enemies, battling for their very lives.

At last, after some minutes, Diamond's fictitious strength suddenly gave out, and then Frank handled and held him with ease. Merriwell pinned Jack down and held him there, while both remained motionless, gasping for breath and seeking to recover from their frightful exertions.

"You fool!" whispered the Virginian, bitterly. "What are you trying to do?"

"Trying to save your life, but you have given me a merry hustle for it," answered Frank.

"Save my life! Bah! Why have you stopped me when we were so near the lake."

"There is no lake."

"Are you blind? All of us could see the lake! It is near—very near!"

"I tell you, Jack, there is no lake."

"You lie!"

"You have been crazed by what you fancied was water. Some time you will ask my pardon for your words."

"You will ask my pardon for stopping me in this manner, Frank Merriwell! You did it because I was the first to discover the lake! You were jealous! You did not wish me to reach it first! I know you! You want to be the leader in everything."

"If you were not half crazy now, you would not utter such words, Jack."

"Oh, I know you—I know!"

Then Diamond's tone and manner suddenly changed and he began to beg:

"Please let me up, Merry—please do! Oh, merciful heaven! I am perishing for a swallow of water! And it is so near! There is water enough for ten thousand men! And such beautiful trees, where the shadows are so cool—where this accursed sun can't pour down on one's head! Please let me up, Frank! I'll do anything for you if you'll only let me go to that lake!"

"Jack, dear old fellow, I am telling you the truth when I say there is no lake. There could be no lake here in this burning desert. It is an impossibility. If there were such a lake, the ones I asked about the water-holes would have told me."

"They did not know. I have seen it, and I know it is there."

Frank allowed his friend to sit up.

"Look, Jack," he said; "where is your lake?"

Jack looked away to the south, the east, the north, and then toward the west, where lay the mountains.

There was no lake in sight.

CHAPTER II.—ON TO THE MOUNTAINS.

"Where—where has it gone?" slowly and painfully asked Diamond. "I am sure I saw it—sure! The lake, the trees, all gone!"

"I told you there was no lake."

"Then—then it must have been a mirage!"

"That is exactly what it was."

With a deep groan of despair Diamond fell back limply on the sand, as if the last bit of strength and hope had gone from him.

"This ends it!" he gasped. "What's the use of struggling any more! We may as well give up right here and die!"

"Not much!" cried Merriwell, with attempted cheerfulness. "That is why I ran you down and dragged you from your wheel."

"What do you mean?"

"I knew the mirage might lure you on and on into the desert, seeming to flee before you, till at last it would vanish in a mocking manner, and you, utterly exhausted and spirit-broken, would lie down and die without another effort."

Jack was silent a few moments.

"And you did all this for me?" he finally asked. "You pursued and pulled me from my wheel to—to save me?"

"Yes."

Another brief silence.

"Frank."

"Well, Jack?"

"I was mad."

"You looked it."

"My thirst—the sight of what I took to be water—the shadows of the trees! Ah, yes, I was mad, Frank!"

"Well, it's all over now."

"Yes, it is all over. The jig's up!"

"Nonsense! Get a brace on, old man. We must get to the mountains. It is our only chance, Jack."

"The mountains! I shall never reach the mountains, Frank. I am done for—played out!"

"That's all rot, old fellow! You are no more played out than I am. We are both pretty well used up, but we'll pull through to the mountains and get a drink of water."

"You never give up."

"Well, I try never to give up."

"Frank, I want you to forgive me for what I said before we saw the mirage. You know I was making a kick."

"Oh, never mind that! It's all right, Jack."

"I want you to say you forgive me."

"That's dead easy. Of course I forgive you. Think I'm a stiff to hold a grudge over a little matter like that?"

Diamond looked his admiration from his bloodshot eyes.

"You're all right, Merry," he hoarsely declared. "You always were all right. I knew it all along. Sometimes I get nasty, for I have a jealous nature, although I try to hold it in check. I never did try to hold myself in check in any way till I knew you and saw how you controlled your tastes and passions. That was a revelation to me, Merry. You know I hated you at first, but I came to admire you, despite myself. I have admired you ever since. Sometimes the worst side of my nature will crop out, but I always know I am wrong. Forgive me for striking you."

"There, there, old chap! Why are you thinking of such silly things? You are talking as if you had done me a deadly wrong, and this was your last chance to square yourself."

"It is my last chance—I am sure of that. I am played out, and I can't drive that wheel farther. It's no use—I throw up the sponge right here."

A look of determination came to Frank's face.

"You shall not do anything of the kind!" he cried. "I won't have it, Jack!"

Diamond did not reply, but lay limp on the ground. Frank put a firm hand on his shoulder, saying:

"Come, Jack, make a bluff at it."

"No use!"

"I tell you it is! Come on. We can reach the mountains within an hour."

"The mountains!" came huskily from Diamond's lips. "God knows if there are any mountains! They, too, may be a mirage!"

"No! no!"

"Think—think how long we have been riding toward them and still they seemed to remain as far away as they were hours ago."

"That is one of the peculiar effects of the air out here."

"I do not believe any of us will reach the mountains. And if we should, we might not find water. Those mountains look baked and barren."

"Remember, I was told how to find water there."

But this did not give the disheartened boy courage.

"I know you were told, but the man who told you said that at times that water failed. It's no use, Frank, the game is not worth the candle."

Then it was that Merriwell began to grow angry.

"I am ashamed of you, Diamond!" he harshly cried. "I did think you were built of better stuff! Where is your backbone! Come, man, you must make another try!"

"Must?" came rather defiantly from Jack. "I'll not be forced to do it!"

"Yes, you will!"

The Virginian looked at Frank in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that you will brace up and attempt to reach the mountains with the rest of us, or I'll give you the blametest licking you ever had—and there won't be any apologies afterward, either!"

That aroused Jack somewhat.

"You—you wouldn't do that—now?" he faltered.

"Wouldn't I?" cried Frank, seeming to make preparations to carry out his threat. "Well, you'll see!"

"But—but—"

"There are no buts about it! Either you get up and make one more struggle, or I'll have the satisfaction of knowing you are not in condition to make a struggle when I leave you. This is business, and it's straight from the shoulder!"

Diamond remonstrated weakly, but Frank seemed in sober earnest.

"I believe it would do you good," he declared. "It would beat a little sense into you. It's what you want, anyway."

A sense of shame came over Jack.

"If you've got enough energy to give me a licking, I ought to have enough to make another try for life," he huskily said.

"Of course you have."

"Well, I'll do it. It isn't because I fear the licking, for that wouldn't make any difference now, but I can make another try for it, if you can."

Frank dragged the other boy to his feet, and then picked up their fallen wheels. Jack was so weak that he could scarcely stand, seeming to have been quite exhausted by his last furious struggle with the boy who had raced across the desert sands to save his life. Twice Frank caught him and kept him from falling.

"What's the use?" Diamond hoarsely whispered. "I tell you I can't keep in the saddle!"

"And I tell you that you must! There are the other fellows, coming this way. I will signal them to ride toward the mountains, and we will join them."

Frank made the signal, and the others understood, for they soon turned toward the mountains again.

Then Merriwell aided Jack in mounting and getting started, mounting himself after that, and hurrying after the Virginian, whose wheel was making a very crooked track across the sand.

When it was necessary Frank supported Jack with a hand on the arm of the dark-faced lad, speaking encouraging words into his ear, urging him on.

And thus they rode toward the barren-looking Desert Range, where they must find water or death.

They came to the mountains at last, when the burning sun was hanging a ball of fire in the western sky. From a distance Merriwell had singled out Split Peak, which had served as his guide. At the foot of Split Peak were two water-holes, one on the east and one on the south.

First Frank sought for the eastern water-hole, and he found it.

But it was dry!

Dry, save for the slightest indication of moisture in the sand at the bottom of the hole.

"I told you so!" gasped Diamond, as he fell to the ground in hopeless exhaustion. "There is no water here."

"Wait," said Frank, hoarsely. "We'll see if we can find some. Come, boys; we must scoop out the sand down there in the hole—we must dig for our lives."

"By golly!" said Toots; "dis nigger's reddy teh dig a well fo'ty foot deep, if he can fine about fo' swallers ob wattah."

"A well!" muttered Rattleton. "We'll sink a shaft here!"

"Well, I don't know!" murmured Browning.

So they went to work, two of them digging at a time, and, with their hands, they scooped out the sand down in the water-hole. As they worked a little dirty water began to trickle into the hole.

"Yum! yum!" muttered Toots, his eyes shining. "Nebber saw muddy wattah look so good befo'! I done fink I can drink 'bout a barrel ob dat stuff!"

They worked until quite exhausted, and then waited impatiently for the water to run into the hole. It rose with disheartening slowness, but rise it did.

When he could do so, Frank dipped up some of the water with his drinking cup and gave it to Jack first of all.

Diamond's hands shook so with eagerness that he nearly spilled the water, and he greedily turned it down his parched throat at a gulp.

"Merciful goodness! how sweet!" he gasped. "More, Frank—more!"

"Wait a bit, my boy. You have had the first drink from this hole. The others must take their turn now. When it comes around to you again, you shall have more."

"But there may not be enough to go around!" Jack almost snarled. "What good do you think a little like that can do a fellow who is dying of thirst? I must have more—now!"

"Well, you can't have another drop till the others have taken their turn—not a taste!"

When Frank spoke like that he meant what he said, and Jack knew it. But the little water he had received had maddened Diamond almost as much as had the mirage. As Frank turned toward the water-hole, Jack started to spring upon him, crying:

"We'll see!"

"Hold on!" said Browning, as one of his hands went out and grasped Diamond. "I wouldn't do that. You are excited. I reckon I'll have to sit on you, while you cool off."

Then the big fellow took Jack down, and actually sat on him, while the Virginian raved like a maniac.

"Poor fellow!" said Frank, pityingly. "He has almost lost his reason by what he has passed through."

One by one the others received some of the water, and then it came Jack's turn once more. By this time he was silent, but there was a sullen light in his eyes. When Frank passed him the water in the drinking cup he shook his head, and refused to take it.

"No!" he muttered. "I won't have it! Drink it all up! You don't care anything about me! Let me die!"

"Well, hang a fool!" snorted Browning, in great disgust.

"Say, jes' yo' pass dat wattah heah, Marser Frank, an' see if dis coon'll refuse teh let it percolate down his froat!"

"Yes, give it to Toots!" grated Diamond. "You think more of him than you do of me, anyway! Give it to him!"

"Don't chool with that fump—I mean don't fool with that chump!" snapped Rattleton. "Let him have his own way! He's got a bug in his head; that's what ails him."

"Let him alone, Bruce," said Frank, quietly. "I want to talk to him."

"He struck at you behind your back."

"Never mind; he won't do so again."

"Oh, you don't know!" muttered Diamond.

"Yes, I do," declared Frank, with confidence.

"Never mind us, fellows. I want a little quiet talk with Jack."

They understood him, and the two lads were left alone.

CHAPTER III.—THE SKELETON.

Frank began talking to Diamond in a smooth, pleasant way, appealing to his sense of justice. At first Jack turned away, as if he did not care to listen, but he heard every word, and he was affected.

"You are not yourself, old fellow," said Frank, softly, placing his hand gently on Diamond's shoulder. "If you were yourself you would not be like this. It is the burning desert, the blazing sun, the frightful thirst—these have made you unlike yourself. I don't mind anything you have said about me, Jack, for I know you are my friend, and you would not think of saying such things under ordinary circumstances. A little while ago, away out on the desert, you told me that much. It was then that reason came back to you for a little while. Knowing how you have suffered, I gave you the first drink from this water-hole. The water ran in slowly, and I did not know that there would be enough to go around twice. You were not the only one who had suffered from thirst, but the others made no objection to your having the first drink—they wanted you to have it. But it was necessary that they should have some of the water, so that all of us would be in condition to search for the other water-hole. Surely, old fellow, you see the common sense of this. And now, Jack, look—the water has cleared, and more is running into the hole. It will quench your thirst, and you will be yourself again. You are my friend, and I am yours. We stand ready to fight for each other at any time. If one of my enemies were to try to get at me behind my back, why, you would——"

"Strangle the infernal cur!" shouted Diamond. "Give me that water, Frank! You are all right, and I'm all wrong! Just let me have a chance to fight for you, and see if I don't fight as long as there is a drop of blood in my body!"

Merriwell had conquered, but he showed no sign of triumph, although he quietly said:

"I knew all the while, dear old fellow; in fact, I believe I know you better than you know yourself."

Then, when the others came up, ready to jolly Diamond about refusing to drink, Frank checked them with a gesture.

Jack felt better when he had taken a second drink of water. As water had risen in the hole, all the boys were able to get another round, and the spirits of all of them were raised.

"I believe we have some hard bread and jerked beef, haven't we, Merry?" asked Browning.

"Yes."

"Well, we are all right, then. Can't knock us out now. All I need is a good chance to rest."

"Oh, you need rest!" nodded Rattleton. "You always need that. You can take more rest and not complain than any fellow I ever saw."

"Young man," said Bruce, loftily, "it won't work. I refuse to let you get me on a string, so drop it."

"You'll be lucky if you get out of this part of the country without getting on a string with the other end hitched to the limb of a tree."

"That reminds me," drawled Bruce; "at the last town where we stopped I asked a citizen if there were any horse thieves in that locality, and he said there were two of 'em hanging around there the night before."

"Yes," nodded Harry, "that was the place where they said they were going to stop lynching if they had to hang every durned lyncher they could catch."

"Boys," laughed Merriwell, "we are all right. When you chaps get to springing those things I feel there is no further danger. We'll pull out all right."

"Suttinly, sar," grinned Toots. "I's gwan teh bet mah money on dis crowd ebry time, chilluns. We's hot stuff, an' dar ain't nuffin' gwan teh stop us dis side ob San Francisco—no, sar!"

Finally, refreshed and filled with new hope, the boys mounted their wheels and started to seek for the second water-hole.

Frank led the way, and they turned to the south, riding along the base of some barren cliffs.

"Are you sure we'll be able to find our way back to the water-hole we have left if we fail to discover the other one?" asked Rattleton.

"I am taking note of everything, and I do not think there will be any difficulty," answered Frank.

They had proceeded in this manner for about two miles when they saw before them a place where the barren cliffs opened into a pass that seemed to lead into the mountains.

"There is our road!" cried Merriwell, cheerfully. "It should lead us straight to the second water-hole."

"Yah! yah!" laughed Toots. "Cayarn't fool dat boy, chilluns! He knows his business, yo' bet! Won't s'prise me a bit if he teks us stret to a resvoyer—no, sar!"

They made for the pass, and, in a burst of energy, the colored boy spurred to the front, taking the lead.

Of a sudden, as they approached a point where the bluffs narrowed till they were close together, the negro gave a sudden wild howl of terror, tried to turn his wheel about and went plunging headlong to the ground.

"Wow!" gasped Rattleton. "What's struck him?"

"Something is the matter with him, sure as fate," said Frank.

Toots was seen to sit up and stare toward the wall of stone, while it was plain that he was shaking as if struck by an attack of ague. Then he tried to scramble up, but fell on his knees, with his hands clasped and uplifted in a supplicating attitude, while he wildly cried:

"Go 'way, dar, good Mr. Debbil! I ain't done nuffin' teh yo'! Please don' touch me! I's nuffin' but a po' good-fo'-nuffin' nigger, an' I ain't wuff bodderin' wif—no, sar! Dar am some white boys wif me, an' I guess yo'll lek them a heap sight better. Jes' yo' tek one of them, good Mr. Debbil!"

"Has he gone daffy, too?" muttered Frank, in astonishment.

Then the boys came whirling up and sprang from their wheels, at which Toots made a scramble for Frank, caught hold of his knees, and chatteringly cried:

"Don' yeh let him kerry me off, Marsar Frank! I knows yo' ain't afeared of nuffin', so I wants yeh ter protect po' Toots from de debbil wif de fiery eyes!"

But Frank was so astonished that he scarcely heard a word the colored boy uttered.

Seated on a block of stone in a niche of the wall was a human skeleton. It was sitting bolt upright and seemed to be staring at the boys with eyes that flashed a hundred shades of light.

"Poly hoker—no, holy poker!" palpitated Harry, leaning hard on his wheel. "What have we struck?"

For a time the others were speechless.

Wonderfully and fantastically was the skeleton decorated. On its head was a rude crown that seemed to be of glittering gold, while gold bracelets adorned its arms. About the fleshless neck was a chain of gold, to which a large locket was attached, and across the ribs was strung a gold watch-chain, while there were other fantastic and costly ornaments dangling over those bones of a human being.

The eyes of the skeleton, flashing so many different lights, seemed to be two huge diamonds of enormous value.

No wonder the young cyclists stared in astonishment at the marvelously bejeweled skeleton!

"Well," drawled Browning, with his usual nonchalance, "the gentleman seems to have dressed up in his best to receive us. Some one must have sent him word we were coming."

Toots, seeing the others did not seem frightened, had got on his feet and picked up his bicycle.

"Goodness!" muttered Diamond. "If all those decorations are solid gold, there is a small fortune in sight!"

"What is the meaning of this, Frank?" asked Rattleton. "How do you suppose this skeleton happens to be here?"

"Ask me something easy," said Merriwell, shaking his head.

"The skeleton must have been decorated in that manner by some living person," asserted Rattleton.

"But where is that person?"

"Not here, that is sure."

"It may be a warning," said Jack, gloomily.

"Warning, nothing!" exclaimed Frank. "It is plain the thing has been left there by some person, and we are the discoverers. It must be that the skeleton is that of some poor devil who perished here for want of water."

"And it may be that the one who placed it there perished also," said Rattleton.

"Very likely."

"In which case," came eagerly from Jack's lips, "all that treasure belongs to us! Boys, it is a wonderful stroke of fortune! We have made enough to take the whole of us through Yale, and——"

"If we ever get back to Yale, old fellow! This unfortunate fellow perished here, and our fate may be similar."

"Boo!" shivered Browning. "That's pleasant to think about!"

"More than that," Frank went on, "the treasure does not belong to us if we can find the real owner or his heirs."

The excitement and interest of the boys was great. They were eager to examine the decorations of the mysterious skeleton.

"We'll stack our wheels, and then one of us can climb up and make an inspection," said Frank.

So they proceeded to stack their wheels, Toots observing:

"Yo' can fool wif dat skillerton if yo' wants to, chilluns, but dis nigger's gwan teh keep right away from it. Bet fo' dollars it will jest reach out dem arms and grab de firs' one dat gits near it. Wo-oh! Land ob wartermillions! it meks me have de fevah an' chillins jes' to fink ob it!"

"We'll draw lots to see who goes up," said Frank, winking at the others. "You will have to go if it falls to you, Toots."

"Oh, mah goodness!" gasped the frightened darky. "I ain't gwan teh draw no lots, Marses Frank—no, sar! I's got a po'erful bad case ob heart trouble, an' mah doctah hab reckermended dat I don't fool roun' no skillertons. He said it might result distrust if I boddered wif skillertons."

"What's that?" cried Frank, sternly. "Would you drink your share of water when water is so precious and not take even chances with the rest of us in any danger?"

"Now, Marses Frank!" cried the darky, appealingly; "don' go fo' to be too hard on a po' nigger! De trubble wif me is dat I'm jes' a nacheral bo'n coward, an' I can't git over hit nohow. Dat's what meks mah heart turn flip-flops ebry time dar's any dangar, sar."

"But think of the treasure up there that we have found. If it should fall to you to investigate, and you were to bring down that treasure, of course you would receive your share, the same as the rest of us."

"Lawd bress yeh, honey! I don' want no treasure if I've goter go an' fotch hit down. I'd a heap sight rudder nebbber hab no treasure dan git wifin reachin' distance of dat skillerton—yes, sar!"

"Don't fool with him, Merry," said Diamond, impatiently. "Of course you don't expect to send him up, and you won't think of giving him any part of the treasure."

Frank flashed a look at the Virginian, and saw that Jack was in earnest.

"You are mistaken, old man," he said. "I do not expect Toots to go up there, but, if there is a real treasure and it is divided, you may be sure he will receive his share."

"Oh, well!" cried Jack, somewhat taken aback; "of course I don't care what you do about that, but I thought you were in earnest about what you were saying."

"The trouble with you," muttered Rattleton, speaking so low that Jack could not hear him, "is that you never see through a joke."

"Come," spoke Browning, "if we've got to take chances to see who goes up and makes the examination, come on. I hope to get out of it myself, but if I must, I must."

"We need not take chances," said Frank, promptly. "I will go."

"It will not be difficult, for it is no climb at all," said Jack. "Two of us can swing ourselves up there in a moment, and I will go with you, Merry."

Then it was that Rattleton suddenly gave a great cry of stupefied amazement.

"What's the matter?" asked Merriwell.

"Look! Look!" gasped Harry, pointing toward the niche in the rocks. "The skeleton—it has disappeared!"

They looked, and, dumb for the time with amazement and dismay, they saw Rattleton spoke the truth.

The mysterious skeleton had vanished!

CHAPTER IV.—"INDIANS!"

"Gone!" cried Jack.

"Sure!" nodded Frank.

"Lordy massy sakes teh goose-grease!" gasped Toots, again shivering with terror. "Didn't I done tole yeh, chilluns! If yo' know when yo' am well off, yeh'll git erway from heah jes' as quick as yeh can trappel! Oh, mah goodness!"

Shaking in every limb, the colored boy tried to get his bicycle out from the others, lost his balance, fell over, and sent the entire stack of wheels crashing to the ground.

"Well, this seems to be a regular sleight-of-hand performance," coolly commented Browning. "Now you see it, and now you don't; guess where it's gone. It drives me to a cigarette."

But he discovered that his cigarettes were gone, which seemed to concern him far more than the vanishing of the skeleton. He declared he had lost a whole package, and seemed to feel quite as bad about it as if they were solid gold.

Rattleton was excited.

"What sort of pocus-hocus—no, hocus-pocus is this, anyway?" he spluttered. "Where's it gone? Who wayed the old thing a took. I mean who took the old thing away?"

"It couldn't have gone away of its own accord," said Frank, "so some one must have removed it."

"Don' yeh fool yo'se'f dat way, Marser Frank!" cried Toots, sitting up amid the fallen wheels. "Dat skillerton am de berry ol' scratch hisse'f! De next thing some ob dis crowd will be disumpearin' dat way. Gwan ter git kerried off, chilluns, if yo' don' git out ob dis in a hurry."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Diamond. "You make me tired with your chatter!"

"Mistah Dimund," said the colored boy, with attempted dignity, "if yo'll let dat debbil kerry yo' off yo'll nebber be missed—no, sar."

Jack pretended he did not hear those words.

"Here goes to see what has become of the thing!" cried Frank, as he scrambled up to the niche where the skeleton had sat.

"I am with you!" cried Diamond, as he followed Frank closely.

Reaching the nook in the face of the cliff, they looked about for some sign of the skeleton that had been there a short time before, but not a sign of it could they see. The ghastly thing was gone, and the glittering ornaments had vanished with it. The block of stone on which the object had sat was still there.

"Well, fat do you whind—I mean what do you find?" cried Rattleton, impatiently.

"Not a thing," was the disgusted reply. "It has gone, sure as fate!"

"So have my cigarettes!" groaned Browning.

"The treasure—is any of that there?" asked Harry, eagerly.

"Not a bit of it."

"Well, that's what I call an unfair deal," murmured Bruce. "It is a blow below the belt. If the old skeleton had desired to go away, none of us would have objected, but it might have left the trimmings with which it was adorned."

Frank was puzzled, and the more he investigated the greater grew his wonder. He knew they had seen the skeleton, yet it had vanished like fog before a blazing sun.

Jack shrugged his shoulders and shivered, saying:

"There's something uncanny about it, old man. I believe it is a warning."

"Nonsense!" cried Frank. "What sort of a warning?"

"A warning of the fate that awaits all of us."

"You are not well, Jack."

"Oh, it is not that! First we see a lake of water, and that disappears; then we see this skeleton, and now that has vanished. You must confess that there is something remarkable in it all."

"The vanishing of the mirage came about in a natural manner, but——"

"But you must confess there was something decidedly unnatural about the vanishing of the skeleton."

"It was removed by human hands—I will wager anything on that."

"Then where is the human being who removed it?"

"I don't know."

Unable to remain below, Rattleton came climbing up to the niche.

"I've got to satisfy myself," he said, as he felt about with his hands, as if he expected to discover the vanished skeleton in that manner. "I can't see how the blamed old thing could get away!"

"Well, you can see quite as well as we can," acknowledged Frank. "It is gone, and that is all we can tell about it."

The boys satisfied themselves that the thing had really disappeared, and they could not begin to solve the mystery. After a time they returned to the ground.

"It am de debbil's work!" asserted Toots. "Don' yeh mek no misteks 'bout dat, chilluns."

They held a "council of war," and it was resolved that they should go on through the pass and try to find the second water-hole before darkness fell.

Already night was close at hand, and they must needs lose no time.

"We can come back here in the morning and see if we're able to solve the mystery," said Merriwell. "I, for one, do not feel like going away without making another attempt at it."

"Nor I," nodded Rattleton.

"It is folly," declared Jack, gloomily. "I say we have been warned, and the best thing we can do is get away as soon as possible."

"By golly! dat am de firs' sensibul fing I've heard yo' say in fo' days!" cried Toots, approvingly.

They picked up their wheels, and soon were ready to mount.

"Here's good-by to the vanishing skeleton for to-night," cried Frank.

He was answered by a wild peal of mocking laughter that seemed to run along the face of the cliff in a most remarkable manner.

"Ha! ha! ha!" it sounded, hoarsely, and "Ha! ha! ha!" came down from the rocks, like a mystic echo.

"O-oh, Lordy!"

Toots made a jump for the saddle of his bicycle, but jumped too far and went clean over the wheel, striking his knee and turning in the air, to fall with a thump on the back of his neck.

"Mah goodness!" he gurgled, as he lay on the ground, dazed by the shock of the fall. "De ol' debbil done gib meh a boost then fo' suah!"

The other lads looked at each other in perplexity.

"Well, wh-wh-what do you think of that?" stammered Rattleton.

"He ought to file his voice, whoever he is," coolly observed Browning. "It's a little rough along the edges."

"It strikes me that somebody is having fun with us," said Merriwell, a look of displeasure on his face.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Harry.

"We don't seem able to do much of anything now. Come on."

Toots scrambled up, and they mounted their wheels. As they started to ride away, a hollow-sounding voice cried:

"Stop!"

"Oh, riv us a guest—I mean give us a rest!" flung back Rattleton.

"Stop!" repeated the mysterious voice. "Do not try the pass. There is danger beyond. Turn back."

"I told you it was a warning!" cried Jack. "What do you think of it now?"

"I think somebody is trying to have a lot of sport with us!" exclaimed Frank.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Not a thing. I don't propose to pay any attention to it, Come on, fellows. We must have more water, and there's none too much time to find it before dark."

Diamond was tempted to declare he would not go any further, but he knew the others would stand by Frank, and so he pedaled along.

As they drew away from the spot where they had seen the skeleton, they heard the mysterious voice calling to them again, commanding them to stop and turn back. Thus it continued till they had ridden on so that it could be heard no longer.

Despite himself Frank had been impressed by what he had seen and heard, and a feeling of awe was on him. Ahead the shadows were thick where the dark cliffs seemed to come together, and there was something grim and overpowering about the bare and towering mountains that sullenly frowned down upon the little party.

The boys were silent, for they had no words to speak. Each was busy with his thoughts, and those thoughts were not of the most pleasant character.

A feeling of heart-sickening loneliness settled down upon them and made them long for the homes that were so far away. What satisfaction was there, after all, in this great ride across the continent? They had encountered innumerable perils, and now it seemed that they were overshadowed by the greatest peril of all.

How still it was! The mountains seemed like crouching monsters of the great desert, waiting there to spring upon and crush them out of existence. There was something fearsome and frightful in their grim air of waiting.

The whirring of the wheels was a warning whisper, or the deadly hiss of a serpent. As they passed between the frowning bluffs, which rose on either hand, the whirring sound seemed to become louder and louder till it was absolutely awesome.

Frank looked back, and of all the party Bruce Browning was the only one whose face remained stolid and impassive. It did not seem that he had been affected in the least by what had happened.

"He has wonderful nerve!" thought Merriwell.

Diamond's dark face seemed pale, and there was an anxious look on the face of Rattleton. Toots betrayed his excitement and fear most distinctly.

Frank feared they would not get through the pass in time to find the second water-hole, and he increased his speed.

The ground was favorable for swift riding. At that time Merriwell thought it fortunate, but, later, he changed his mind.

Of a sudden the pass between the bluffs ended, and they shot out into a valley or basin.

A cry of astonishment and alarm came from Frank's lips, and he used all his energy to check and turn his flying wheel.

Before them blazed a fire, and around that fire were gathered—

"Indians!" palpitated Harry Rattleton.

CHAPTER V.—BLUE WOLF TRIES THE BICYCLE.

"Indians!" echoed Jack Diamond.

"Indians?" grunted Bruce Browning, astonished.

"O-oh, Lordy!" gasped Toots. "Dis am whar a nigger boy I know is gwan teh lose his scalp fo' suah!"

"Turn!" commanded Frank—"turn to the left, and we'll make a run to get back through the pass."

But they were seen, and the redskins about the fire sprang to their feet with loud whoops.

At the first whoop Toots gave a howl and threw up both hands.

"Don' yo' shoot, good Mistar Injunes!" he shouted. "I's jes' a common brack nigger, an' I ain't no 'count nohow. Mah scalp wouldn' be no good teh yo' arter——"

Then he took a header off his wobbling machine and fell directly before Jack, whose bicycle struck his body, and Diamond was hurled to the ground.

"Stop, fellows!" cried Merriwell. "We mustn't run away and leave them! Come back here!"

From his wheel he leaped to the ground in a moment, running to Diamond's side. Grasping Jack by the arm he exclaimed:

"Up, old fellow—up and onto your wheel! We may be able to get away now! We'll make a bluff for it."

But it was useless, for Jack was so stunned that he could not get on his feet, though he tried to do so.

Toots was stretched at full length on the ground, praying and begging the "good Injunes" not to bother with his scalp, saying the hair was so crooked that it was "no good nohow."

Up came the redskins on a run and surrounded the boys, Bruce and Harry having turned back.

Browning assumed a defensive attitude, muttering:

"Well, if we're in for a scrap, I'll try to get a crack at one or two of these homely mugs before I'm polished off."

There were seven of the Indians, and nearly all of them carried weapons in their hands. Although they were not in war paint, they were a decidedly ugly-looking gang, and their savage little eyes denoted anything but friendliness.

"Ugh!" grunted the tallest Indian of the party, an old fellow with a scarred and wrinkled face.

"Ugh! ugh! ugh!" grunted the others.

Then they stared at the boys and their bicycles, the latter seeming a great curiosity to them.

"Well, this is a scrolly old jape—I mean a jolly old scrape!" fluttered Rattleton. "We're in for it!"

Toots looked up, saw the Indians, uttered another wild howl, and tried to bury his head in the sand, like an ostrich.

Frank singled out the tall Indian and spoke to him.

"How do you do?" he said.

"How," returned the Indian, with dignity.

"Unfortunately we did not know you were here, or we should not have called," explained Merriwell.

The savage nodded; the single black feather in his hair fluttering like a pennant as he did so.

"Um know," he said. "Um see white boy heap much surprised."

"Jee! he can talk United States!" muttered Rattleton.

"Talk it!" said Bruce, in disgust. "He can chew it, that's all."

"I trust we have not disturbed you," said Frank, calmly; "and we will leave you in your glory as soon as my friend, who fell from his wheel, is able to mount and ride."

"No, no!" quickly declared the tall Indian; "white boy no go 'way. Injun like um heap much."

Browning lifted his cap and felt for his scalp.

"It may be my last opportunity to examine it," he murmured.

"But we are in a hurry, and we can't stop with you, however much we may desire to do so," declared Frank, glibly. "You see we are on urgent business."

"Yes, very urgent," agreed Rattleton. "Smoly hoke—no, holy smoke! don't I wish I were back to New Haven, New York, any old place!"

"White boys must stop," said the big savage. "Black Feather say so, that settle um."

"I am afraid it does," confessed Browning.

Diamond got upon his feet, assisted by Frank.

"Well," he said, somewhat bitterly, "that is what we have come to by failing to heed the warning we received!"

"Don't go to croaking!" snapped Rattleton. "These Indians are peaceable. They are not on the war path."

"But they are off the reservation," said Frank, in a low tone; "and that is bad. They have us foul, and there is no telling what they may take a notion to do."

"It's pretty sure they'll take a notion to do us," sighed Harry.

The tall Indian, who had given his name as Black Feather, professed great friendliness, and, when the boys told him they had been looking for the water-hole, he said:

"Um water-hole dare by fire. Good water, heap much of it. Come, have all water um want."

"Well, that is an inducement," confessed Browning. "We may be able to get a square drink before we are scalped."

It was with no small difficulty that Toots was forced to get up, and, after he was on his feet, he would look at first one Indian and then dodge, and look at another, each time gurgling:

"O-oh, Lord!"

And so, surrounded by the Indians, the boys moved over to the fire, which was near the water-hole, as Black Feather had declared.

"Well, we'll all drink," said Frank, as he produced his pocket cup and proceeded to fill it. "Here, fellows, take turns."

While they were doing so the Indians were examining their bicycles with great curiosity. It was plain the savages had never before seen anything of the kind, and they were filled with astonishment and mystification. They grunted and jabbered, and then one of them decided to get on and try one of the wheels.

It happened that this one was the smallest, shortest-legged redskin of the lot, and he selected the machine with the highest frame.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "White boy ride two-wheel hoss, Injun him ride two-wheel hoss heap same. Watch Blue Wolf."

"Yes," said Browning, softly, nudging Merriwell in the ribs with his elbow, "watch Blue Wolf, and you will see him smash my bicycle. I sincerely hope he will break his confounded head at the same time!"

"White boy show Injun how um git on," ordered Blue Wolf.

"Go ahead, Bruce," directed Frank.

"Oh, thunder!" groaned the big fellow. "I'm so tired!"

But he was forced to show the Indians how he mounted the wheel, which he did, being dragged off almost as soon as he got astride the saddle.

"Ugh!" grunted Blue Wolf, with great satisfaction. "Um heap much easy. Watch Blue Wolf."

"Yes, watch Blue Wolf!" repeated Browning. "It will be good as a circus! Oh, my poor bicycle!"

With no small difficulty the little Indian steadied the wheel, reaching forward to grasp the handlebars while standing behind it. The first time he lifted his foot to place it on the step he lost his balance and fell over with the machine.

The other Indians grunted, and Blue Wolf got up, saying something in his own language that seemed to make the atmosphere warmer than it was before.

The bicycle was lifted and held for the little Indian to make another trial. He looked as if he longed to kick it into a thousand pieces, but braced up, placed his foot on the step and made a wild leap for the saddle. He missed the saddle, struck astride the frame just back of the handlebars, uttered a wild howl of dismay, and went down in hopeless entanglement with the unfortunate machine.

"Wow!" howled Blue Wolf.

"Oh, my poor bicycle!" groaned Browning, once more.

The fallen redman kicked the bicycle into the air, but it promptly came down astride his neck and drove his nose into the dirt.

"Ugh!" grunted the watching Indians, solemnly.

"Whoop!" roared Blue Wolf, spitting out a mouthful of dirt.

Then he made another frantic attempt to cast the machine off, but it persisted in sticking to him in a wonderful manner. One of his arms was thrust through the spokes of the forward wheel to the shoulder, and as he tried to yank it out, the rear wheel spun around and one of the pedals gave him a terrific thump on the top of the head.

"Yah!" snarled the unlucky Indian.

"Two-wheel hoss kick a heap," observed Black Feather.

Blue Wolf tried to struggle to his feet, but he was so entangled with the bicycle that it seemed to fling him down with astonishing violence.

Then as the noble red man kicked, and squirmed, and struggled, the bicycle danced and pranced upon his prostrate body like a thing of life.

"O-o-oh!" wailed Blue Wolf, in pain and fear.

Toots suddenly forgot his fears, and holding onto his side, he doubled up with a wild burst of "coon" laughter.

"Oh, land ob watermillions!" he shouted. "Dat bisuckle am knockin' de stuffin' out ob Mistah Injun! Yah! yah! yah! Lordy! lordy! 'Scuse meh, but I has ter laff if it costs me all de wool on mah haid!"

Browning folded his arms, a look of intense satisfaction on his face as he observed:

"I have made a discovery that will be worth millions of dollars to the government of the United States. Now I know a swift and sure way of settling the Indian question. Provide every Indian in the country with a bicycle, and there will be no Indians left in a week or two."

"Gamlet's host—I mean Hamlet's ghost!" chuckled Rattleton, holding his hand over his mouth to keep from shrieking with laughter. "I never saw anything like that before!"

Merriwell sprang forward and assisted Blue Wolf in untangling himself from the wheel, fearing the bicycle would be utterly ruined.

The little Indian was badly done up. His face was cut and bleeding in several places, and he was covered with dirt. With some difficulty he got upon his feet, and then he backed away from the bicycle, at which he glared with an expression of great fear on his countenance.

"Heap bad medicine!" he observed.

It seemed that the other Indians were really amused, although they remained solemn and impassive.

"Give me hatchet!" Blue Wolf suddenly snarled. "Heap fix two-wheel hoss!"

He would have made a rush for the offending wheel, but Frank held up a hand warningly, crying:

"Beware, Blue Wolf! It is in truth bad medicine, and it will put a curse upon you if you do it harm. Your squaw will die of hunger before another moon, your children shall make food for the coyotes, and your bones shall bleach on the desert! Beware!"

Blue Wolf paused, dismay written on his face. He longed to smash the bicycle, but he was convinced that it was really "bad medicine," and he was afraid to injure it.

"Say, that is great, old man!" enthusiastically whispered Rattleton in Merriwell's ear. "Keep it up."

"Blue Wolf not hurt two-wheel hoss," declared Black Feather, who seemed to be the chief of the little band. "Want to see white boy ride."

"Do you mean that you want me to ride?" asked Frank.

"Ugh!"

"All right," said Frank. "I'll show you how it is done."

Then he motioned for the savages to stand aside.

"No try to run 'way," warned Black Feather. "Injun shoot um."

"All right, your royal jiblets. If I try to run away you may take a pop at me."

CHAPTER VI.—TRICK RIDING.

The Indians made room for Frank to mount and ride.

Standing beside the wheel Frank sprang into the saddle without using the step, caught the pedals and started.

The savages gave utterance to a grunt of wonder and admiration.

Frank had practiced trick riding, and he now proposed to exhibit his skill, feeling that it might be a good scheme to astonish the savages.

He started the bicycle into a circle, round which he rode with the greatest ease, and then of a sudden he passed one leg over the frame, and stood up on one of the pedals, which he kept in motion at the same time.

The Indians nodded and looked pleased.

Then Frank began to step cross-legged from pedal to pedal, passing his feet over the cross bar of the frame and keeping the wheel in motion all the time.

A moment later he whirled about, and with his face toward the rear, continued to pedal the bicycle ahead the same as if he had been seated in the usual manner on the saddle.

"Heap good!" observed Black Feather.

Then, like a cat Merriwell wheeled about, lifted his feet over the handlebars to which he clung, slipped down till he hung over the forward wheel, placed his feet on the pedals, and rode in that manner. This made it look as though he were dragging the bicycle along behind him.

There was a stir among the Indians, and they looked at each other.

Without stopping the bicycle, Frank swung back over the handlebars to the saddle. Having reached this position, he stopped suddenly, turning the forward wheel at an angle, sitting there and gracefully balancing on the stationary machine.

"Heap much good!" declared Black Feather, growing enthusiastic.

"Oh, those little things are dead easy," assured Frank, with a laugh. "Do you really desire to see me do something that is worth doing?"

"What more white boy can do?"

"Several things, but I'll have to make a larger circle."

It was growing dark swiftly now, the sun being down and the shadows of the mountains lying dark and gloomy in the valleys.

"Go 'head," directed Black Feather.

Frank started the bicycle in motion, and then, with it going at good speed, he swung down on one side and slowly but neatly crept through the frame, coming up on the other side and regaining the saddle without stopping.

"Paleface boy great medicine!" said Black Feather.

"Ugh!" grunted all the Indians but Blue Wolf.

The little savage was looking on in a sullen, wondering way, astonished and angered to think the white boy could do all those things, while he had been unable to mount the two-wheeled horse.

"How do you like that, Black Feather?" asked Frank, cheerfully.

"Much big!" confessed the chief. "Do some more."

"All right. Catch onto this."

Then away Frank sped, lifting the forward wheel from the ground and letting it hang suspended in the air, while he rode along on the rear wheel.

"Merry is working hard enough," said Rattleton. "I never knew he could do so many tricks."

"There are lots of things about that fellow that none of us know anything about," asserted Browning, who was no less surprised, although he did not show it.

"He is a fool to work so hard to please these wretched savages!" muttered Diamond.

"Now, don't you take Frank Merriwell for a fool in anything!" came swiftly from Harry. "I never knew him to make a fool of himself in all my life, and I have seen a good deal of him."

"Well, why is he cutting up all those monkey tricks? What will it amount to when it is all over?"

"Wait and see."

"The Indians will treat us just the same as if he had not done those things."

"Perhaps so."

"Of course they will!"

"Now, Black Feather, old jiblets," cried Frank, in his merriest manner, "I am going to do something else. Get onto this."

Sending the bicycle along at high speed Frank lay over the handlebars and swung his feet into the air till he held himself suspended in that manner, head down and feet up.

The Indians were more pleased and astonished than ever.

"Oh, it's all in knowing how!" laughed Frank, as he gracefully and lightly dropped back to the saddle.

Again the Indians grunted.

"Now, Black Feather, old chappie," said Frank, "I am going to do the greatest trick of all. I'll have to get a big start and have lots of room. Watch me close."

Away he went, bending over the handlebars and sending the bicycle flying over the ground. He acted as if he intended to make a big circle, but suddenly turned and rode straight toward the pass by which they had entered the basin. Before the Indians could realize his intention, he was almost out of sight in the darkness of the young night.

Howls of rage and dismay broke from the redmen. They shouted after the boy, but he kept right on, quickly disappearing from view.

"There," sighed Browning, with satisfaction, "I told you he was not doing all that work for nothing, fellows."

"He's done gone an' lef us!" wailed Toots.

"That's what he has!" grated Diamond—"left us to the mercy of these miserable redskins! That's a fine trick!"

"Oh, will you ever get over it?" rasped Rattleton. "Why shouldn't he? He had his chance, and he'd been a fool not to skin out!"

"I thought he would stand by us in such a scrape as this."

"What you thought doesn't cut any ice. He'll come back."

"After we are murdered."

Rattleton would have said something more, but the Indians, who had been holding an excited conversation, suddenly grasped the four remaining lads in a threatening manner.

"Oh, mah goodness!" palpitated Toots. "Heah is whar I's gwan teh lose mah wool! It am feelin' po'erful loose already!"

Browning was on the point of launching out with his heavy fists and making as good battle of it as he could when he heard Black Feather say:

"No hurt white boys. Make um keep still, so um not run 'way off like odder white boy. That am all."

"I'll take chances on it," muttered Bruce, giving up quietly.

The four lads were forced to sit on the ground, and some of the savages squatted near. The fire was replenished, and the Indians seemed to hold a council.

"Deciding how they will kill us," said Diamond, gloomily.

"Nothing of the sort," declared Rattleton. "See them making motions toward the bicycles. They are talking about the wonderful two-wheeled horses."

"Gracious!" gasped Toots; "dat meks mah hair feel easier!"

Browning held a hand on his stomach in a pathetic manner.

"Oh, my!" he murmured. "How vacant and lonely my interior department seems to be! Methinks I could dine."

"The hard bread and jerked beef," whispered Jack. "It is in the carriers attached to the wheels."

"Yes, and we had better let it remain there."

"Why?"

"These Indians look hungry, too."

"You think——"

"I do. They will take it away from us and eat it if we bring it out. That would leave us in a bad fix."

"But they can get it out of the carriers."

"They can, but they won't."

"Why not?"

"They are afraid of those bicycles—so afraid that they will not go near them. Therefore our hard bread and jerked beef is safe as long as we let it remain where it is."

Harry agreed with Bruce, and they decided not to touch the food in the carriers; but all were thirsty again, and they expressed a desire to have another drink from the water-hole.

To this the Indians did not object, and they took turns at drinking, although the water did not taste nearly as sweet as it

had the first time.

Having satisfied themselves in this manner they sat down on the ground once more, being compelled to do so by the redskins, who were watching them closely.

"They have us in a bad position in case they take a notion to crack us over the head," said Harry. "We wouldn't get a show."

"Mah gracious!" gurgled Toots, holding fast to his scalp with both hands. "We's gwan teh git it fo' suah, chilluns! De fus' fing we know we won't no nuffin'!"

"We must get out of this somehow," muttered Bruce.

"That's right," nodded Jack. "Merriwell has taken care of himself, and left us to take care of ourselves."

He spoke in a manner that showed he felt that Frank had done them a great wrong.

"It's a good thing he got away as he did," asserted Harry. "Now we know we have a friend who is not a captive like ourselves, and we know he knows the fix we are in. You may be sure he will do what he can for us."

"He'll do what he can for himself. How can he do anything for us?"

"He'll find a way."

"I doubt it."

"You have become a great doubter and kicker of late, Diamond. It is certain the loss of that Mormon girl who married the other fellow has soured you, for you were not this way before. Why don't you try to forget her?"

"I wish you might forget her! You make me sick talking about her so much! I don't like it at all!"

"If you don't like it lump it."

Jack and Harry glared at each other as if they were on the point of coming to blows, and this gave Browning an idea. He saw the Indians had noticed there was a disagreement between the boys, and he leaned forward, saying in a low tone:

"Keep at it, fellows—keep at it! I have a scheme. Pretend you are fighting, and they will let you get on your feet. When I cry ready we'll all make a jump for our wheels, catch them up, place them in the form of a square, and stand within the square. The redskins are afraid of the wheels—think them 'bad medicine.' They won't dare touch us."

Browning had made his idea clear with surprising swiftness, and the other boys were astonished, for they had come to believe that the big fellow never had an original idea in his head.

Both Jack and Harry were taken by the scheme, and Diamond quickly said:

"It's a go. Keep on with the quarrel, Rattleton."

Harry did so, and in a very few seconds they were at it in a manner that seemed intensely in earnest. Their voices rose higher and higher, and they scowled fiercely, flourishing their clinched hands in the air and shaking them under each other's nose.

Browning got into the game by making a bluff at stopping the quarrel, which seemed to be quite ineffectual. He seemed to try to force himself between them, but Rattleton hit him a hard crack on the jaw with his fist, with which he was threatening Diamond.

"Scissors!" gurgled Bruce, as he keeled over on his back, holding both hands to his jaw. "What do you take me for—a punching bag?"

"You have received what peacemakers usually get," said Harry, as he continued to threaten Diamond.

The Indians looked on complacently, their appearance seeming to indicate that they were mildly interested, but did not care a continental if the two white boys hammered each other.

Jack scrambled to his feet and dared Harry to get up. Harry declared he would not take a dare, and he got up. Then Bruce and Toots lost no time in doing likewise, and, just when it seemed that the apparently angry lads were going to begin hammering each other Browning cried:

"Ready!"

Immediately the boys made a leap for the bicycles, caught them up, formed a square with them, and stood behind the machines, like soldiers within a fort.

The Indians uttered shouts of astonishment, and the four boys found themselves looking into the muzzles of the guns in the hands of the savages.

"What white boys mean to do?" harshly demanded Black Feather. "No can run away."

"Heap shoot um!" howled Blue Wolf, who seemed eager to slaughter the captives. "Then no can run away."

"Hold on!" ordered Browning, with a calm wave of his hand. "We want to parley."

"Want to pow-wow?" asked Black Feather.

"That's it."

"No pow-wow with white boys. White boys Injuns' prisoners. No pow-wow with prisoners."

"No!" shouted Blue Wolf. "Shoot um! shoot um!"

"Land ob massy!" gurgled Toots. "Dey am gwan teh shoot!"

"Black Feather," said Browning, with assumed assurance and dignity, "it will not be a healthy thing for your men to shoot us."

"How? how?"

"Do you see that we are protected by the 'bad medicine' machines? If you were to do us harm now, these machines would utterly destroy you and every one of your party. The moment you fired at us these machines would be like so many demons let loose, and as they are not made of flesh and blood, they could not be harmed. Not one of your party could escape them."

The light of the fire showed that the Indians looked at each other with mingled incredulity and fear.

"Wow!" muttered Rattleton. "Is this Browning I hear? How did you happen to think of such a bluff?"

"Have to think in a case like this," returned the big fellow, guardedly. "I think only when it is absolutely necessary. This is one of those occasions."

The Indians got together and held a consultation.

"Can't we make a run for it now?" asked Diamond, eagerly.

"We can," nodded Bruce, "but we won't run far. They'd be able to drop us before we could get out of the light of the fire."

"What can we do?"

"Why, we'll have to——"

Browning was interrupted by a clatter of hoofs, which caused him to turn toward the East. The Indians heard the sound, and they turned also.

Then wild yells of terror rent the air.

CHAPTER VII.—ESCAPE.

Coming through the darkness at a mad gallop was what seemed to be the gleaming skeleton of a horse. The ribs, the bones of the neck, legs and head, all showed plainly, glowing with a white light.

And on the back of the horse, which had sheered to the north and was passing the fire, sat what seemed to be the skeleton of a human being, the bones gleaming the same as those of the horse.

It was almost an astonishing and awe-inspiring spectacle, and it frightened the Indians greatly.

"Howugh—owugh—owugh!" wailed Black Feather, dismally.

Then the savages dropped on their faces, covering their eyes, so they could not see the skeleton horseman.

Almost at the same moment as the horseman was passing the spot the ghastly appearing thing seemed to give a sudden swing about and completely disappear.

"Poly hoker!" gasped Rattleton. "It's gone!"

"That's right!" palpitated Diamond—"vanished in a moment!"

"Oh, mah soul—mah soul!" wailed Toots. "Dat sholy am de ol' debbil hisse'f, chilluns! When we see it next it's gwan teh hab one ob us fo sho!"

"Hark!" commanded Browning.

The beat of the horse's feet could be distinctly heard, but the creature had turned about and was going back toward the pass through the bluffs.

Chucker-chucker-chuck! chucker-chucker-chuck! chucker-chucker-chuck! came the ghostly sounds of the galloping horse.

"It's turned about!" gasped Harry, in astonishment.

"It's going!" fluttered Jack.

"And we'd better be going, too!" put in Browning.

Then with a familiar whirring sound something came flying toward them through the darkness, causing Toots to utter a wild shriek of terror.

Into the light of the camp-fire flashed a boy who was mounted on a bicycle, and they saw it was Frank Merriwell.

"Away!" he hissed, as he flew past them. "Make straight for the pass by which we entered this pocket. I will join you."

Then he was gone.

Browning gave Toots a sharp shake, fiercely whispering:

"Mount your wheel and keep with us if you want to save your scalp! If you don't you will be left behind."

Then the boys leaped upon their bicycles and were away in a moment, before the prostrate Indians had recovered from the shock of terror given them by the appearance of the skeleton horse and rider.

For the time Bruce Browning took the lead, and the others followed him. Toots had heeded the big fellow's warning words, and he was not left behind.

Barely had they passed beyond the range of the firelight and disappeared in the darkness when wild yells of anger came from behind them, and they knew the Indians had discovered they were gone.

"Bend low! bend low!" hissed Diamond. "They may take a fancy to shoot after us! Stoop, fellows!"

Stoop they did, bending low over the handlebars of their bicycles.

Bang! bang! bang!

The Indians fired several shots, and they heard some of the bullets whistle past, but they were not hit.

"Well, that's what I call luck!" muttered the young Virginian.

"What do you call luck?" asked Rattleton.

"The appearance of that skeleton horse and rider in time to scare the Indians and give us a chance to get away."

"Oh!" said Harry, sarcastically, "I didn't know but it was Merry's return. I told you he would not desert us."

"I wonder how he happened to come back just then?"

"He came back because he was watching for an opportunity to help us, and he saw we had a splendid chance to get away while the redskins were scared by the appearance of the horse and rider. You ought to know him well enough to know he is not the fellow to desert his friends in a scrape like this."

Diamond was silent.

"I wonder where Frank is?" said Browning. "He said he would join us, and he is——"

"Right here, old man," said a cheerful voice, as a flying bicycle brought Merriwell out of the darkness to Browning's side. "This way, fellows! We'll hit the pass and get out of here as soon as we can."

"Lawd bress yeh, Marser Frank!" cried Toots, joyfully. "I didn't know's I'd see yeh no mo', boy!"

"I hope you didn't think I had left you for good?"

"No, sar!" declared the colored boy. "I done knows yeh better dan dat, sar! I knowed yeh'd come back, but I was afear'd yeh'd come back too late, sar. Dem Injuneses was gittin' po'erful anxious fo' dis yar wool ob mine—yes, sar!"

"Well, I am glad to know you thought I would not desert you. I don't want any of my friends to think I would go back on them in the hour of need."

Diamond was silent.

The pass was found without difficulty, and they went speeding through it.

"How did you happen to turn up just then, Frank?" asked Harry.

"I was waiting for a chance to come to you, and I saw the chance when that horse and rider frightened the Indians."

"The horse and rider—where are they?" asked Browning.

"Gone through the pass ahead of us."

"Mah gracious!" exclaimed the colored boy. "What if dat ol' debbil teks a noshun teh wait fu' us?"

"What sort of ghost business was it, anyway?" questioned Rattleton. "It seemed to be a skeleton horse and a skeleton

rider, and it disappeared in a twinkling. I will admit this skeleton business is beginning to work on my nerves.”

“It is rather creepish,” laughed Frank; “but I do not think it is very dangerous.”

“All the same, you do not attempt to explain the mystery.”

“Not now.”

“Not now? Can you later?”

“Perhaps so.”

“It is plain he knows no more about it than the rest of us,” said Diamond. “As for me, I am getting sick of seeking vanishing lakes and vanishing skeletons. If I get out of this part of the country alive, you’ll never catch me here again.”

“Meh, too!” exclaimed Toots.

“Well, I don’t know as any of us will care to revisit it,” laughed Frank. “Anyway, we have been very lucky in escaping from those Indians. That you can’t deny.”

“You fooled them easily,” said Rattleton.

“Yes, and they did not even take a shot at me, which was a surprise. I expected they would pop away a few times.”

“What are we going to do after we get out on the open desert again?” asked Jack. “It seems to me we’ll be as bad off as ever.”

“We’ll have to go around the range to the south, or wait for the Indians to get away from that water-hole, so we can go through the mountains as we originally intended.”

“The Indians may not go away.”

“I rather think they have been scared so they’ll not hang around there long. I don’t fancy they’ll be anywhere in the vicinity by morning.”

“If they are gone——”

“We’ll be all right, providing we can make our hard bread and dried beef hold out till we can reach one of the small railroad towns.”

“How far away is the railroad?”

“Not much over fifty miles.”

“That is easy!” declared Rattleton. “We can make it on a spurt!”

As they reached the eastern opening of the pass their attention was attracted by a bright light that seemed to shine out from the very niche where they had found the jewel-decorated skeleton.

“What does that mean?” exclaimed Jack, in astonishment.

“Land ob wartermillions!” gasped Toots. “It am de debbil’s light fo’ suah, chilluns! Don’ yeh go near it!”

“By Jove!” cried Frank. “That is worth investigating! Come on, fellows!”

He headed straight toward the light, and as they came near the niche they saw the bejeweled skeleton was again seated as they had seen it in the first place, and a bright flood of light was shining upon it from some mysterious place.

“It’s back!” exclaimed Harry, in astonishment.

“Sure enough!” said Frank. “It is on deck again.”

“I tells yeh to keep away from dat skillerton!” shouted Toots. “Hit am gwan teh grab yo’ this time if yo’ gits near hit!”

“We’ll take chances on that,” declared Frank. “This time we won’t give it time to get away, but we’ll go right up and examine it.”

“That’s what we will!” agreed Harry.

But even as he spoke, the light disappeared, and this made it impossible for them to see anything up there in that dark nook.

“Ha! ha! ha!”

Again they heard the mocking laughter, smothered, hollow and ghostly in sound.

“Somebody is having lots of fun with us,” said Frank, as he leaped from his wheel. “It may be a good joke, but I fail to see where the ‘ha, ha,’ comes in.”

“Is the skeleton gone?”

"I don't know, but I'll mighty soon find out."

Without hesitation he swung himself up to the niche in the rocks, and Rattleton followed, determined that Frank should not go alone into danger.

Harry afterward confessed that he was shivering all over when he climbed up there in the darkness, but his fear did not keep him from sticking to Merry.

A cry broke from Frank's lips.

"What is it?" called Browning, from below.

"By the eternal skies, it's gone again!"

"Didn't I tole yeh!" cried Toots, from a distance. "Come erway from dar, Marser Frank! If yo' don', yo's gwan teh be grabbed!"

"It is gone!" agreed Rattleton. "This beats the Old Nick!"

Again they heard that mocking laugh, which seemed to come down from some point above their heads.

"Wooh!" shivered Harry. "That sounds pleasant!"

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Frank, in a voice that indicated chagrin. "I don't like to be made fun of this way! If we don't solve this mystery before we go away I shall always regret it."

"Beware!"

It was the same voice that had uttered the warning when they were riding into the pass, and now, in the darkness of night, it sounded even more dismal and uncanny than before.

"Come out and show yourself," called Frank.

For some time the boys remained there, but they were forced to abandon the task of solving the mystery that night. Frank descended to the ground with no small reluctance, and Harry kept close to him. They mounted their wheels and rode away once more, fully expecting to hear the mocking laughter, or the ghostly voice calling after them. In this, however, they were disappointed, as nothing of the kind happened.

After they had ridden some distance, Frank proposed that they halt for the night.

"We are in for an open-air camp to-night," he said. "It is something we did not expect, but it can't be helped, and as the night is not cold I think we can get along all right. We need rest, too."

"That's right," agreed Bruce. "I feel as if I need about a week of steady resting, but I don't care to take it here."

"How about the Indians?" asked Jack. "We are not very far from them, and they might find us."

"I scarcely think there is any danger of that."

"Why not?"

"Those redskins were so badly frightened that they'll not go hunting after white boys to-night. It is more likely they will skin out and make for the Shoshone Reservation, on which they must belong."

"But what if they should happen to follow us?" Jack persisted.

"We must take turns at standing guard to-night, and the guard should be able to give us warning of danger in time for us to mount our wheels and get away."

It was plain that Diamond was not in favor of stopping there, but he said no more.

Fortunately the night was warm, so they suffered no discomfort by sleeping thus. No dew fell out there on the desert.

It was arranged that Diamond should stand guard first, while Frank came second, with Toots for the last guard toward morning.

They ate some of the hard bread and jerked beef and then threw themselves down, with their bicycles near at hand, so they could spring up and mount in a hurry if necessary.

Browning was the first to stretch himself on the ground, and he was snoring almost immediately. The others soon fell asleep.

The rim of a round, red moon was showing away to the eastward when Jack awoke Frank.

"How is it?" Merriwell asked. "Have you heard or seen anything suspicious?"

"Not a thing," was the reply. "All is still as death out here—far too still. I don't like it."

"Well, it is not real jolly," confessed Frank, with a light laugh; "but I don't think we need to be worried about visitors; and that is one good thing."

Jack was fast asleep in a short time.

Morning came, and Toots was the first to awaken. Dawn was breaking in the east as he sat up, rubbing his eyes and muttering:

“Good land! dat am de hardes’ spring mattrus dis coon ebber snoozed on—yes, sar! Nebber struck nuffin’ lek dat befo’.”

Then he looked around in some surprise.

“Gracious sakes!” he continued. “Whar am de hotel? It done moved away in de night an’ lef’ us.”

It was some time before he realized that they had not put up at a hotel the night before.

“Reckum dis is whar we stopped las’ night,” he finally said. “I ’membah ’bout dat now. We was ter tek turns watchin’. I ain’t took no turn at all, an’ it’s wamnin’. He! he! he! Guess de chap dat was ter wake me fell asleep hisself an’ clean forgot it. Dat meks meh ’bout so much sleep ahaid ob de game.”

He was feeling good over this when he noticed that three forms were stretched on the ground near at hand, instead of four.

“Whar am de odder one?” he muttered. “One ob dem boys am gone fo’ suah. Land ob wartermillions! What do hit mean? Dar am Dimun, an’ dar am Rattleum, an’ dar am Brownin’, but whar—whar am Marsers Frank?”

In a moment he was filled with alarm, and he lost no time in grasping Harry’s shoulder and giving it a shake, while he cried:

“Wek up heah, yo’ sleepy haid—wek up, I tells yeh! Dar’s suffin’ wrong heah, ur I’s a fool nigger!”

“Muts the whatter?” mumbled Rattleton, sleepily. “Can’t you let a fellow sleep a minute? It isn’t my turn yet.”

“Yoah turn!” shouted Toots. “Wek up, yo’ fool! It’s done come mawnin’, an’ dar’s suffin’ happened.”

“Eh?” grunted Harry, starting up and rubbing his eyes. “Why the moon is just rising.”

“Moon!” snorted the colored boy. “Dat’s de sun comin’ up! An’ I don’t beliebe yo’ took yoah turn keepin’ watch.”

Browning grunted and rolled over, flinging out one arm and giving Toots a crack on the neck that keeled him over on the ground.

“Landy goodness!” squealed the darky, grasping his neck with both hands. “What yo’ tryin’ ter do, boy? Want ter coon? Nebber seen such car’less pusson, sar!”

“Oh, shut up your racket!” growled the big college lad. “I’m not half rested yet. Call me when breakfast is ready.”

“Yo’ll done git yeh own breakfas’ dis mawnin’, sar; but befo’ dar’s any breakfas’ we’s gwan ter know what has become of Marsers Frank. He’s gone.”

“Gone?” replied Bruce, sitting up with remarkable quickness.

“Gone?” ejaculated Harry, popping up as if he were worked by springs.

“Gone where?” asked Diamond, also sitting up and staring around.

“Dat’s jes’ what I wants ter know, chilluns,” declared Toots. “Dat boy ain’t heah, an’ I’s po’erful feared de old skillerton debbil has cotched him.”

“Why—why,” said Jack, “I woke him and he took my place.”

“But nobody roused me,” declared Rattleton.

“Nor me,” asserted Browning.

“Git up, chilluns—git up!” squealed Toots, excitedly. “We’s gotter find dat boy in a hurry! ’Spect he’s in a berry bad scrape!”

CHAPTER VIII.—THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

By this time the boys were fully aroused. An investigation showed that Merriwell’s wheel was gone.

“Didn’t I tole yeh old debbil skillerton would done cotch some ob us!” cried Toots, in great distress.

“I hardly understand what the skeleton could have wanted with Merry’s wheel,” observed Browning.

“G’way dar, boy! Didn’ de skillerton ride a hawse!”

“And you think it is an up-to-date skeleton that has decided to ride a bicycle hereafter. In that case, I congratulate Mr. Skeleton on his good sense.”

"It must be that Frank has gone on a ride without saying anything to us," said Jack. "I do not see any other way of explaining it."

"But why should he do such a thing?" asked Rattleton.

"That is where you stick me."

Browning slowly shook his head.

"It is remarkable that he should do such a thing without saying anything to us," declared the big fellow.

"And he must have taken that ride in the night," said Jack.

"While he should have been on guard," added Harry.

The boys stood looking at each other in sober dismay.

"It isn't possible that Merry could have gone daffy," muttered Rattleton. "He is too well balanced for that."

"I don't know," came gloomily from Diamond. "This dismal, burning desert is enough to turn the brain of any fellow."

"Yah!" cried Toots. "Don' yeh git no noshun dat boy ebber had his brain turned! It am de weak brains dat git turned dat way. His brain was all right, but I jes' know fo' suah dat he hab been cotched."

"And I suppose you want to run away as soon as possible before you are 'cotched?'"

Then the colored boy surprised them all by saying:

"No, sar, I don' want teh go 'way till we knows what hab become ob Marser Frank. Dat boy alwus stick by his frien's, an' dis coon am reddy teh stick by him, even if he do git cotched."

"Good stuff, Toots!" cried Rattleton, approvingly. "You are all right! If anything has happened to Frank we'll know what it is or leave our bones here."

The boys were worried. They hurriedly talked over the remarkable disappearance, trying to arrive at an understanding of its meaning.

At length it was agreed that Frank might have gone back to try to solve the mystery of the skeleton, and then they decided that two of the party should remain where they had made their night bivouac, while the other two proceeded to search for Merriwell.

Diamond insisted on being one of the searchers, and Rattleton was determined to be the other, so Browning and Toots were left behind.

The boys mounted their wheels and rode back toward the pass through the bluffs.

Diamond was downcast again.

"Everything is going against us," he declared. "There is fate in it. I am afraid we'll not get out of this wretched desert."

"Oh, you're unwell, that's what's the matter with you!" declared Harry, scornfully. "I'll be glad when you are yourself again."

"That's all right," muttered Diamond. "You are too thoughtless, that's what's the matter with you."

They approached the spot where the mysterious skeleton had been seen, and both were watching for the niche in the rocks.

Suddenly they were startled by hearing a wild cry from far above their heads, and looking upward they saw Frank Merriwell running along the very brink of the cliff, but limping badly, as if he were lame.

But what astonished and startled them the most was to see a strange-looking, bare-headed man, who was in close pursuit of Frank. Above his head the man wildly flourished a gleaming, long-bladed knife, while he uttered loud cries of rage.

"Smoly hoke!" cried Harry. "Will you look at that!"

Diamond suddenly grew intensely excited.

"What can we do?—what can we do?" he exclaimed. "Frank is hurt! That creature is running him down! He will murder him!"

"If Merry had a pistol he would be all right."

"But he hasn't! We must do something, Harry—we must!"

"Neither of us has a gun."

"No, but—"

“We can’t get up there.”

“But we must do something!”

“We can’t!”

Jack grew more and more frantic. He leaped from his wheel and seemed to be looking for some place to try to scale the face of the bluff.

“Oh, if I could get up there!” he groaned. “I’d show Frank that I was ready to stand by him! I’d fight that man barehanded!”

And Rattleton did not doubt it, for he well knew how hot-blooded Diamond was, and the young Virginian had never failed to fight when the occasion arose. He would not shirk any kind of an encounter.

Merriwell saw them and shouted something to them, but they could not understand what he said.

“Turn! turn!” screamed Jack. “You must fight that man, or he will stab you in the back! He is going to strike you!”

Frank seemed to hear and comprehend, for he suddenly wheeled about and made a stand. In a moment the man with the knife had rushed upon him and struck with that gleaming blade.

A groan escaped Jack’s lips as he saw that blow, but it turned to a gasp of relief when Frank stopped it by catching the man’s wrist.

“Give it to him! Give it to him!” shrieked Diamond, dancing around in a wild frenzy of anxiety and fear.

Then the boys below witnessed a terrific struggle on the heights above them.

The man seemed mad with a desire to plunge the knife into Frank, and it was plain that Merriwell did not wish to harm the unknown, but was trying to disarm him.

“What folly! what folly!” panted Diamond. “He’ll get his hand free and stab Merry sure! Beat him down, Frank—beat him down!”

Once Frank slipped and fell to his knees. A fierce yell of triumph broke from the man, and it seemed that he would succeed in using the knife at last.

With a groan of anguish Diamond covered his eyes that he might not witness the death of the friend he loved. For Jack Diamond did love Frank Merriwell, for all that he had complained against him of late.

A cry of relief from Rattleton caused Jack to look up again, and he saw Frank had regained his feet and was continuing the battle.

And now the man fought with a fury that was nerve thrilling to witness. His movements were swift and savage, and he tried again and again to draw the knife across Frank’s throat.

Jack and Harry scarcely breathed until, with a display of strength and skill, Frank disarmed his assailant by giving his arm a wrench, causing the knife to fly through the air and fall over the edge of the cliff.

Down to the ground below rattled the knife, and then Diamond said:

“Now Frank will be able to handle the fellow!”

But, flinging his arms about the boy, the man made a mad effort to spring over the brink. For some seconds, locked thus in each other’s arms, man and boy tottered on the very verge, and then they swayed back.

Frank broke the hold of the man, striking him a heavy blow a second later. The man reeled and dropped on the edge of the precipice. He scrambled up hastily, but a great slice of rock cleaved off beneath his feet and went plunging downward.

Then the watching boys saw the unknown tottering on the brink, wildly waving his arms in an endeavor to regain his balance. Frank sprang forward to aid him.

Too late!

With a wild scream of despair, the strange man toppled over and whirled downward to his death.

Frank climbed down.

“It’s all up with him, poor fellow,” said he, as he stood near the body of the unknown man, looking down at the face that was white and calm and peaceful in death.

“Who is he?” asked Harry.

“What is he?” asked Jack.

“I am afraid those questions cannot be answered,” confessed Frank. “That he was a raving maniac I am sure, and he lived in a remarkable cave close at hand; but who he is or how he came to be there in that cave I do not know.”

"Well, how you came to be up there with him running you down to stick a knife in you is what I want to know," said Harry.

"That's right," Jack nodded. "Explain it, old man."

Then Frank told them how, after the moon rose the night before, he had taken his wheel with the intention of riding around the camp, feeling he could keep watch as well that way as any. After the moon was well up, he saw there was no one anywhere about, and a desire to revisit the spot where they had seen the skeleton seized upon him. He rode to the spot, but there was no skeleton in the niche among the rocks. Leaving his bicycle, he climbed up there to examine once more, and to his astonishment, found that what seemed to be a solid, immovable stone had turned in some manner, disclosing an opening.

Then, with reckless curiosity, Frank resolved to investigate further, and he descended into the opening, found some stone steps, and was soon in a cavern. The first thing he discovered was the skeleton, still decorated as the boys had seen it in the first place, and he remained there till he found how it could be placed in view on the block of stone and then removed in a twinkling. He also found a lamp with a strong reflector, which had thrown its light on the skeleton from a hole in the rocks. There was another opening near that, where a person in the cave could look out on the desert, and Frank knew the ghostly voice they had heard must have come from that place.

Merriwell continued his investigations, having lighted the lamp, by the light of which he wandered through the cave. Suddenly he came face to face with an old man, who seemed surprised, but spoke quietly to him.

The old man declared he was "Prof. Morris Fillmore," but did not say what he was professor of, and he volunteered to explain everything to the boy.

This he did, telling how he worked the skeleton to frighten away those who might molest him in his solitude, as he wished to be alone. There was another entrance to the cave, and, in a large, airy chamber a horse was kept. The horse was coal black, but on one side of him was drawn the outlines of the skeleton frame of a horse, and the strange old man explained that he had a suit of clothes on one side of which he had traced the skeleton of a human being. This had been done with phosphorus, and it glowed with a white light in the darkness.

The old hermit had entered the pocket and ridden near the camp of the Indians. When he turned about the skeleton tracings in phosphorus could not be seen, and so the ghostly horse and rider seemed to disappear in a most marvelous manner.

Frank questioned him concerning the treasure, and the old man seemed to grow excited and suspicious. He said something about the treasure being the property of some one who had fled from the destroying angels of the Mormons in the old days, but had perished in the desert. Frank was led to believe that the skeleton was that of the original owner of the treasure.

But when the boy would have left the cave the stranger told him he could not do so. He informed Frank that he could never go out again, and then it was that the boy became sure Fillmore was crazy.

As the man was armed, Frank decided to use strategy. First he sought to lull the man's suspicions, and after being watched closely for hours he found a chance to slip away.

Almost immediately the man discovered what had happened and pursued. By chance Frank fled out through a passage that led upward till the top of the bluff was reached, but he fell and sprained his ankle, so he was unable to get away. The hermit followed, and the mad battle for life took place.

"Well, this is amazing!" gasped Jack. "What are you going to do with that treasure?"

"Take it to some place for safe deposit and advertise for the legal heirs of Prof. Millard Fillmore."

"And if no heirs appear——"

"The treasure will belong to us."

"Hurrah!"

CHAPTER IX.—A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

Frank's plan was carried out. All the treasure was removed from the cavern in which the mysterious old hermit was buried. The hermit's horse was set free, and the boys carried the treasure to Ullin, Nevada, where it was shipped to Carson and deposited in a bank there.

"If it is not claimed in a year's time, boys," said Frank, "we will go about the work of having it evenly divided among us. In that case we will have made a good thing out of this trip across the continent."

Nothing more was seen of the Indians, and the boys continued on their trip until Carson City was reached.

One evening Frank was strolling along alone when a shrill, piercing cry of pain, ending abruptly, cut the still evening air.

"Hello!" muttered Frank, as he paused to listen. "Something is wrong with the person who gave that call."

He listened. In a moment the cry was repeated, and this time it ended with a distinct appeal for help.

Frank was unarmed, but he was aroused by the thought that a fellow being was in distress, and he ran quickly to a dark corner, from beyond which the cry had seemed to come.

To the left was a dark and narrow street, which looked rather forbidding and dangerous.

"I believe the cry came from this street," said Frank, to himself. "If there were a few lights——"

"Help!"

There could be no mistake this time; the cry did come from that street. A short distance away in the darkness a struggle seemed to be going on. Frank could hear the sound of blows, hoarse breathing, muttered exclamations and cries of pain.

"Some fellow is being done up there!" thought the boy from Yale.

Without further hesitation he ran toward the point from which the sounds seemed to come.

In a moment Frank was close upon two dark forms that were battling fiercely on the ground. He could see them indistinctly in the darkness.

"Ah-h-h, you little whelp!" snarled a harsh voice "So ye will run away, hey? Well, ye'll never run away no more after this!"

"Oh, please, please don't beat me so!" pleaded a weak voice. "You—you are killing me! Oh! oh! oh!"

"I'll make ye 'oh, oh, oh!'" grated the other.

Then the blows fell thick and fast.

"Here, you miserable brute!" rang out the clear voice of Frank. "You ought to be shot!"

Then he grasped the figure that was uppermost and attempted to drag him off the other.

To Frank's surprise, although the attack had been sudden, he did not succeed in snatching the assailant from the unfortunate person he was beating.

"Get out!" roared a bull-like voice. "Lemme alone, or I'll cut yer hide open! This is none of your business!"

"Help, sir—help!" cried the weak voice. "He has beaten me nearly to death! He will kill me!"

"Ye oughter be killed, ye ungrateful little whelp!"

"Break away!" commanded Frank, as he lifted them both by a wonderful outlay of strength and literally tore them apart.

The one who had been assailed could not keep on his feet, but swayed weakly and sank to the ground.

With a sound that was like the snarl of a ferocious beast, the other grappled with Frank. He was so short that he stood not much higher than Frank's waist, but his shoulders were wonderfully broad, and he had arms that were almost long enough to reach the ground when he was on his feet.

"Great heavens!" thought Merriwell. "What is this I have run against? Is it a human gorilla?"

And then he found that the creature possessed marvelous strength, for Frank was literally lifted off his feet and flung prostrate, the other coming down upon him.

The fall came about so suddenly that Frank was dazed, and his breath was nearly knocked out of his body. For a moment he did nothing, and the creature scrambled up and grasped the fallen lad by the throat with hands that were like iron.

"Bother with me, will ye!" snarled that beastlike voice. "I'll fix ye so ye won't do it no more!"

Frank felt that he was in deadly peril, and that caused him to clutch the man's wrists and hold fast.

He saw something uplifted, and he knew well enough that the furious creature had drawn a weapon of some sort.

"Look out!" panted the weak voice from close at hand. "He will kill you! He has a knife!"

Then, as Merriwell used all his strength to hold back that uplifted hand, he began to realize that, athlete though he was, he was no match for the person he had tackled.

The strength of those long arms was something wonderful, for little by little the man forced Frank's hand back, and his knife approached the boy's breast.

Merriwell felt that his power of resistance might give out suddenly at any instant, and then the blade would be driven to its hilt.

He was desperate and frantic, for there was something awfully horrifying in the steady manner in which that knife was forced nearer and nearer.

Cold sweat started out all over him, and he panted for breath, while it seemed that his madly leaping heart would burst

from his bosom.

He could see two glaring eyes that seemed to shine with a baleful light of their own in the darkness. He could see the writhing features of a ghastly face, and he could hear the creature grate his teeth.

Nearer and nearer came the blade.

Crying and panting, the one whom Frank had attempted to save got upon his feet, swayed a bit, and then steadied himself with a great effort.

"You shall not do it—you shall not!" he gasped.

Then he flung himself on the man, seeking to drag him from the prostrate lad.

Frank saw that the time had come to make a last effort for the mastery, and so, aided by the other, he succeeded in forcing his opponent back enough so he could squirm out from beneath.

In a moment Frank gained his feet, and then, as the man with the knife came up, out shot the fist of the young athlete.

Smack!

The blow landed fairly, sounding clear and distinct.

Over went the dwarf, and the knife flew out of his hands, falling with a clattering ring upon some stones.

Merriwell knew he must follow up his advantage, but he was barely quick enough, for the fallen ruffian scrambled to his feet with the nimbleness of a cat.

But again Frank struck the fellow, using all his skill and muscle. He barely escaped being clutched by those long arms, but the dwarf was knocked down once more.

The sounds which came from the throat of the man were decidedly unpleasant to hear. They did not seem to be words, but were a succession of snarls.

By the time Frank had struck the creature again, he did not scramble up so quickly.

At that moment, having heard the sounds of the struggle, some person brought a light to the broken window of an old house that stood almost within the limits of the street.

That light shone out and fell full on the dwarf man as he was rising to his feet after the third blow. His long arms were extended so that his hands lay on the ground, and he was standing in a crouching position on all fours. His face was pale as marble, and disfigured by a red scar that ran down his left cheek from his temple to the corner of his mouth. His eyes were set near together, and were blazing with ferocity.

Taken altogether, Frank thought that the most horrible face he had ever seen.

The light seemed to startle the horrid-appearing creature, and, with a low, grating cry of baffled fury, he turned and ran swiftly away, still in a somewhat crouching position, his hands almost touching the ground, while he made queer leaps and bounds.

In a moment the dwarf had disappeared.

Frank gave a breath of relief.

"Good riddance!" muttered the lad from Yale.

Then he turned to look for the person he had saved from the dwarf.

That person had disappeared.

"Gone!" exclaimed Merriwell, in astonishment and regret. "He must have been frightened away during the last of the struggle. He was weak, and he may not have gone far."

Frank resolved to search, and immediately set about doing so. He had not proceeded far when he came upon a form stretched motionless on the ground.

A hasty examination showed Frank it was a boy, who seemed to have fainted.

"It is the chap the dwarf was beating!" decided Merriwell.

He lifted the unconscious boy in his arms, tossing him over one shoulder, and started toward the lighted street.

"I must take the poor fellow to the hotel, and then we'll see what can be done for him. He seems to be in a bad way."

By the time the lighted street was reached the boy recovered consciousness. He struggled a bit, moaned slightly, and then, in a pathetic, pleading voice, he said:

"Please don't take me back to Bernard Belmont, Apollo—please don't! I know he will kill me!"

"Don't be afraid," said Frank, gently. "I am not taking you to any one who will harm you."

A cry of astonishment broke from the boy.

"Why," he exclaimed, "you are not Apollo!"

"No; I am Frank Merriwell. Who is Apollo?"

"A dwarf—a wretch—the hired tool of Bernard Belmont! Oh, he is a monster, without heart or soul!"

"He must be the one with whom I had the lively little set-to."

"You—you came to my aid—you saved me from him! How can I thank you! But I thought he would kill you!"

"And so he might if you hadn't helped me throw him off. You did it just in time, and I believe you saved my life."

"Oh, but he had a knife—I could see it! And I knew he would use it. He has such wonderful strength."

"He is strong."

"Strong! I do not see how you held him off! But I could see him forcing the knife nearer and nearer, and I grew frantic, for it seemed that you would be killed before my eyes."

"I was rather anxious myself," confessed Frank, with something like a laugh.

"It was a nasty position."

"I don't know how I dared touch him, but I remember that I did. Then you flung him off and got up. After that, I remember that you were fighting, and I felt sure you could not conquer him. He would get the best of you in the end, and then he'd finish me. I was scared and tried to run away; but I did not go far before I became sick and weak, and—and I don't remember anything more."

"You fainted."

"And you whipped Apollo?"

"Not exactly. I knocked him down a few times, but he seemed to spring to his feet almost as soon as he went down. Then somebody brought a light to a window and he was scared away."

The boy clung to Frank.

"He did not go far!" he excitedly whispered. "He is not far away! He is liable to spring upon us any time! Bernard Belmont has sent him for me, and he will not rest till he gets me. Oh, I must get away—quick—to my sister! She is near—so near now! But my strength is gone, and—and——"

The boy began to cough, and each convulsion shook him from head to feet. There was a hollow, dreadful sound about that cough—a sound that gave Frank a chill.

"Never mind if your strength is gone," said Merriwell, encouragingly. "You'll get along all right, for I'll stick by you and see that you do."

"You are so kind!"

"What's your name?"

"George Morris."

"Where do you live—here in Carson?"

"Oh, no, no! I live in Ohio."

"That is a long distance away."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you happen to be here?"

The boy hesitated, seeming in doubt and fear, and then, with what appeared to be a sudden impulse, he said:

"I am going to tell you—I am going to tell you everything. Put me down here. Let's rest. I am tired, and I must be heavy."

They sat down on some steps, the boy seeking to keep in the shadow, showing he feared being seen.

"It's—it's like this," he began, weakly. "I—I ran away."

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed Frank.

The lad quickly, almost fearfully, clutched his arms.

"Don't think I ran away foolishly!" he exclaimed, coughing again. "I—I came out here to find my sister, who is buried."

"Then your sister is dead?"

"No."

"Not dead? You said she is buried. How can a person be buried and not be dead?"

Frank began to think it possible the boy was rather "daffy."

"There—there's lots to the story," came painfully from the boy. "I can't tell you all. The letter said she was buried—buried so deep that Bernard Belmont could never find her. That letter was from Uncle Carter."

"Uncle Carter?"

"My father's brother, Carter Morris. He lives somewhere in the mountains west of Lake Tahoe. He has a mine up there, and he is very queer. He thinks everybody wants to steal his mine, and he will let no one know where it is located. They say the ore he has brought here into Carson is of marvelous richness. Men have tried to follow him, but he has always succeeded in flinging them off the trail. Never have they tracked him to his mine."

"Then he is something of a hermit?"

"Yes, he is a hermit, and my sister is with him. He wrote that she was buried deep in the earth—that must be in his mine."

"How did your sister come to be with him?"

"I helped her—I helped her get away!" panted the boy, excitedly. "I knew they meant to kill us both!"

"They? Who?"

"Bernard Belmont and Apollo."

"Who is Bernard Belmont?"

"My stepfather. He married my mother, after the death of my father. He is a handsome man, but he has a wicked face, and he is a wretch—a wretch!"

The boy grew excited suddenly, almost screaming his words, while he struck his clinched hands together feebly.

"Steady," warned Frank. "You must not get so excited."

The boy began to cough, holding both hands to his breast. For some minutes he was shaken by that convulsive cough.

"Come," said Frank, "let me get you to the hotel. You must have a doctor. There must be no further delay."

"No, stop!" and the boy held to Merriwell's arm. "I must tell you now. I seem to feel that my strength is going—going! I must tell you! He—he killed my mother!"

"Who—Bernard Belmont?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Killed her? You charge him with that?"

"I do. He killed her by inches. He tortured her to death by his abusive treatment—he frightened my poor mother to death. And then, when he found everything had been left to us—my sister and myself—then he set about the task of destroying us by inches. It was fixed so that he could get hold of everything with us out of the way, and he——"

Another fit of coughing came on, and, when it was finished, the boy was too weak to proceed with the story.

"You shall have a doctor immediately!" cried Frank, as he lifted the lad and again started for the hotel.

CHAPTER X.—THE STORY.

Frank succeeded in getting George Morris to the hotel, took him to a room, and put him on the bed.

"Do not leave me!" pleaded the boy. "Apollo will come and carry me off if you do. Stay here with me!"

"I'll stay," assured Frank; "but I must find some of my friends and send for a physician. You must have a doctor right away."

Bruce, Diamond and Toots had gone out, but he found Harry, and told him what was desired. Harry started out to search for a doctor, while Frank returned to the boy, who was in a state of great agitation when he re-entered the room.

"Oh, I thought you would never come!" coughed the unfortunate lad. "You were away so long!"

He was thin and pale, with deep-sunken eyes, which, however, were strangely bright. He was poorly and scantily dressed, and the hand that lay on his bosom seemed so thin that it was almost transparent. One of his eyes had been struck by the fist of the brutish dwarf, and was turning purple. On one cheek there was a great bruise and a slight cut.

Frank's heart had gone out in sympathy to this unfortunate lad, and he was filled with rage when he thought how brutally the poor boy had been treated.

Merriwell sat down on the edge of the bed, and took that thin, white hand. It felt like a little bundle of bones, and was so cold that it gave Frank a shudder.

"You are very ill," declared the boy from Yale. "I believe you have been starved."

"That was one way in which he tried to get rid of us," said George.

"You are speaking of Bernard Belmont?"

"Yes."

"He tried to starve you?"

"Yes, and my sister also. Little Milly! You should see her! She is such a sweet girl, and she is so good! I don't see how he had the heart to torture her."

"This Belmont must be a human brute!" cried Merriwell, in anger. "He deserves to be broken on the wheel!"

"He is a brute!" weakly cried the boy. "He killed my mother—my dear, sweet mother! Oh, she was so good, and so beautiful! She loved us so—Milly and me! Listen, my dear friend," and the the boy drew Frank closer. "I—I think he—poisoned her!"

These words were whispered in a tone of such horror and grief that the soul of the listening lad was made to quiver like the vibrating strings of a violin when touched by the bow.

"You mustn't think about that now," said Frank, soothingly. "It will hurt you to think about it."

"But I must, for, do you know, dear friend, I feel sure I shall not have long to think of it."

"What do you mean?" asked Merry, with a chill.

"Something—something tells me the end is near. Apollo, he hurt me—here."

The boy pressed one hand to his breast and coughed again.

"You are excited—you are frightened," declared Frank. "You will be all right in the morning. The doctor will fix you up all right. You shall have the very best food you can eat, and I'll see that you receive the tenderest care."

The eyes of the lad on the bed filled with tears and his lips quivered, while he gazed at Frank with a look of love.

"You are so good!" he said, weakly, but with deep feeling. "Why are you so good to me—a stranger?"

"Because I like you, and you are in trouble."

"There are not many like you—not many! I know I can trust you, and I do wish you would do something for me!"

"I will. Tell me what it is. I promise in advance."

"I don't want you to promise till you know what it is, for I have no right to ask so much of you."

"Very well. Tell me."

"When I am dead, for I know I shall not last long—will you find my sister and tell her everything? Tell her how near I came to reaching her, and let her know that I am gone. She loves me. I am only fifteen, but she is eighteen and very beautiful. She looks like my angel mother. Dear little Milly! Will you do this?"

"I will do it, if the occasion arises; but we'll have you all right in a short time, and you will go to her yourself."

"If I recover, I shall not be able to go to her."

"Why not?"

"Bernard Belmont has followed me, and he will drag me back to the old prison—I know it."

"He shall not!" exclaimed Frank, with determination.

"The law is with him," said the boy, weakly. "He has the best of it, for he is my legal guardian."

"At that he has no right to abuse you, and he can be deprived of guardianship over you. It shall be done."

But no light of hope illumined the face of the unfortunate boy.

"It will be no use," George said. "He has starved me and beaten me. He has drenched me with water, and left me where it was icy cold, so that I have been awfully ill. And all the time I had this—this cough."

Frank leaped to his feet and paced the small room like a caged tiger, his soul wrought to an intense fury at the thought of the treatment the boy had received. He longed for power to punish the monster who had perpetrated such dastardly

acts.

"Your sister," he finally asked—"did this brute treat her thus?"

"Nearly as bad, but she was older and stronger."

"Tell me, how did your sister get away from him?"

"We planned to run away together, and then I became so ill that I could not. I—I made her leave me. I told her she must find Uncle Carter—must let him know everything. It was our only hope. He must save us."

"But how did she reach your uncle?"

"It was this way: We knew where Bernard Belmont kept some money in a little safe, and I—I knew how to get into that safe. That money belonged to us—it was mother's money. Belmont was not worth a dollar when he married my mother. It would not be stealing for us to take it. Sometimes he went away and left us to be cared for by Apollo, the dwarf. Such care! Apollo was a monster—a brute! Bernard Belmont hired him to torture us. This time, when Belmont went away, Apollo shut us up in a room, leaving some bread and water for us, and we were left there, while he visited the wine cellar and got beastly drunk. He thought we were safe in that room—thought we could not get out. But we had been imprisoned there before, and I had made a key of wire. We got out. We found the dwarf in a drunken sleep, and we tied him. Then we went to the safe and opened it. There was but a trifle over fifty dollars in that safe. It was not enough to take us both to Nevada—to Uncle Carter. Then I fainted, and I was too ill to try to run away when my sister restored me. She insisted on staying with me, but I commanded her to go. I begged her to go. I told her it was the only way. If she did not go, we were lost, for Bernard Belmont would discover what we had done, and he would make sure we had no opportunity to repeat the trick. She wanted to stay and care for me. I told her Belmont would not dare harm me till he had caught her. It might be some days before he got back. It was possible she could reach Uncle Carter, and then Uncle Carter could come East and save me. After a time I convinced her. She took the money, dressed herself for the street, and, after kissing me and weeping over me, left me. I have never seen her since."

"But she escaped—she reached your uncle?"

"Yes."

"He made no effort to save you?"

"No."

"Why was that?"

"I know nothing, except that he is queer. Perhaps he thought I was not worth saving. It was nearly a week before Bernard Belmont returned. All that time I kept Apollo tied fast, and I rejoiced as the days went by. When Belmont came there was a terrible outburst. I was beaten nearly to death. He tried to make me tell where my sister had gone, but I would only say, 'Find out.' When I had become unconscious and he could not restore me to my senses to question me further, he started to trace Mildred. He traced her after a time, but she had reached Uncle Carter, and she was safe. He wrote a letter to Uncle Carter, and the reply he received made him furious. It told him that Milly was buried so deep that he would never see her again. She was dead to him and to the world. Then Bernard Belmont swore that I would soon be dead in truth. After that—oh, I can't tell it!"

Frank saw it was exhausting the unfortunate boy, and he quickly said:

"Do not tell it; you have told enough. But you escaped."

"After nearly a year. I escaped without a cent of money, and how I worked my way here I do not know. Several times I dodged detectives, whom I knew were in the employ of Belmont. I got here at last, but I found Bernard Belmont and Apollo were waiting for me. I tried to escape, but Apollo found me, and—you know the rest."

CHAPTER XI.—ANOTHER ESCAPE.

The poor boy relapsed into silence, closing his eyes and breathing with no small difficulty. A great flood of pity welled up in the heart of Frank Merriwell as he looked at that thin, bruised face, and he felt like becoming the boy's champion and avenger.

Again Frank pressed the thin hand that looked so weak and helpless. He held it in both his own warm, strong hands, and he earnestly said:

"My poor fellow! you have been wretchedly treated, and it is certain that Bernard Belmont shall suffer for what he has done. Retribution is something he cannot escape."

"Oh, I don't know!" weakly whispered George. "I used to think so—I used to think that the wicked people all were punished, but I'm beginning to believe it isn't so."

"You must not believe it isn't so," anxiously declared Frank. "Of course you believe there is an All-wise Being who witnesses even the sparrow's fall?"

"Yes."

"Then you cannot doubt that such a Being will visit just punishment upon the wicked man who has caused you so much

suffering and pain. His way is past finding out, but you must trust Him.”

There was something noble and manly on the face of Frank Merriwell as he spoke those words, and the manner in which he uttered them told that he had the utmost and implicit confidence in the wisdom of the Being of whom he spoke.

At that moment it scarcely seemed possible that Frank was the same merry, laughing, lively lad who was usually so full of fun and pranks. Those who fancied they knew him best would have been amazed could they have seen him and heard his words.

Thus was shown one of the many hidden sides of Frank’s nature, which was most complex and yet honest and guileless.

The boy on the bed opened his eyes and looked at Frank in silence, for a long time. Finally he said:

“I see you really believe what you say, and you have given me new faith. I have suffered so much—so much that I had begun to doubt. It is hard to trust in the goodness of God when it seems that nearly all the wicked ones in the world are the ones who are prosperous. Bernard Belmont is believed to be an upright and honorable man in the town where he lives, and the people there think he was very kind to the two invalid children left on his hands when his wife died.”

“Some day they will know the truth.”

“It will be when I am dead!”

“Nonsense!”

“I am sure of it. Do you know, dear friend, Apollo hurt me so much to-night! It seems that he hurt me somewhere in—here.”

The boy pressed his hand to his side.

“But the doctor is coming, and he will make you well again.”

“Perhaps he can’t. I had rather not get well than be turned over to Belmont again and left for him to torture.”

George shuddered at this, and Frank ground his teeth softly, as he thought what intense satisfaction it would give him to see the man Belmont punished as he deserved.

“Why doesn’t Harry come with the doctor?” thought Frank, as he got up and impatiently paced the floor. “He has had plenty of time.”

A few moments later the boy on the bed beckoned with his thin hand.

Frank hastened to the bedside, anxiously asking: “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes,” whispered George; “sit down and listen.”

“I wish you would save your strength. You must stop talking.”

“I must talk, for it is my last chance. I want to tell you again that I know my sister is somewhere in the mountains up around Lake Tahoe. You have said you would find her. Do so; tell her I am gone. She is an heiress, for all the money Bernard Belmont has will belong to her then. If you could do something to aid her in obtaining her rights. Will you try?”

“I will try.”

“Oh, you are so good—and you are so brave! How you fought that terrible dwarf! You did not seem afraid of him! It is wonderful! I never saw anybody like you! Yes, yes, I am beginning to have faith. How can I help it after this?”

He smiled at Frank, and there was something so joyous and so pathetic in that smile that Merry turned away to hide the tears which welled into his eyes.

When Frank turned back he was bravely smiling, as he said, in a most encouraging manner:

“Now you must have faith that you are going to get well. That is what you need. It will be better than medicine and doctors. Think—think of meeting your sister again!”

“Yes, yes!” panted the boy. “Dear little Milly!”

“How happy she will be!”

“Yes, yes!”

“And think of regaining possession of what is rightfully your own—of getting square with Bernard Belmont.”

A cloud came to the face of the boy.

“Of course I want what is mine—I want Milly to have her rights,” he slowly said; “but—but it is not my place to punish the man who has wronged us.”

“The law will do that.”

"God will do that! I believe it once more since talking with you. I trust Him fully."

There were footsteps outside the door, a gentle tap, and Frank admitted Harry and a physician.

The doctor sat down in a chair by the bed and asked the boy a few questions, while Frank and Harry anxiously watched and listened. The doctor's face was unreadable.

"Who is this boy, Frank?" whispered Harry. "Where did you find him?"

"Wait," said Merry. "I will tell you later, but not here."

The doctor declared that the unfortunate lad must have some light stimulating food without delay, and he wrote a prescription.

"Take this to a druggist and have it filled," he said, handing it to Harry.

Harry left the room.

The boy lay back on the bed, his eyes closed, breathing softly. The doctor arose and walked to the window, motioning Frank to join him.

"How is it, doctor?" Merriwell anxiously asked, in a whisper.

The man shook his head.

"I can't tell yet," he confessed; "but I fear he is done for. He has been starved, and his lungs are in a bad way. What he needs most is stimulants and food, but everything must be mild, as his system is in such a weakened condition. As for the injury to his side, of which he complains, of course I cannot tell how severe that may be."

Frank's heart sank, for the doctor was more discouraging in his manner than in his words.

"Save him if you can, doctor!" he entreated.

"I will. Is he a friend or relative of yours?"

"He is an utter stranger to me. I never saw him before to-night."

The doctor lifted his eyebrows in astonishment.

"Indeed! Then who is to pay the bills for his care and treatment?"

"I will," Frank promptly answered. "Here, take this as a fee in advance."

A bill was thrust into the physician's hand.

After looking at the bill the doctor assumed a very deferential manner.

"He should have a first-class nurse," he declared.

"He shall," assured Merriwell; "the best one to be obtained in Carson."

"This is very strange," said the physician. "I can't understand why you should do such a thing for one who is a stranger to you. You must have an object."

"I have."

"Ah! I thought so!"

"My object is to see this poor, abused boy live and get his just due. He has been misused, and the man who has misused him should be punished. I hope to live to know that man has been punished as he deserves."

"Ah!" came from the doctor once more. "Then you have a grudge against the man?"

"I never saw him in all my life. I never heard of him before this night."

The physician was more puzzled than before.

"Then I must say you are a most remarkable person!" he exclaimed.

Once more there were steps outside the door—heavy shuffling steps.

The boy on the bed heard those steps, and a gasp came from his pale lips, as he turned his head toward the door, his face distorted by fear.

"He is coming!"

The words came in a hoarse whisper from the injured boy.

Frank started toward the door and the boy wildly entreated:

"Stop him—don't let him come in here! Hark! There is another step! They are both there! They have come for me—come to drag me back to a living death!"

"Why, he is raving!" exclaimed the doctor.

Bang!—open flew the door. Without stopping to knock or ask leave to enter, a tall, dark-bearded man stepped into the room.

At this man's heels came a crouching figure that seemed half human and half beast. It had a short, thick body and long arms that nearly reached the floor. Its face was pale as marble, save for a red scar that ran down the left cheek to the corner of the mouth. The eyes were set near together, and they glistened with a savage, cruel light.

Frank stepped between the intruders and the bed, but the boy had seen them, and he sat up, uttering a wild scream of fear, then fell back on the pillow.

"Who are you? and what do you want?" demanded Merriwell, boldly confronting the man and the creature at his heels.

"Never mind who we are; we want that boy, and we will have him!" declared the man. "He can't escape us this time!"

Frank glanced at the figure on the bed, and then turned back, crying with great impressiveness:

"He can and has escaped you, Bernard Belmont; but he will stand face to face with you at the great bar of justice in the day of judgment!"

"What!" hoarsely cried the man, starting back and staring at the ghastly face of the boy on the bed; "he is dead!"

CHAPTER XII.—AT LAKE TAHOE.

Poised like a sparkling gem in a grand and glorious setting of mountain peaks, lies Lake Tahoe, the highest body of water on the American continent.

The sun was shining from a clear sky when Frank Merriwell and Harry Rattleton reached a point where they could look down upon the bosom of the lake, from which the sunlight was reflected as from the surface of a mirror.

"There it is, old man!" cried Frank, enthusiastically—"the most beautiful lake in all the wide world!"

"That is stutting it rather peep—I mean putting it rather steep," said Harry, with a remonstrating grin.

"But none too steep," asserted Frank. "People raved about the beauties of Maggiore and Como, and thousands of fool Americans rush over to the old world and go into raptures over those lakes, but Tahoe knocks the eye out of them both."

"I think you are stuck on anything American, Frank."

"I am, and I am proud of it, too. Rattleton, we have a right to be proud of our country, and we would be blooming chumps if we weren't. It is the greatest and grandest country the sun ever shone upon, and a fellow fully realizes it after he has been abroad and traveled around over Europe, Asia and Africa. I've been sight-seeing in those lands, my boy, and I know whereof I speak."

"You are thoroughly American, anyway, Frank."

"That's right. I love my native land and its beautiful flag—Old Glory! I never knew what it was to feel a thrill of joy that was absolutely painful till I saw the Stars and Stripes in a foreign land. The sight blinded me with tears and made me feel it would be a privilege to lay down my life in defense of that starry banner."

"Well, you're a queer duck, anyway!" exclaimed Harry. "I never saw a chap before who seemed cool as an iceberg outside and had a heart of fire in his bosom."

Frank laughed.

"Every man is peculiar in his own way," he said "I never try to be anything different than I am. I am disgusted by affectation."

"We have found Lake Tahoe, but that is not finding the 'buried heiress,' as you call her."

"But we will find her."

"I scarcely think it will be an easy task."

"Nor do I think so, but I gave George Morris my word, and I am going to keep my promise to him, poor fellow!"

"You never seem to consider the possibility of failure, Frank."

"The ones who consider the possibility of failure are those who fail, old fellow. Those who succeed are the ones who never think of failure—who believe they cannot fail. Confidence in one's self is an absolute requisite in the battle of life."

"There is such a thing as egotism."

"Yes. That consists in bragging about what you can do. It is most offensive. It is the fellow who does things without boasting who cuts ice in this world. The other fellow often spends his time in telling what he can do, but never does much."

"I think you are right; but let's get down nearer the lake. I've heard that the water is marvelously clear."

"It is so clear that a small fish may be seen from the surface, though the fish is near the bottom where the lake is the deepest."

"Then it can't be very deep."

"It is, nevertheless. In many places it is thirty or forty feet—even more than that."

"Then who invented the fish story?"

"The fish story is all right," laughed Merriwell. "I know."

"How do you know?"

"I've been here before."

"Here—at Lake Tahoe?"

"Sure."

"Well, say!" cried Rattleton, in astonishment, "I'd like to know where you haven't been!"

"Oh, there are lots of places where I haven't been, but this is one of the places where I have been. That's all."

"What brought you here?"

"I came here in pursuit of a young lady in whom a friend of mine, Bart Hodge, was interested."

"I think I have heard you speak of Hodge."

"Yes, he was my chum when I was in Fardale Military Academy. We were enemies at first, and Hodge did his best to down me, but we became friendly after that, and Hodge turned out to be a very decent fellow."

"Where is he now?"

"Give it up. Haven't heard from Bart in a long time. Last I knew he was out here in the West somewhere."

The boys had reached Tahoe on their wheels, there being a road to the lake. The road was not a very good one for bicycle traveling, but they had ridden a portion of the way.

Now they had left the road and pushed down to the lake by a winding path, along which they had been forced to carry their wheels at times.

They made their way down to the edge of a bluff, from the verge of which they could look over into the water.

"Say! it is clear!" cried Harry.

"I told you so," smiled Frank.

"But—but—why, it almost seems to magnify! I can count the pebbles on the bottom. Look at those tiny fishes swimming around there."

In truth the water was marvelously clear, and things on the bottom could be seen almost as plainly as if they were not beneath the surface.

"Why, it don't seem possible that a boat can float on it!" broke from Harry.

"It is something like floating in the air."

"Are there boats to be obtained near here?"

"There are a number of boats on the lake. There once was a man near here by the name of Big Gabe who owned a boat."

"Let's get it, if he is here now. I want to take a sail on this lake. How do we find Big Gabe?"

"I don't know that we'll be able to find him at all. He was a consumptive."

"Oh, then he may be dead?"

"Not from consumption. He came here to die, but in less than a year he was stronger and heartier than he had ever before been, and he was so lazy that he didn't care to do anything but lay around and take life easy. He said he was going to stay here till he died, but there seemed little prospect that he'd ever die. He——"

At this moment there was a sudden wild snarl behind them, and, before they could turn, each lad received a powerful

thrust that sent him whirling from the bluff to fall with a great splash into the water below.

Both lads had pulled their bicycles over the brink, so the wheels fell with a loud splash into the water which washed against the base of the steep rock.

The boys themselves had been sent whirling still farther out, and they sank like stones when they struck the water.

But they came up quickly, wondering what had happened.

"Blate glisters—no, great blisters!" gurgled Harry, as he spurted water like a whale. "Where are we at?"

"Christmas!" said Frank. "What struck us?"

And then, on the top of the bluff, they saw a creature that was dancing and howling with rage and satisfaction.

It was Apollo, the dwarf.

"May I be hanged!" exploded Rattleton. "It's that thing!"

"It is!" agreed Frank; "and I supposed that thing must be hundreds of miles from here."

"Going East."

"Of course."

"Belmont didn't let any grass grow under his feet before he got out."

"Not much."

The creature on the bluff danced and screamed and waved its long arms, while its hideous face was convulsed with expressions of rage.

"Oh, I'd like to get at him!" grated Frank.

"Thank you, I'd much rather keep away!" exclaimed Harry.

Then the boys started to swim ashore.

Suddenly the dwarf began throwing stones at them. He picked up huge stones from the ground and sent them whizzing through the air with great force and something like accuracy.

"Well, this is getting rather hot!" exclaimed Frank, as a huge jagged stone shot down past his head and sank in the water.

"Hot!" gurgled Rattleton. "I should say so—some!"

"Look out!"

Another huge stone struck between them.

"If that had hit either of us, it would have fixed us!" came from Frank.

"You bet!"

"Swim, old fellow! We must get away."

But as they swam, looking for a place to go ashore, the dwarf followed along the top of the bluff, still pelting them with stones, while he uttered those savage cries.

One of the smaller stones struck Merry and hurt him not a little.

"Wait!" he muttered. "I'll get a chance at you yet!"

Then, regardless of the shower of stones, he started to swim in toward the shore where he saw a place that they could get out of the water.

But another stone whizzed down, and there came a broken, strangling cry from Harry.

"What happened, old fellow?" asked Frank, who was now a bit in advance. "Did the cur hit you?"

No answer.

Frank looked around, and found Harry had disappeared from view.

The dwarf on the bluff danced and howled with fierce delight.

As quickly as he could, Frank turned about, swam back a little and dived. It did not require a great effort to go down, for now his clothes were thoroughly wet, and he sank easily.

As soon as he was below the surface, keeping his eyes open, he saw his friend lying on the bottom. The water was so

clear that there was not the least difficulty in this.

Down Frank went till he reached Harry, whom he grasped. Planting his feet on the bottom, he gave a great leap and shot upward.

The water was not more than eight feet deep, and he quickly reached the surface, immediately striking for the shore.

But his watersoaked garments and Harry's weight dragged on him, and it was a desperate battle to keep from going down again.

"You must do it, Merriwell!" he told himself. "It's your only show! Pull him out somehow!"

Several times his head was forced below the surface and it seemed that the struggle was over; but he would not give up, and he would not let go his hold on Harry.

"Both or none!" he thought. "If I can't get out with him, I'll not get out without him!"

The dwarf had disappeared from the bluff, which was a fortunate thing, as he would have been given a fine opportunity to pelt them with rocks as Frank slowly and laboriously swam ashore. Just then, if Merriwell had been struck on the head by a stone, it must have ended the whole affair.

"Oh, if my clothes were off!" panted Frank. "Then I could do it. I must do it anyway."

He wondered how badly Harry was hurt, but it was impossible to tell till the shore was reached.

The water did not seem so buoyant as it should, and he almost felt that there was a force dragging him down.

Purely by his power of determination he succeeded in reaching the rocks and dragging himself out with his burden, when he sank down utterly exhausted.

"Thank goodness!" he gasped. "I did it!"

He had not been there many moments when he heard a cry above, and, looking upward, saw the dwarf had returned to the edge of the bluff.

The dwarf seemed astonished when he saw the boys had reached shore, and he sent a stone whistling down at them.

Frank dodged the missile, and then, with a fresh feeling of strength, hastened up the rocks toward the top of the bluff.

Apollo saw the boy coming and immediately took to his heels, quickly disappearing from view.

Finding the dwarf had escaped, Frank turned back, lifted Harry in his arms, and again mounted the rocks.

He reached the top and bore his friend to a place where he could rest on some short grass where he was sheltered from the sunlight.

Then Frank looked for Harry's injury.

Rattleton had been struck on the head by a stone, which had cut a short gash in the scalp, and from this blood was flowing.

"It doesn't seem very bad," said Frank, as he examined the wound. "I rather think it stunned him, and that is all. He was not under water long enough to drown."

Frank took a handkerchief from his pocket and wrung it out, intending to bind up Harry's head with it.

At that moment, happening to glance up, he saw a pale, horrible face peering out from a mass of shrubbery.

It was the face of Apollo, the dwarf.

"That creature still here!" grated Merriwell, as he sprang up. "If he isn't driven away, he may find a way to injure us further."

Then he ran after Apollo, who quickly disappeared.

Frank pursued the dwarf hotly, hearing the little wretch crashing along for some distance, but Apollo succeeded in keeping out of sight, and, at last, he could be heard no more.

Merry was disgusted. He spent some time in searching for Apollo, and then returned to the spot where he had left Harry.

CHAPTER XIII.—A RACE ON THE LAKE.

To Frank's amazement, he found Rattleton reclining in a very comfortable position, with the handkerchief bound about his head.

"Hello, old boy!" Merriwell cheerfully called. "I reckon you are all right, for you are able to do up your own wound."

"I say, Frank," came eagerly but weakly from Rattleton, "what has become of her?"

"Her? Whom?"

"The fairy, the nymph, the beautiful queen of the woods! She was here a few moments ago—she was with me."

"By Jove! that crack on the head has knocked him daffy!" thought Merriwell. "He's off his trolley sure!"

"Why don't you answer me?" Harry impatiently demanded. "I closed my eyes but a moment, and when I opened them again she was gone."

"I hope you are not referring to the dwarf," laughed Frank, lightly. "I hope you do not mean him when you talk about a fairy, nymph and beautiful queen of the woods?"

"No, no! Of course I do not mean that horrible creature! I mean the girl—the girl who was here!"

"There has been no girl here."

"What? I know there has! I saw her, although it seemed like a dream. I saw her before I could fully open my eyes. She was kneeling here beside me, and she was so beautiful!"

"My dear fellow," said Merriwell, gently, "that tap on the head has mixed you somewhat—there's no doubt about it."

Harry made a feeble, impatient gesture.

"You think I am off," he said; "but I am not. I tell you I saw a girl—a girl with blue eyes and golden hair. Her cheeks were brown as berries, but the tint of health was in them. And her hands were so soft and tender and warm!"

Frank whistled.

"I'm afraid you are hurt worse than I thought," he said, with no small concern.

"Oh, scrate Gott!" spluttered Harry. "I am not hurt at all! I tell you I saw her—do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear."

"But you don't believe me, and that is what makes me hot."

"Keep cool."

"How can I? Look here, look at my head."

"Yes, you did a very good job. I was about to do it up when I saw that dwarf again, and I chased him."

"I didn't do it up at all."

"No?"

"Not on your retouched negative!"

"Then who——"

"The girl—the girl, I tell you! When I came to my senses, I felt some person at work over me, and through my eyelashes I saw her kneeling here at my side. I tell you, Frank, she was a dream—a vision! I thought I was in heaven, and I scarcely dared breathe for fear she would disappear."

Frank was watching Harry closely.

"Hanged if the fellow doesn't believe it!" muttered Merry.

Rattleton's ears were sharp, and he caught the words.

"Believe it!" he weakly shouted—"I know it! I not only saw her, but I felt her hands as she gently brushed back my wet hair and tied this bandage in place. Look at it, Merry, old fellow; I couldn't have put it on like that—you know I couldn't."

"Well, it would have been quite a trick."

"I think she saw us thrown into the water, for she murmured something about it. She must live near here, Frank."

Harry was fluttering with suppressed eagerness.

"If you saw such a girl, it is likely that she does."

"If I saw such a girl! Oh, smoly hoke! will you never be convinced?"

"Perhaps so," nodded Frank, as he examined the ground.

"What are you looking for?"

"Her trail."

"If you were an Indian, you might find it; but no white man could find it here, as the ground is not favorable."

"I think that is right," admitted Frank, as he gave over the attempt. "If you saw such a girl, I have a fancy I know who she is."

Harry started up, shouting:

"You do?"

"Sure."

"Then you saw her when you visited the lake before?"

"No."

"How is it that you are sure you know who she is if you never saw her before?"

"You are little numb just now, Harry, or you would have thought of it yourself. She must be the buried heiress."

Rattleton caught his breath.

"Right you are!" he exclaimed. "Why, it must be her!"

"It strikes me that way," nodded Frank.

"By Jove!" palpitated Harry; "she is a peafect perch—I mean a perfect peach! Merry, old chap, she takes the bun!"

Frank laughed.

"It's not often you get this way, Rattles," he said. "She must have hit you hard."

"Right where I live, old man. I'd like to win her."

"But you must not forget she is an heiress."

"Oh, come off! That doesn't cut any ice in this case. She was dressed like anything but an heiress, and——"

"You know why. She is living like anything except an heiress, and still she is one, just as hard."

"And that infernal dwarf is here searching for her!"

"Sure."

"We supposed he had gone East, with Bernard Belmont."

"Yes."

"Instead of that, Belmont sent him here to find the girl."

"Correct me, noble dook."

Harry started up, in great excitement.

"We must defend her, Frank—we must protect her from that wretched creature!" he cried. "I am ready."

"I see you are," smiled Merry. "The thought that she might be in danger has aroused you more than any amount of tonics. We can't protect her unless we can find her."

"And you said a short time ago that we would not fail to find her."

"We will not, and I hope we may be able to find her in time to be of assistance to her. To begin with, we must get our bicycles out of the lake. It is a fortunate thing they fell in the water."

"Fortunate?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It is pretty certain the dwarf would have smashed them if they had not."

"That's right. I never thought of it. He would have had a fine opportunity. It is fortunate."

"We can remove our clothes and hang them in the sunshine to dry while we are getting the wheels."

A look of horror came to Harry's face.

"No, no!" he cried, wildly. "We can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"The girl—she is somewhere near here. What if she should see us? Good gracious; it hakes my mart—I mean it makes my heart stand still to think of it!"

Harry's expression of horror and the way in which he uttered the words caused Frank to shout with laughter.

"Oh, my dear fellow!" he cried; "if you could do that on the stage! It would be great! You'd make a great hit!"

For once in his life Harry failed to see the humorous side of a thing, and he did not crack a smile.

"What's the use to 'ha-ha' that way, Merry?" he cried, "You wouldn't want a thing of that kind to happen, and you know it."

"Of course not, old man, so we'll have to keep on part of our clothing while we are recovering the wheels."

They approached the edge of the bluff, and, as they did so, a canoe shot out from the mouth of a small cove nearly half a mile away.

There was a single person in the canoe and, immediately on seeing her, Harry cried:

"There she is—that is the girl!"

It was a girl, and she was handling the paddle with the skill of an expert, sending the light craft flying over the bosom of the lake.

"We must call to her!" exclaimed Harry. "She must stop!"

"We can't stop her by shouting to her, Rattles," declared Frank, quickly. "It would frighten her, that's all."

"But—but what can we do?"

"Unless we can find a boat, absolutely nothing."

Rattleton was desperate.

"It's terrible, Frank!" he cried. "We may lose the only chance of finding her! At least, she should be warned!"

"Look!" directed Merriwell, who was watching the girl closely. "She is looking back! See her use the paddle now! She is alarmed! She makes the canoe fly! She makes it spin along at great leaps! Surely something has frightened her! What is it?"

Harry's excitement grew.

"It's something, that's sure. She is using all her strength! How beautifully she handles the paddle! See the sunshine strike her hair! It is like gold! And now—look! look!"

Around a point just beyond the cove came a boat in which two men were seated. Both men were paddling, but the boat was heavy, and they were not gaining on the fleeing girl.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Frank. "It is Apollo, the dwarf!"

"Yes; and the other—the other is——"

"Bernard Belmont!"

"Then he is here—he did not go East at all. That was a blind."

"Sure enough. They are here to find the girl."

"To put her out of the way, perhaps!"

"It would be like that man. If he gets hold of her, some terrible accident is likely to happen to Mildred Morris. But they are not gaining; she is keeping the lead with ease."

"Yes," nodded Frank, satisfaction on his face; "she will not be taken."

The boys watched the race with great interest, seeing the girl draw farther and farther from her pursuers, till, at last, they gave over the attempt in disgust, although they still paddled along after her.

She headed for a distant shore, and Frank and Harry did not cease to watch till both boats had disappeared in the shadow of the mountains and timber.

"There," said Merriwell—"over there somewhere must be the present home of that girl. It is a wild region, for I was there once myself, and I know. We will go there and see what we can find."

"But we must recover our wheels first."

"That is right; and now we can remove our clothes to do so, without fear of being seen. Come on."

It was no simple task to get the bicycles out of the lake, but the thought of the girl's possible danger seemed to have restored Harry's strength, and, between them, they succeeded, after many efforts, in accomplishing their object.

In the meantime their clothes, which had been hung where sun and wind would reach them, had partly dried.

"We can't wait for them to get entirely dry," said Frank. "We'll put them on just as they are. Nobody ever gets cold around Lake Tahoe at this time of year."

Harry did not object, but the garments were just wet enough so it was not an easy thing to get into them. This, however, was done, after a severe struggle and a small amount of startling and highly picturesque language from Rattleton.

"Woo!" said Harry. "If we had a fine road, we could get on our bikes and send them spinning at such speed that the breeze would soon dry us; but now—how do you propose to get over across this part of the lake, anyhow?"

"Well," said Frank, "you heard me speak of Big Gabe?"

"Of course."

"His cabin was not far from here."

"What of that?"

"He owned a sailboat."

"Wheejiz—no, jeewhiz! that's the stuff! That's what we want!"

"I rather thought so. With the aid of a sailboat we can get across the lake easily."

"Let's look for Mr. Big Gabe without delay."

Frank took the lead, and they went in search of the big hermit, trundling their wheels or carrying them, as was necessary.

The modern bicycle is so light, although it is strong and stanch, that it may be carried almost anywhere, and so the task of taking the wheels along was not as difficult as it might have been.

Within half an hour they came in sight of Big Gabe's hut, which lay on the shore of the little cove out of which the girl had sped in the light canoe.

"It was from this very spot that I first saw that building," said Frank. "I'll never forget it. Bart Hodge was with me. When we drew nearer, Big Gabe himself came out and threatened to shoot us, thinking we were trying to steal his boat, or something of that sort."

"Where is the boat now?"

"There it is, down where the tree overhangs the lake. See?"

They could see the single mast and stern of the boat.

"Good luck!" cried Rattleton. "With the aid of that, we won't do a thing but make a lively cruise across the lake, for the wind is rising, and we'll have a fair breeze."

Frank was looking steadily toward the hut, and there was something like a frown on his face, which his companion observed.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked.

"The hut looks deserted. The first time I saw it smoke was coming out of the chimney. Now the chimney is giving forth no smoke, and the door stands open. It doesn't look as if any one had been around the place for a year."

"That's right," admitted Harry, anxiously. "But the boat is there."

"It may be in bad condition, else why didn't Belmont and the dwarf take it?"

"There was no breeze a short time ago, and they could not have sailed it across the lake. Besides, they were in pursuit of the girl in the canoe, and they hoped to overtake her with the aid of a boat they could row or paddle."

"Your reasoning is all right, my boy. We will hope the sailboat is all right, too. Come on."

CHAPTER XIV.—THE HERMIT'S POWER.

Around the shore of the cove the two boys went toward the hut. As they approached it Frank placed his hands to his mouth in the form of a horn, and shouted:

"Oh, Gabe! Oh, Mr. Blake!"

His voice came back in a distinct echo from a distant rocky steep, but that was all the answer he received. The rising breeze stirred the open door, seeming to wave it at the boys in derision, but the air of loneliness about the place was

oppressive.

"There's no one about," said Frank.

"Not a soul," agreed Harry.

They reached the cabin and looked in. It had not been occupied for two months, at least.

"Big Gabe is dead or gone," said Merriwell, with sincere regret. "I hoped to find him here."

"Well, let's see if his boat is all right," came anxiously from Rattleton. "That is what we want to know most."

Leaving their wheels leaning against a tree, they hastened to the spot where the boat lay moored at a short distance from the shore.

"We'll have to swim to get it," said Frank. "It is plain that other boat in which we saw Belmont and the dwarf was used by Gabe to get from the shore to the sailboat."

Frank stripped off quickly and plunged into the lake, although the water was cold, as he well knew from recent experience.

Out to the boat he swam, came up by her stern, and got in without difficulty, which was a very neat thing to do, as the average boy would have tried to crawl in over the side, with the probable result of upsetting the boat.

"How's she look, Merry?" called Harry, anxiously.

"O. K.," answered Frank. "There's some water in her, but it is a small amount, and the sails are well reefed. They may be somewhat rotten, but we'll be careful of them."

"How are we to get our wheels on board?"

Frank stood up and surveyed the bottom, which he could do with ease, because of the unruffled surface of the cove, as the wind did not touch it there.

"There's a channel leading up to that large rock," he said. "I'll bring the boat up there."

"Look out to not get her aground so she can't be brought off," warned Harry. "That would be a scrape."

"I'll look out."

Frank did not find it difficult to get up the anchor, and then, with the aid of a long oar, he guided the boat to the rock.

In the meantime, Harry had hastened to bring the bicycles down to the cove, and they were all ready to be taken on board. This was accomplished, and Harry followed them.

"Now away, away," he cried. "We'll set our course for yonder shore."

"Of course," punned Frank, and Rattleton made a grimace.

"Bad—very bad," he said. "That habit has been the cause of more sudden deaths than anything else of which I know."

Frank laughed, and they pushed the boat from the great rock.

Rattleton set about unfurling the sails and getting them ready for hoisting.

"Are you a sailor, Merry?" he asked, as if struck by a new thought.

"Am I?" cried Frank. "Ha! ha! also ho! ho! Wait a wee, and you shall see what you shall see."

"Then you have been to sea?"

Frank gave the other boy a look of reproach.

"And you had the nerve to do that after saying what you did about the bad pun I made a short time ago!" he cried. "Rattleton, your crust is something awful!"

They made preparations for running up the sail, saw that the tiller was all right and the rudder worked properly, and looked after other things. The bicycles were in the way, but that could not be helped.

Harry aided Frank in setting the sail, and, with the aid of the oar, the boat was worked out to a point where they could feel the breeze.

"By Jove! this is rather jolly," commented Rattleton, as they began to make headway. "With a fair wind, we'll run over there in a short time, and then—then if we can find that girl!"

"My boy, your face is aglow with rapture at the thought," smiled Frank. "You have been hit a genuine heart blow. Look out that it doesn't knock you out."

Away they went, making fair speed, although the boat was decidedly crude and cumbersome.

The mountainous region beyond the lake was wild and picturesque, but, fortunately, the boys found a cut that led down to the very shore of the lake.

They reached a spot where they could run up close to the shore, which enabled them to take their bicycles off without trouble.

The boat was made fast, the sails having been reefed once more, and then the lads deliberately mounted their wheels and attempted to ride into the cut.

This was not so difficult as might be thought, for they found what seemed to be an antelope "run" that led from the shore, and they pedaled along that path.

"It was somewhere in this region that we found the retreat of the gang of money makers when I was here before," said Frank.

"What's that? A gang that made money?"

"Yes."

"I suppose they had some kind of an old hut hereabouts in which they did the work?"

"They had a cave—a most wonderful cave it was said to be. That cave had never been fully explored, and—— By Jove!"

Frank interrupted himself with the exclamation, a strange look having come to his face.

"What is it?" asked Harry.

"I have an idea."

"Put us on."

"That cave, my boy—that cave!"

"What about it?"

"It is said that Carter Morris, the queer old miner, lives in some sort of an underground place."

"That's right!" cried Rattleton, catching Frank's meaning, and growing excited.

"He has some sort of mysterious mine."

"Sure, old man!"

"And he wrote Bernard Belmont that Mildred Morris was buried from the sight of the world."

"Now, you believe——"

"I do—I believe it possible that man may be occupying the very cave once occupied by the counterfeiters."

Rattleton was following Frank along the path, and he nearly ran Merriwell down in his excitement.

"You know the way to that cave?" he shouted. "You can find it?"

"I might be able to do so, although I am not sure of it. I can try. Even if we find the cave, we may not find the man and girl there."

"It is a chance, anyway. It's the best we can do."

After they had proceeded into the mountains some distance, Frank began to look for a slope they could scale, so they might get out of the pass.

It was finally found, and, with their wheels on their backs, they labored to the top. Getting down on the other side was even more difficult, but they succeeded.

Then Frank led Harry a wild chase, till Rattleton was pretty well played out. His head had ceased to bleed, and he had removed the handkerchief, but he could feel that the blow had taken not a little of the stamina out of him.

"How long are you going to keep this up, Merry?" he asked.

"We must be somewhere near that cave," declared Frank. "It is getting toward night. I hoped to be fortunate and find it before dark."

"If we don't——"

"There's another day coming. We have hard bread and smoked beef in the carriers, and we can find water here. We're not nearly as bad off as we were on the Utah desert."

"That's right. That was a bad fix, but we pulled out of it all right. If our clothes were somewhat drier I could regard the approach of night with greater complaisance."

"Our clothes are nearly dry, and they will be much more so in two hours."

They continued the restless search, Frank seeming utterly tireless. Rattleton admired him for his resistless energy and unwavering determination and confidence.

Fortune must have smiled on them, for, as they were making their way along a narrow cut, they turned a short corner and beheld the dark mouth of a cave just ahead of them.

Both lads stopped and stood beside their wheels, uttering exclamations of satisfaction.

"Is that it, Frank?" asked Harry.

"It may be one of the entrances to the old cave of the counterfeiter," answered Merry. "That cave has several mouths. This is not the one I saw, but——"

"It is a cave, and it may be the one we are searching for. Come on!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Go in."

"We can't go in without torches."

"That's right—dead right! Was so excited I didn't think of that. But—hooray!—we have found it!"

"Don't be so sure yet. We'll go up and look in."

They approached the mouth of the cave.

Suddenly, as they came near, there was a roar from within, and out of the cave rushed a man whose long hair and beard were white, and whose clothes were rude and worn.

The boys halted in amazement, staring at this man, who also stopped.

Frank spoke to Harry:

"It must be Carter Morris!"

"It is!" cried the old man, whose ears had caught the words. "How do you know me? What right have you to know my name? I am buried—buried from the world!"

"Crazy as a bedbug!" whispered Rattleton.

"Oh, crazy, am I!" sneered the man, much to Harry's astonishment, for it had not seemed possible he could hear that whisper. "That's what they think—the fools!"

Rattleton clutched Frank's wrist.

"Look," he panted; "she is coming! There she is!"

Out of the darkness within the mouth of the cave advanced the strange girl they had seen in the canoe. She was hatless, and she looked marvelously pretty with her golden hair hanging about her ears and reaching down upon her shoulders.

"Well, she is a fairy!" admitted Merriwell. "If you win that, you'll be a lucky lad, Rattles."

"Ha! ha! ha!" harshly laughed the man, without a trace of mirth in face or voice. "That is all they think of, the fools! That is what brings them here! They know you are rich, my dear—they know it! And they seek to win you! But you are dead to the world—dead and buried!"

"Mr. Morris," said Frank, speaking quietly, "we have a message for the young lady."

"Bah!" cried the man.

"It is from her brother," said Frank.

"Bah!" repeated the hermit.

But the girl started forward, crying:

"My brother—what do you know of him?"

The man put out his hand and held her back.

"It is a trick," he declared—"a shallow trick! They think to fool you that way. Don't listen to them, child! Let me talk to them."

Then he turned on the boys, his face dark with anger.

"Go away from here!" he cried. "Every moment you remain here your lives are in danger! If you care to live, go away at once!"

The girl looked frightened.

"We can't go away till we have delivered our message," said Frank, calmly, as he started forward.

"Back!" cried the strange old man, flinging out his hand with a warning gesture. "It means death if you advance another step!"

The girl looked more frightened than ever, and the boys halted again.

"The old pirate!" whispered Harry. "We must save her from him somehow, Frank! I know he is detaining her against her will."

Again that harsh, mirthless laugh.

"You know a great deal," sneered the man; "but you do not know enough to go away and save your lives! You do not know my power, but you shall feel it!"

The girl cried out and started to lift a hand. Then the man stepped to the right and touched the wall of stone.

To Frank and Harry it seemed that the mountains fell on them and beat them down with a great blow that stretched them helpless and senseless on the ground!

CHAPTER XV.—RECOVERY.

With a feeling of numbness and pain in every limb and every part of his body, Frank Merriwell stirred and tried to sit up. His strength seemed to be gone, and he wondered at his weakness.

"What—what does it mean?" he asked himself, puzzled.

There was a cloud on his brain, and, for the time, he did not remember what had happened. He realized he was lying on the ground, and he wondered if he had been there long.

After a time he turned his head a bit, and close beside him he saw Harry Rattleton, stretched on his back, his arms outspread, his face ghastly pale.

A chill of horror seized upon Merriwell's heart.

Why didn't Harry move? Why were his eyes closed? Why was his face so white?

There was something horrible and awe-inspiring about those rigid limbs and that ghastly face.

"He is dead!"

He succeeded in speaking the words aloud, although his voice was weak and faint. The sound startled him, and, with a mighty effort, he lifted himself to one elbow.

"Harry!" he panted, thickly—"Harry, wake up!"

Still no stir.

"Harry, Harry, are you asleep?"

Rattleton remained motionless.

Holding himself thus, Frank watched, but he could not see that the bosom of his friend rose and fell at all—he could not see that Harry breathed.

Surely that pallid face was not the face of a living person! It had the stamp of death upon it!

"Merciful goodness!" whispered Frank, as he dragged himself nearer. "I know—I am sure some frightful thing has happened to us! But I do not seem to remember."

He paused and stared about. Sunset light was on the snow-capped peaks of the Sierras, and away up there they were dazzling to the eye; but there were deep shadows below—black shadows in the heart of Frank Merriwell.

"The mountains!" he faintly murmured—"they are all around us! This is not the desert—no, no! We were not overcome by hunger and thirst. Something—something else struck us down!"

He lifted one hand to his head, which was so numb and felt so lifeless. What was the trouble?

Concentrating all his faculties, he forced himself to think. Then he seemed to remember.

"The girl!" he faintly exclaimed—"we were searching for her! We were trying to find the cave, and—we found it!"

He remembered at last. He remembered the appearance of the old man of the white hair and beard; he remembered that the girl had come forth from the mouth of the cave; he remembered the warning of the strange man and the frightful shock that had followed.

"Jingoes!" he said. "I believe we were struck by lightning! I'm not completely knocked out, but Harry seems to be."

Then he reached Rattleton and touched his face, felt for his pulse, sought to discover if his heart beat.

Close to the breast of his friend Frank placed his ear, and what he heard caused him to utter a cry of satisfaction.

"Not dead!" he exclaimed. "He still lives! There is a chance for him."

The thought that Harry's life might depend on his efforts aroused him still more. He loosened Harry's sweater and the collar about his throat, he chafed his wrists and temples, he fanned him, called to him, sought in many ways to arouse him.

At last he saw signs of success. Rattleton's breast rose and fell, and he gave a great sigh.

"That's right, old man!" cried Frank, with satisfaction. "Just open your peepers and let us know you are recovering."

Harry opened his eyes.

"Where—what—why——"

He seemed unable to ask the questions that sought for utterance.

"I was thinking the same things a few moments ago," said Frank. "We were knocked out in the first round with the old hermit."

"Hermit—what hermit?"

"That's it," nodded Merry. "You're as bad off as I was. Why, Carter Morris, the uncle of the girl with the golden hair, who has hit you so hard."

A light of understanding came to Harry's face, and he revived with wonderful swiftness.

"I remember it all now!" he faintly exclaimed. "But I do not know what happened to us. It seemed to me that something struck me."

"Something did."

"What was it?"

"I don't know, but something knocked us both out. You remember that the old man warned us not to advance another step—said it would mean instant death if we did."

"Yes; but I thought the old duffer was bluffing."

"So did I. I have since decided that he wasn't."

"You think he gave us the knock-out?"

"I do."

"How could he?"

"Some way. He has some mysterious power, with the aid of which he guards the mouth of that cave."

"And that power must be——"

"Electricity!"

"It's a dead-sure thing!" cried Harry. "We were given an electric shock. When the man touched the wall with his hand, he turned on the current."

"I believe it."

"But how did the shock reach us?"

"Don't know. I saw no wires."

"Nor I."

"There must have been wires."

"I presume so."

"Well, where are we now?"

They looked around, but there was nothing about their surroundings that they remembered having seen before.

"We are not in front of the cave," said Frank.

"No, we are not where we fell, that is sure."

"We must have been removed to this spot."

"Sure."

"The bicycles—where are they?"

With no small difficulty they got upon their feet, and then they saw their wheels leaning against the face of a black rock near by.

At first their legs seemed scarcely able to support their weight, but they grew stronger as the moments passed, and they approached the wheels.

Then it was they saw something drawn with white chalk on the smooth surface of the black rock.

It was the representation of a human hand, with the index finger pointing in a certain direction.

Beneath the hand were these words:

"THIS WAY—GO!"

"It is a warning!" cried Frank.

"You boot your bets—I mean bet your boots! It tells us to git."

"Well?"

With that word Frank turned on Harry sharply.

"You may go if you want to," said Rattleton; "but I never knew you to run away. You are not easily scared."

"How about you?"

"I am here to find that girl, and I am going to stay till I find her or croak! That's how about me!"

"Good stuff!" cried Merry, approvingly, as he grasped the hand of his comrade. "We'll both stay till we find her."

In a short time the boys began to feel like themselves once more. Taking their wheels along, they sought for a spring, and were able to find one.

There they stopped and made a meal from the hard bread and jerked beef, which was washed down with clear water from the spring.

"Now I am all right," Harry declared. "A feed was what I needed."

They discussed matters a few minutes, and then, carefully observing the surroundings, decided to conceal the bicycles in the vicinity of the spring and seek for the mouth of the cave once more.

They found a good hiding place for the wheels, and there the machines were stowed away.

"We can't be so awfully far from that cave," Frank decided. "One man and a girl would not be able to bring us a long distance."

But the cave was not easy to find, and the more they searched the more bewildered they became.

Meanwhile night was coming on swiftly.

"Hist!" warned Harry, suddenly grasping Frank's wrist and drawing him down behind some bowlders. "Look there!"

"What is it?"

"Moving figures! I saw them distinctly over there."

"The man and the girl?"

"Couldn't tell. There they are again. Look!"

"I see! It is not the man and the girl. It is two men."

"That is right—or, at least, a man and something that resembles a man."

"It is Bernard Belmont and his gorilla man!"

"You are right, Merry, my boy; and they, too, are searching for the mouth of the cave. It will be a good scheme to watch them."

CHAPTER XVI.—LOST UNDERGROUND.

The boys followed Belmont and Apollo, being aided in doing so without danger of discovery by the gathering darkness; but they knew very well that, in a short time it would become so dark that they might lose track of the two.

Apollo seemed to be guiding his master to some spot, and they clambered over the rocks with haste that indicated a desire to reach the place without delay.

At last the dwarf paused and swept aside some matted vines from the face of what seemed to be a cliff of solid stone.

A black opening, large enough to admit a man in a stooping posture, was revealed.

Apollo urged Belmont to follow, and then they disappeared beyond the vines, which fell down and hid the opening again.

"It's a cave, Merry!" whispered Rattleton.

"Yes," nodded Frank; "it may be one of the many entrances to the great cavern of the 'queer' makers. This may lead into the cave occupied by Carter Morris!"

"Then let's get in there quick!" exclaimed Harry, eagerly. "If we don't, we may lose track of those men."

"We must use something like caution, my boy. If we were to rush in after them, it might do us up, for they may be laying for us."

So the mouth of the cave was approached with caution.

When they had reached it, Frank listened.

From a distance inside he could hear voices, and, peering through the vines, he caught the glimmer of a light.

"Come in quickly after me, Harry," he directed. "Be ready to fight for your life if attacked."

Rattleton's heart was in his throat, and he felt that they were plunging into unknown and terrible danger, but he said:

"Go ahead. I am with you to the end."

Gently and swiftly Frank made the opening in the vines larger, and then he quickly stepped through, holding them aside for his friend to follow.

The vines fell back into place, and the lad crouched close to the ground.

"There," said Frank, "see that light? It is not a torch."

"No. It seems to be some sort of lamp."

"It is a miner's lamp. Look—another is being lighted."

A match flared up, and its bright glow revealed the pale and terrible face of the gorilla man, who was lighting the lamp.

The lamps were arranged to be placed in the hats of those who carried them, and this was what the two men did with them.

When everything was arranged to their satisfaction, Belmont and the dwarf started onward into the cave.

"We'll follow them, Harry," said Frank.

The light from the lamps made it a comparatively easy task for the boys to accomplish their purpose.

Deeper and deeper into the great cave went the two men. Once or twice they stopped and listened. Once the boys distinctly heard Apollo say:

"Master, I think I heard a step."

"Nonsense!" returned the man, sharply. "You heard nothing."

"I am sure I heard something," the dwarf insisted.

"Then it was a rat, or, if there are no rats here, it was a piece of falling stone."

"It may have been," acknowledged Apollo.

Onward they went.

Frank and Harry had stopped and were listening. Harry's hands grasped Merriwell's arm, and he was filled with excitement. He drew a breath of relief when the men moved on.

"Jy bove—no, by Jove!" he gasped. "I thought the trick was up then!"

"Still!" cautioned Frank. "We must not alarm that dwarf too much. He has wonderfully keen ears."

The passage, in places, broadened into great chambers, while in other places it narrowed till they were forced to make their way along one at a time.

"If we lose sight of those lights we may have some trouble getting out," whispered Harry.

"That's so," confessed Merriwell. "I have seen other passages besides the one taken by them."

The thought of being lost underground in that great cave was enough to turn them cold with fear.

And then, without the least warning, the lights in advance suddenly vanished.

"Down!" whispered Merriwell. "I believe they have discovered we are after them. Close to the ground and listen!"

Down they crouched, their hearts beating riotously in their bosoms.

Not a sound seemed to break the deathlike stillness of the cave.

"What's happened?" whispered Harry. "Where have they gone?"

"Give it up," answered Frank. "They have disappeared, but that is as much as I know."

"Perhaps they are laying for us."

But, although they waited a long time, not a sound could they hear save those sounds made by themselves.

"I am going ahead," declared Merriwell.

"We may run into them."

"Got to chance it, old man. That might be better than to have them run away from us. Come on."

"I'm with you."

Keeping close together, they crept forward slowly, not knowing but they might be attacked at any moment.

Of a sudden, Frank gave a gasp and cry. Harry tried to grasp his companion, and then he found himself slipping, sliding, falling.

Down they went, getting hold of each other, but being unable to stop their descent. It was impossible to see anything there in that frightful darkness, and that made their peril seem awful indeed.

Fortunately their fall was not always direct. There were times when they seemed to be sliding down a steep slope, while dust filled their eyes and mouths, and they were bruised and scratched and robbed of breath.

Finally, when it had seemed they would never cease falling, they stopped with a great thump and lay panting side by side.

"Great humping misery!" gasped Rattleton, weakly. "Are we diving or are we lead—I mean are we living or are we dead?"

"We seem to be living," said Frank, "but we might be better off if we were dead. I think we are in a bad scrape."

"What happened to us, anyway?"

"We fell."

"Or were we pushed?"

"There was no pushing about it. We took the tumble ourselves."

"You don't suppose the chaps we were following fell down here ahead of us?"

"No."

"Then what could have become of them?"

"They must have turned off into a side passage we did not see. That is the only way I can explain it."

"Well, we may not be able to get out of this."

"We'll have to get out."

"What if we can't?"

"We mustn't think of that."

"All right; but I can't help it."

They sat up and felt of themselves, finding no bones were broken, although they had been bruised somewhat.

Harry was about to get on his feet, but Frank would not allow that till he had lighted a match, as there was danger of taking another mad tumble.

Frank always carried matches in a watertight case, and he produced and struck one. By the aid of the tiny blaze they first satisfied themselves that they were not on the brink of another descent, and there was no immediate danger of

falling again. Then they tried to look around.

“Murder!” gasped Harry. “We are in it—bad!”

Frank felt that Rattleton was right; without doubt they were in a very bad scrape. But it was Merry’s policy to keep up his courage and put on a front, so he joked and laughed as if it were a matter to be made light of.

“I don’t know how you do it, old man,” said Harry, gloomily; “but I can’t laugh while we are in this sort of a hole.”

“We’ve both been in bad scrapes before. Keep a stiff upper lip. We’ll pull out all right. First, we must see if we can scale this place where we fell.”

Another match was lighted, and they made an examination. It was not long before they were convinced that it was utterly useless to think of trying to get out that way.

“Can’t be done!” groaned Harry.

“Not that way,” admitted Frank. “But we’ll find a way.”

“We came here to find the buried heiress, and now we are buried ourselves. That’s what I call hard lines.”

With the aid of their matches, they made their way along slowly, both fearing they might take another fall, and that it might be fatal.

“Perhaps it would be the best thing that could happen to us,” said Rattleton, dolefully. “It would be a great deal better than starving down here underground.”

Frank said nothing. He saw their matches were running out, and the thought of being left there in the darkness of that great cavern, with no means of procuring a light of any sort, was overcoming him and making it impossible for him to assume an air of carelessness and merry spirits.

Finally, when there were but a few matches left, Frank said:

“We’ll have to feel our way along and take chances, Harry. I am not going to use up all these matches, for there is no telling how valuable they may be later on.”

So, clinging to each other, they crept along inch by inch, lost in the Stygian darkness of the great cavern of the Sierras.

CHAPTER XVII.—BROTHER AND SISTER.

“There’s a light ahead, Harry!”

Frank uttered the words in an excited whisper, after they had been groping their way through the darkness of the great cavern for what seemed to be many hours.

Rattleton was greatly agitated.

“It is a light, sure!” he panted. “Frank, we’re all right at last!”

For some time they had heard a strange puffing sound that seemed smothered and far away, like the panting breathing of some subterranean monster. This was accompanied by a singular buzzing roar that sounded very uncanny.

“What is it?” asked Rattleton, in awe—“what can it be?”

“Give it up,” confessed Frank. “Let’s find out. Come on.”

They moved toward the light, and soon they found themselves looking down into a round chamber of the great cavern from a height of many feet.

What they saw filled them with inexpressible astonishment.

The place was lighted with electric lamps, and down there in the chamber was a steam engine and a small electric dynamo.

The engine was running steadily, and the dynamo hummed with a sound about which there now was nothing uncanny.

Near the engine, watching it with interest, was the girl of the golden hair.

Harry clutched Frank’s arm.

“There she is!” he panted. “We have found her at last!”

They stood in silence for several moments, watching the girl, who looked very pretty beneath the light of the electric lamps.

Suddenly a cry came from Harry, and he clutched Merriwell’s arm with quivering fingers, pointing with his other hand.

“Look! look!” he exclaimed. “The dwarf—there he is!”

Sure enough, the crouching figure of Apollo was seen emerging from the darkness of a black opening and advancing toward the girl with swift, catlike steps.

The girl had heard Harry's exclamation, and, startled, she looked up toward where the boys were standing.

Then the dwarf rushed upon her and clutched her with his iron hands.

A scream of terror came from the lips of the frightened girl, and rang in weird echoes through the cave.

The hand of Apollo was pressed over her mouth.

But that scream had been heard, and there was an answering shout from not very far away.

The girl struggled, but the dwarf dragged her along toward the dark opening.

"How can we get down there, Frank? We must take a hand! How can we do it? It is too far to jump!"

Rattleton was frantic.

Frank was looking for some way of getting down into the chamber.

Before either of them could discover a means of going to the assistance of the girl, Carter Morris, the strange old hermit, rushed into the cavern.

Morris sprang to the aid of the girl, but it seemed Bernard Belmont had been waiting for such a thing to happen, for he leaped out of the darkness and grappled with the hermit.

Then a savage battle took place before the eyes of the boys.

"Furies!" roared the man of the cave, writhing to break the grasp of his assailant. "Who are you?"

The girl got her mouth free from Apollo's hand and screamed:

"It is my stepfather—it is Bernard Belmont!"

It seemed that those words filled the hermit with a mad frenzy. He struggled furiously, and Belmont was forced to exert all his strength to prevent himself from being overcome, although he was the assailant.

"We must go to the rescue, Frank—we must!" palpitated Rattleton.

The boys were determined to find a way of getting down into the round chamber, and Frank fancied he saw a manner of descending. It would be necessary to drop at least fifteen feet, but he started to make the attempt and Harry followed.

The battle between Belmont and Carter Morris continued with great fury, and Morris seemed to become perfectly mad with rage when he was unable to overcome his assailant.

Bit by bit the hermit dragged the man toward the buzzing dynamo, his eyes glowing with an awful purpose.

Suddenly he tried to hurl Belmont upon the dynamo.

Belmont realized the intention of the man, and a scream of fear escaped him.

A moment later both men went down upon the machine!

A second they seemed to cling there, and then they were flung off, falling upon the rocky floor of the cavern and lying still, holding fast to each other in death!

The girl screamed, and the dwarf seemed overcome with sudden fear. He stared at the contorted face of his dead master, seeming unable to realize what had happened in the twinkling of an eye.

Down from the heights above dropped two boys.

"Give it to him, Frank!" screamed Harry.

They rushed at the dwarf, but, for once in his life, at least, Apollo was mastered by terror, for, with a shout of dismay, he released the girl and fled, disappearing in a hopping, bounding manner into the darkness.

Rattleton caught the half-fainting girl in his arms, crying:

"Hurrah, Merry, we have found her, and we've saved her!"

But she had fainted.

When another morning dawned the two boys and the girl left the great cave and started for Carson City.

Already had Mildred explained to them how it happened that the steam engine and the dynamo were found in the cavern. The miners who had occupied that retreat years before had discovered a valuable vein of ore, and they had devised a scheme of mining with the aid of electricity. The engine was brought there to run the dynamo. As a certain portion of the cave yielded coal in liberal quantities, it was not difficult to find fuel for the engine.

Carter Morris, being somewhat of an electrician, had put the abandoned machinery in running order when he took possession of the cave.

It had been his intention to protect himself from intruders by the aid of electric currents, and he had given Frank and Harry a frightful shock at the mouth of the cavern by means of hidden wires.

The electric current had caused his death when he fell upon the dynamo in struggling with Bernard Belmont.

The graves of both men were made in the cave, and Little Milly shed tears over the body of her mad uncle, who had sought to befriend her by "burying" her.

The hidden bicycles were found, and the sailboat was discovered where the boys had left it.

After setting sail to cross the lake, Frank touched Harry's arm and pointed to an object that was floating in the water, at the same time pressing a finger to his lips and shaking his head, with a look toward Milly.

Harry looked and started, for he saw the ghastly, upturned face of Apollo, the dwarf, the scar on his cheek having turned a purplish blue.

The girl did not see this object, and the boys believed it far better to leave the dwarf than to horrify her by letting her see the body.

Carson was reached without further adventure, and there a joyous surprise awaited Mildred Morris.

Jack Diamond met the little party outside the hotel.

"Where are Toots and Bruce?" asked Frank, in a low voice.

"Standing guard, as you directed," said Jack. "We have taken turns since you went away, and he has not been left alone a moment."

"How is he?"

"Better—much better. The doctor says he thinks he'll come around all right."

Then Frank and Harry accompanied Milly to a certain room of the hotel. Browning and the colored boy were called out of the room, and Merriwell said to the girl:

"Go in, Miss Morris. There's some one in there who will be glad to see you."

He held the door open, and urged her gently into the room.

A moment later there was a cry of joy—two cries—a rush. Then, peering in at the door for a moment, the delighted lads saw Milly spring toward the bed and clasp her living brother in her arms.

Frank closed the door.

Immediately Toots danced a wild cancan of delight.

"Golly sakes teh goodness!" he chuckled. "Dat gal sho' am a peach. I'd jes' lek teh take dat sick boy's place 'bout five minutes. Yah! yah! yah! Oh, mommer!"

The boy whom Mildred had rushed to meet was her brother, George, who was not dead, but had fainted at sight of his cruel stepfather and the dwarf. Belmont had thought the boy dead, and had left Carson without delay, much to the satisfaction of Frank Merriwell.

And now the doctor who was attending George said the boy had a fair show to recover.

"Say," observed Diamond, suddenly, "the buried heiress is out of sight! I think I will——"

"If you try it," spluttered Rattleton, menacingly, "I'll hake your bread—I mean I'll break your head! I saw her first, and I have first claim there!"

"Break away, there, you chumps," laughed Frank. "We have business first, you know. We must speed on toward California and bring this wonderful trip of ours to a successful finish. Onward is the cry."

That afternoon they bade farewell to George and Mildred, and rode away, sorry indeed at the parting.

CHAPTER XVIII.—OLD FRIENDS.

"We are a set of jolly, jolly lads,
As we ride—as we ride away!
You bet we're up to date, but are no cads,
As we ride—as we ride away!
We've crossed the plains and scaled the Rockies high,
And now hurrah! for 'Frisco's town is nigh;
We sing as toward that port we swiftly fly,

As we ride—as we ride away!”

Through a California forest of monster trees our five boys were riding, and they sang as they rode, their voices blending beautifully and making the old woods echo with sweet music.

To them it seemed that all the perils of the trip were past and San Francisco was in view, although in truth, it was more than two hundred miles away by the route they would be compelled to follow.

It was a perfect day, with the sun shining from a cloudless sky, as it always seems to shine in California. It was warm, but not too hot for comfort, and the road through the forest was fairly good, winding to the right and then to the left beneath the shadows of the great trees.

“If this road wasn’t so crooked, we wouldn’t have to travel so far,” groaned Browning, his manner being so dismal that the others broke into a shout of laughter.

“You shouldn’t kick about this road,” smiled Frank. “I’ve seen a road much more crooked than this.”

“It must have been pretty crooked.”

“It was so crooked that when you started to ride on it you’d meet yourself coming back.”

“Yow!” whooped Rattleton. “That’s the worst I ever heard! A man should be put behind bars for perpetrating anything like that.”

“I don’t think I’d like to be put behind bars,” confessed Merry.

“Huah!” grunted Bruce. “There are others. Why, I know fellows who want to be in front of bars all the time.”

“You mean they drink incessantly?”

“No, I mean they drink whiskey.”

“Yah! yah! yah!” shouted Toots, his shrill laugh awaking the echoes. “Nebber heard Mistah Brownin’ say nuffin’ funny as dat befo’! Dat teks de cake!”

“I wouldn’t mind taking a small cake,” said the big fellow. “This California air makes me hungry.”

“Land ob wartermillions! yo’s alwus hungry, Mistah Brownin’, sar. Yo’s been eatin’ all de way ‘crost de country.”

“That’s right,” was Browning’s confession. “And there was one strip of country where they didn’t seem to have anything to eat but corn beef and cabbage. I actually ate so much corn beef and cabbage that I was ashamed to look a cow in the face.”

“Well, we’ll soon be in San Francisco, the greatest city in all this Western land,” put in Frank. “There we can get almost any kind of feed we like. Why, I know a restaurant where we’ll be able to get ‘genuine Boston baked beans.’”

“You know a place?” questioned Diamond. “You know? Look here, Frank Merriwell, what is there you don’t know about? Have you been everywhere and seen everything?”

“Not by a long distance, but I have been in San Francisco.”

“Well, it seems to me that we never mention a place that you don’t know all about. You were perfectly familiar with Carson City.”

“Yes, I had been there before, and it is a place I shall not soon forget, for it was there I last saw my old chum of Fardale, Bart Hodge.”

“You have spoken of him often of late.”

“Yes; I have been thinking of him very much. It is natural, as I am near where I saw him last. Dear old fellow! How we fought in the old days when we first met! And, after that, what firm friends we became! Hodge had his failings, but he was white at heart. He would lay down his life for a friend. His parents were wealthy, and they had indulged him in everything he desired, till he was completely spoiled and they could do nothing with him. Fardale was noted as a place where just such fellows were taken and broken into the traces, and so his father sent him there. Hodge didn’t do a thing at first—oh, no! not a thing! He raised merry thunder, and he hated me with a virulent hatred. He tried to injure me in every way he could devise, but when I pulled him out of several bad scrapes, incidentally saving his life, he began to see that he was in the wrong. He had a fierce battle to overcome his natural inclination to do dirty things, but overcome it he did, and he became fairly popular in time, although no one knew him and understood him like myself. Between us there was a perfect understanding, and I could control him when he would not listen to reason from any other person.”

“I believe you were stuck on Hodge!” said Diamond, somewhat piqued.

“No more than I am on any of my true friends,” answered Frank.

“It seems you put yourself to lots of trouble with him.”

“I did; but I fancied there was the making of a fine man in him, and I felt that it was a shame to see a chap go to the dogs. Several times he came near being fired from Fardale, for they could do nothing with him. If he had been fired, his father would have forced him to hustle for himself. With a boy of Hodge’s nature that must have meant ruin, as he

would have fallen in with fast companions, would have required money, and would have obtained it by some means or other. If his companions had been crooked, Hodge, although his nature would have rebelled against anything dishonest, would have become crooked also. He told me that, and he said I was his good angel."

"Hang it, Merry!" spluttered Rattleton; "you've been a good angel for lots of us. It seems that every fellow who sticks by you gets on better than he ever did before."

"I'm a mascot," laughed Frank. "Follow me and you'll wear diamonds—or something else."

"There's no doubt about it," grunted Browning. "We'll be arrested if we don't. Can't go naked in this country."

"Yah!" cried Toots. "Don' yo' try so hard to say somefin' funny, Mistah Brownin', fo' dat is where yo' meks a mistook, sar. Yo' falls do'n on yo'se'f, an' yo' don' get funny at all."

"Thanks, my colored counsellor," murmured the big fellow. "You have a shocking habit of giving advice when it isn't asked. I wouldn't do it so much if I were you."

"Choke off, Toots," advised Frank.

"All right, sar—all right," muttered the colored boy; "but I knows what I knows—yes, sar. It done do some of de crowd good if dey took mah advice, sar."

The boys admired the trees and the weather, and they were supremely happy. All were hearty and healthy, with muscles as hard as iron and eyes clear as the eagle's.

Browning, although still stout and sturdy, had worked himself down to a hard, healthy condition, and was really a stunningly handsome fellow. There was about him a suggestion of great strength, and almost any man might have hesitated about facing him in anger.

As Merriwell was one who constantly kept himself in perfect condition, it cannot be said that he was looking better than when the party left New York, although he, like the others, was tanned by exposure to all sorts of weather.

As the party came around a bend of the road, they saw another young bicyclist, who was standing beside his wheel, somewhat uneasily regarding their approach.

"Hello!" exclaimed Diamond. "Here's a fellow traveler."

Frank took off his cap and waved it about his head, but the stranger did not answer the salute.

"Some way he doesn't seem at all pleased to see us," said Rattleton.

"It may be the way with Californians," said Diamond.

"Anyhow we'll stop and ask him a few questions," Merriwell said. "At least, he can't refuse to answer us, if we are civil."

So, as the boys came up, they slackened their speed and prepared to dismount. To their surprise the stranger made preparations to mount, as if he contemplated riding away if they stopped.

"He's going to run away," grunted Bruce, in disgust.

"Hold on," urged Merriwell, addressing the stranger. "We want to talk with you."

Then the boys sprang off their wheels.

To their surprise, the stranger suddenly held out his hand, almost shouting:

"It is Frank Merriwell, or my eyes can't see straight!"

"Bart Hodge, as I live!" cried Frank, grasping the outstretched hand.

CHAPTER XIX.—BART HODGE MAKES A CONFESSION.

It was Bart Hodge!

How they did shake hands! Strangely enough, neither of them laughed, but there was a look of joy on their faces that told of satisfaction and delight too great for laughter.

"Merriwell, old man," said Hodge, his voice unsteady with emotion, "I can scarcely believe it is true! It seems too good to be true!"

"Hodge!" exclaimed Frank, "there is fate in this. I was speaking of you not more than ten minutes ago."

"Speaking of me?"

"Sure."

"Then you had not forgotten me?"

"Forgotten you?" came reproachfully from Frank—"you should know I am not the kind of fellow to forget my friends."

"That's right," nodded Bart, quickly; "you always did stick to your friends through thick and thin."

"Yes, through thick and thin, old chum."

"But it is most astonishing to see you away out here in this part of the country. Where did you drop from?"

"Oh, we are on a little run across the country," smiled Merry. "We started from New York, and we're bound for San Francisco. Permit me to introduce my friends."

Then he presented the others of the party in turn, and Bart shook hands with them all, expressing his satisfaction at meeting them, but seeming rather reserved and uneasy. Frank observed that Hodge turned his head to glance down the road now and then as if expecting the appearance of some one or something.

"So you're Hart Bodge—I mean Bart Hodge?" said Harry, as he was introduced. "Well, I'm glad to know you. Merry has talked about you ever since I first met him at Yale. He has told everything about you."

"If that is true, I'm afraid you have not formed a very good opinion of me," said Hodge, somewhat gloomily.

"On the contrary, I have formed a very good opinion of you," assured Rattleton.

"Then it can't be Merry has told you everything."

Frank was not a little surprised by Bart's manner, for Hodge had been a fellow who could not easily suppress his self-conceit, and it had always been his desire to impress strangers with the idea that he was something quite out of the ordinary.

A vague feeling that something was wrong with Bart seized upon Merriwell.

"You're not well, old man," he said. "I know it. Don't say you are."

"Never was better in all my life."

"But something is the trouble—I can see that."

"Oh, no!" assured Bart; "you are mistaken, I assure you."

But, for all of these words, Frank was not satisfied, as Bart's manner had plainly betrayed the fact that he was trying to conceal something.

"Which way are you traveling?" Frank asked.

"East."

"Too bad! We are going the other way, and I hoped you'd go along."

"Oh, no! it is impossible," Hodge quickly asserted.

"Business important?"

"Well, it is—er—somewhat so."

"Where are you from last?"

"Oh, I've been traveling—yes, traveling," answered Bart, vaguely.

"Now, look here!" cried Merry, decisively; "you've got to travel with us, old man. I won't take no for an answer, for I believe you can do it. You'll turn about and go to San Francisco with us."

"That's right; come on," cried the others.

Bart shook his head.

"Can't do it—I can't. You don't know—I can't explain—now."

"Do you think this is using me just right?" asked Frank, reproachfully. "You'll find us a jolly crowd, and we'll have dead loads of sport. We've made a quick run across, and we can take our time going back. None of the fellows are obliged to hurry home. Come along with us, Bart, and we'll do you good."

Something like a smile flitted over Hodge's serious face.

"You are the same old Merriwell," he said. "It has done me good to see you a little while, Frank."

"It will do you more good to see me longer, and it'll do me good to have you come with me. Come along."

Bart wavered. It was plain enough that he longed to go, but, for some reason, he hesitated.

Frank passed an arm about Hodge's shoulders, saying, gently but firmly:

"You've got to do it; you can't get out of it, old chum."

A wave of feeling fled across Hodge's face, and there was something like a suspicious quiver of his sensitive chin.

"You do not understand," he slowly murmured. "I'd like to have a talk with you, Frank. I—I might tell you——"

"That's right," said Harry, heartily. "Old friends like you chaps want a chance to talk over old matters and things. Excuse us. We're going to find a chance to stretch our weary limbs on the ground. Browning has an attack of that tired feeling, and he will fall asleep in his tracks if he doesn't recline without delay."

"Huah!" grunted Bruce.

Then the boys withdrew, leaving Hodge and Merriwell together.

Bart seemed embarrassed and uneasy. He glanced at Frank slyly, as if in doubt, which Merry did not fail to note, although pretending not to observe it.

They sat down near the foot of a monster tree, against which they could lean in a comfortable position as they chatted. The great forest of redwood trees was all about them, and a Sabbath peace brooded over the gentle slope of the Sierras.

"Well, Bart," said Frank, insinuatingly, "I trust things are going well with you?"

A sudden change came over Hodge. A fierce look of rage came to his face and his eyes blazed, while his voice was harsh and unpleasant, as he cried:

"Things are not going well with me! Everything has gone wrong! Oh, I've had infernal luck! I know I was born under an unlucky star, and the only time I ever did get along was when you and I were together at Fardale."

"Then stick by me, and change your luck again."

"I'd like to do it, but you are going the wrong way."

"What's the odds? There is no reason why you should not turn back and——"

"There is a reason."

"Of course I do not know about that, but——"

"Listen, Frank; you remember Isa Isban?"

"Yes, and Vida Milburn, Isa's half-sister, with whom you were in love. I distinctly remember that Vida was a beautiful and charming girl."

Hodge's teeth ground together with a nerve-tingling, grating sound, and his face was set as stone, although his eyes still blazed.

"Yes, a beautiful girl—a charming girl!" he admitted, but with sarcasm that could not be mistaken.

"What's the matter? Where is Vida now?"

"I don't know, and I don't care a rap!"

"Oh, say! I think I tumble. It is a case of lovers' quarrel. Now, now, now! Don't be foolish, my boy! It will come out all right. You know true love persistently refuses to run smooth. You'll make it all up in time."

Hodge grinned, but there was nothing of mirth in the expression. It seemed to Frank as if some wild animal had shown its teeth.

"Oh, yes, it will come out all right!" he sneered. "We'll make it all up in time! It's too late, Merriwell."

"You think so, that's all."

"I know so. She's married!"

Frank gasped.

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Married? Why, she is a mere girl! And you—where do you come in?"

"I'm not in it, and I think I'm lucky. That's not worrying me."

"But how—how did it happen? Why did you throw her over? or why did she go back on you?"

"I'm not going to tell the whole story now, Frank; but the fact is that she lacked faith in me. I rather think I'm dead lucky to get out of it, for she was rather weak and fickle. You know her half-sister, Isa Isban, although stunningly handsome, is wild and reckless. She was married to a gambler and maker of crooked money."

"But he is dead—was shot, and Isa disappeared."

"Well, she has reappeared, but I'll tell you about that later. It's Vida I wish to tell you about now. You know Vida's old uncle and aunt never did have a high opinion of me."

"Not till they discovered that you were a brave and honorable fellow. Then they seemed to turn about and think you one of the finest chaps in the world."

"They got over it," Hodge sneered. "They came to think me anything but brave and honorable. They believed me a drunkard, a gambler and a thief!"

Frank was shocked, and he showed it.

"Impossible!" he cried. "How could they think such a thing of you? They had no reason to think so!"

Bart turned crimson till it extended all over his face and neck.

"You don't know, Merry," he muttered, positively showing shame. "I'm not like you—I make a bad break sometimes. It is hard for me to resist temptation, and—well, I was tempted, and I succumbed. That's all."

"Succumbed? What do you mean? I know your heart is right, old fellow, and you did not do anything wrong intentionally."

"Appearances were against me—I confess it. First—well, I was seen drunk. That is, I seemed to be drunk, but I swear to you that I had not taken but one drink, and that was not enough to knock out a ten-year-old boy. It was drugged, Frank—I know it!"

"Drugged? Who did such a villainous trick?"

"My enemy—a young fellow who loved Vida. He has a father who's got the rocks. He's older than I, and I thought him my friend. I met him at her home. His name is Hart Davis."

"The whelp! But did Vida see you?"

"Yes. I had been out with Davis that night. In the morning I was found on the steps of Vida's home, apparently dead drunk."

"How came you there?"

"I didn't know at the time. Since then—well, it is settled in my mind. Davis said I left him to go to the place where I was boarding in Carson City. He said I seemed to be all right when I left him, and so he let me go. He appeared very shocked to think such a misfortune had happened me: but—burn him!—I believe he gave me knock-out drops—I believe he carried me to that house—I believe he left me on the steps, where I was found!"

Frank's eyes were blazing now, and the look on his expressive face told how he felt toward Mr. Hart Davis.

"And did Vida throw you over for that?" he asked, in an indignant manner.

"Not entirely for that. She was very shocked and cold toward me, but when I was arrested——"

"Arrested?" gasped Frank. "Arrested for what?"

"For stealing a watch."

CHAPTER XX.—FRANK BECOMES ALARMED.

"For stealing?"

Frank's astonishment was so great that he found it difficult to utter the words.

"Yes," nodded Bart, gloomily, "for stealing a watch."

"But—but I know you never did such a——The man who would think such a thing ought to be shot!"

"The watch was found on my person," said Bart, slowly.

"Found on you, was it? I don't care! I know you didn't steal it. Nothing could make me believe that."

A gleam of satisfaction seemed to pierce the fierce look on Hodge's face, as a shaft of sunshine sometimes pierces a black and sullen cloud.

"You are right, Merriwell," he said; "I did not steal it. Give me your hand. Oh, it is good—so good to have some one in the world who has confidence in me! It has seemed of late that everybody was down on me."

He grasped Frank's hand, and pressed it warmly.

"You have been up against hard luck, old friend," came feelingly from Frank. "And the girl shook you quite after you were arrested?"

"Yes."

"Were you tried?"

"Yes."

"Convicted?"

"No."

"Still she threw you over?"

"She did."

"Well, you are dead lucky! Such a girl is not worth thinking about! Don't let that break you up, Hodge."

"Wait," said Bart. "I have not told you all."

"Go on."

"I was arrested in one of the most notorious gambling houses in Carson."

It was plain that the confession cost Hodge much, for his shame was evident, and he hastily added:

"Give it to me, Merriwell! I deserve it! Blow me up!"

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Frank, slowly, "although I am very sorry to hear what you have told me. Were you in that house to play?"

"Yes."

"That is the bad part of it, for you know you can't let gambling alone once you get at it. I had hoped you were free of your old bad habits."

"You never hoped so more than I!" cried Bart. "But it's no use—I can't reform. Davis induced me to go to the gambling house, and then he dropped me like a live coal when I was pinched."

"But you said they proved nothing against you."

"No, they could not prove anything, for I proved that I bought the watch of a young man who offered it to me at a bargain. That cleared me of that charge."

"But Vida Milburn threw you down just as hard?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Don't you see, I was arrested in a gambling house while playing roulette. She had seen me when I appeared to be drunk. That was enough. Even though I did not steal, I drank and gambled. Her aunt forbade her seeing me. She sent back my presents, and told me we must become as strangers. Two months later she married Hart Davis."

Frank's hand fell on the shoulder of his old-time friend.

"It was hard luck, Hodge," he said, in a straightforward manner, "and you were not entirely blameless. At the same time, it is certain that girl did not care for you as she should, and she might have made you miserable if you had won her. The girl who really loves a fellow will believe in him and his honor till there is not a single tattered remnant of his reputation to which she can pin her faith. I tell you, old chum, you may congratulate yourself that you got off as you did."

"I have tried to do so," said Hodge, "and I resolved to be a man and forget her. But it was harder to forget than I dreamed, and then, when I was beginning to forget, that other came upon me again."

"That other? What other?"

"Her half-sister."

"Isa Isban?"

"Yes."

"You met Isa?"

"In Sacramento."

"And she looks as she did long ago—just as handsome?"

"A hundred times more so!" cried Bart, his eyes kindling and a flush suffusing his cheeks. "Merriwell, she is the handsomest girl I ever knew!"

Frank whistled, regarding Bart searchingly and uneasily.

"What's this? what's this?" he exclaimed. "What has she been doing with you? Why, hang me if I don't believe—I know you were hard hit by her!"

"I was," confessed Bart, flushing still more. "When I first saw her I thought her Vida, but she seemed to have grown more beautiful than ever, and I could not help looking at her. Then I discovered there was a difference—I saw it was not Vida but Isa. When I spoke to her she remembered me, and then—well, we became very friendly. I told her everything, and she laughed. She said Vida was too soft for anything—said the old aunt made Vida do anything she wished, and the girl hadn't spirit enough to do as she desired. She said she would stick to a fellow if she loved him even though he were jailed for twenty years. There was spirit, dash, go about her, Merriwell! She fascinated me. I saw in her what I had missed in Vida."

Frank shook his head in a very sober manner.

"My dear fellow," he said, "do you remember Isa had a husband?"

"Yes, but he is dead," said Bart, quickly.

"I know that; but do you remember the sort of fellow he was?"

"Of course; he was a counterfeiter."

"Exactly, and Isa 'shoved the queer' for him. She didn't do a thing to me the first time we met. I changed a fifty-dollar bill for her, and when I tried to pass the bill I came near being arrested. You remember that?"

"Sure."

"I hardly think that is the sort of girl you wish to get stuck on, old boy."

"I don't know about that," said Bart, rather defiantly. "She stuck to her husband through thick and thin, and I think all the more of her for it."

Frank was alarmed.

"My dear fellow," he cried, "you are an easy mark. That girl is shrewd—altogether too shrewd for you to match your wits against hers. She will play you for a fool—I am sure of it."

Bart reddened again and then turned very pale, his manner indicating great embarrassment. He drew from Frank a bit, and something in his air added to Merriwell's alarm.

"I hope you haven't been very friendly with Isa Isban," Frank said.

"I might have been more friendly, but she had a foolish idea that it would injure me if I were seen with her often."

"She had such an idea?"

"Yes; and that goes to show the girl's heart is all right. She had consideration for me."

Frank bit his lip and scowled.

"It is remarkable," he confessed. "Are you sure it was out of consideration for you that she did not wish you seen with her?"

"Sure? Of course."

"It seems strange. It seems that the kind of life she has led with that reckless coiner husband would be sure to make her careless of others—make her hard and heartless."

"It is not strange you think so, Merriwell; but it is because you do not know her. I honor and respect her for standing by her husband, even when she knew he was a rascal, and I believe she has a heart and soul a thousand times more noble than the heart and soul of her half-sister."

"Bad, bad!" exclaimed Frank. "Look here, Bart, you must go along with me. That is settled. Isa Isban will ruin you if you do not escape from her influence."

A look of indignation settled on Hodge's face, and he drew away.

"If you knew her well, Frank, I would not pardon you for saying that about her; but, as you know nothing about her, I will overlook it. But, old fellow, please don't speak of Miss Isban in that way."

"Miss Isban? Her name is Mrs. Scott; her husband's name was Paul Scott."

"I know, but she has resumed her maiden name since his death. She calls herself Miss Isban now. You should see her, Merriwell. She looks like a sweet girl graduate—a girl of eighteen, and——"

"She must be twenty-one or two."

"I don't know, and I don't care. She does not look it, and I believe she is a splendid girl. I honor and respect her."

"Great Scott!" thought Frank; "Hodge is in the greatest peril of his life! I am sure of it. I am sure that girl will work his utter downfall if he is not saved from her influence. It is my duty to find a way to save him. I will!"

When Frank made up his mind to do a thing, he bent all his energies to accomplish the end. In the past Hodge had been easily influenced, but he felt sure Isa Isban had a hold on the lad that could not be broken with ease. The task must be accomplished by clever work.

"Where is she now?" Merry asked.

"I don't know."

"Don't? How is that?"

"Well, you see, I—I left Sacramento rather—rather suddenly," faltered Bart.

"Suddenly? Explain it, old chum. Why did you leave Sacramento suddenly? I trust you did not get into trouble there?"

Hodge ground his heel into the ground, seeming quite occupied in digging a hole in that manner. Suddenly he started and listened.

"A horse is coming this way—up the trail!" he exclaimed. "It is coming at a hot pace, as if hard ridden."

"Let it come. That needn't bother us. Answer my questions, Bart. You know I am your friend, and there should be perfect trust and no secrets between close friends."

But Hodge did not seem to hear those words. He was listening to the hoofbeats of the galloping horse, and his face had grown pale.

"Look here, Merriwell," he hastily exclaimed, "the rider of that horse may be a person I do not care to meet."

Bart got up hastily, and Frank arose, saying:

"You needn't be afraid of him. The other boys are good fighters, and there is no single man in this country that can do you up while you are with this crowd. We will stand by you."

"It's not that; you don't understand. I must not be seen. I'll get out of sight, and you must bluff him off, if he asks about me. That's all. Here he comes!"

A glimpse of the horseman was obtained as he flitted along between the great trees.

Immediately Hodge slipped behind a tree, and lost no time in getting out of view.

The horseman came on swiftly, and the boys saw that he was a large man with a grizzled beard that had once been coal black. He was roughly dressed, with his pantaloons tucked into his boots.

As he approached the man eyed the boys closely. Close at hand he drew up, saying in a harsh voice:

"Wa-al, who are you, and whatever are yer doing here?"

CHAPTER XXI.—ARREST AND ESCAPE.

Frank was inclined to resent the stranger's words and manner.

"I don't understand how that concerns you, sir," he said, rather stiffly.

"Hey," cried the man, glaring at Merry. "Don't git insolent, youngster! I don't like it."

"Your question was impertinent."

"Whatever is that? Be careful. I don't want any foolin'."

Frank smiled at this, which seemed to make the horseman angry.

"Hang ye!" he exclaimed. "You want to be respectful, for you're liable to get into trouble with me, and you won't like that."

"Shoo fly!" chuckled Toots, showing his big white teeth in a grin. "G'way dar, man! Yo' gibbs me de fever an' chillins."

"Wa-al, dern me!" roared the man, growing very red in the face. "It's the first time an ordinary nigger ever dared to speak to Bill Higgins that way."

"Hole on, sar! I ain't no ordummary nigger, sar. I's a cullud gemman ob 'stinction, sar, an' po' white trash cayarn't talk to me lek dat—no, sar!"

"Choke off that critter!" growled the man, addressing Frank. "If yer don't, I'll shoot him full of holes!"

"I wouldn't advise you to do that," came calmly from Merriwell. "You might get into serious trouble if you did."

"Trouble?—trouble over shootin' a nigger?" snorted the stranger. "Wa-al, I think not! I've got the record of killin' a dozen white men, and—"

"Thirteen is an unlucky number you know. Without doubt you will be hanged, as you deserve, when you kill the thirteenth one."

"Mebbe so, but a nigger won't count. I'll bore him if he opens his trap again!"

"Land ob mercy!" gurgled Toots, dodging behind a tree. "Dat man am crazy fo' suah! Look out fo' him, chilluns; dar am no tellin' when he'll tek a noshun inter his fool haid teh shoot you all."

"You must be a very bad man," said Merriwell, sarcastically.

"I am; and now yer realize it, mebbe you'll have a little more respect. Who be yer? an' what're yer doing here?"

"If you will show that you have any right to ask those questions, I will answer them."

"Right! Why, hang it! I'm ther sheriff of this county!"

"Well, what have we done that the sheriff of this county or any other county in California should come around and demand our names, as if we were criminals?"

"Ye're suspicious characters."

"Is that it? And we look like dangerous criminals?"

"I've seen fellows what didn't look more dangerous than you as was rather tough."

"Well, we are not tough, and we have no reason for concealing our names."

Then Frank gave the name of each of the boys, pointing them out as he did so, and told how they happened to be in California.

Bill Higgins, as the man had called himself, listened and looked them over. His manner seemed to change, and he said:

"You tell that pretty straight, and I reckon you're not giving me a crooked deal, but whar's to' other one?"

"What other one?"

"The one what owns the other bisuckle. Thar's only five of you, and here are six bisuckles."

The keen eyes of the sheriff made this discovery, and Frank realized that Hodge's wheel should have been concealed.

"Oh, the other fellow has just stepped aside to look at the big trees," he explained. "This is the first time we have ever seen trees like these. They are wonders, sir. Do you have them all over the State? How tall are they? Can you give us the dimensions of the largest tree discovered in this State? We desire some information concerning them."

"I see ye do," said Higgins, with sarcasm, "an' I desire a little information myself. You'll answer my questions."

Frank feared his ruse would fail, but he suavely said:

"Oh, certainly—of course, sir. We shall be pleased to answer your questions. Do these trees make good timber for building purposes? Are they difficult to work up? How thick is the bark? And how—"

"That'll do!" roared the sheriff, fiercely. "I'm no bureau of information. Whar is the other feller?"

Frank assumed a dignified and injured air.

"As you do not seem inclined to answer my questions, I must decline to answer yours," he said, coldly. "If you will drive along, it will be agreeable to us."

Higgins showed his yellow teeth through his grizzled beard.

"Oh-ho!" he grated. "So that's the trick. Wa-al, I know t'other chap is near, an' I'm goin' ter see him. That is settled."

Off his horse he sprang, leaving the animal to stand, and then, to the surprise of all, he ran to the tree behind which Bart was concealed, dashed around it, and gave a shout of triumph.

A moment later the sheriff reappeared, dragging Hodge by the collar.

"Don't try ter git away!" he commanded. "If ye do, you'll be sorry. I don't fool with a critter of your caliber."

"Let go!" cried Bart, indignantly. "What are you trying to do with me? Take your hands off, sir!"

"Not till I lodge ye behind bars, young feller. You're under arrest, so cool down and keep still."

"Why am I arrested?"

"Oh, you don't know; oh, no!"

"Answer my question, sir! Why am I arrested?"

"Now, don't go to gettin' funny and givin' orders. It ain't necessary to answer."

Frank stepped forward.

"It is no more than right that you should tell me why you have arrested my friend, sir," he said.

"Ho! ho!" cried the sheriff. "So he is your friend! I thought as much! Well, don't you get too frisky, or I may take a notion to arrest you, too."

"Such a thing would be an outrage, and I believe you have perpetrated an outrage in arresting Mr. Hodge."

"I don't care what you think!"

"At the same time, I see no reason why you should refuse to tell me why you have arrested him."

"Jive him gesse—I mean give him Jesse!" fluttered Rattleton, as he sought Frank's side. "You know we will stand by you, old man. If you say the word, we'll take Hodge away from him."

Bill Higgins' ears were sharp, and he caught the words. Like a flash he whipped out a huge revolver, which he held in a menacing manner, while he growled:

"Thirteen may be an unlucky number, but skin me if I don't make it thirteen or more if you chaps tries the trick!"

He looked as if he meant what he said.

"Steady, fellows," warned Merriwell, as the boys gathered at his back, ready for anything. "Don't be hasty."

"It won't be good fer yer if you are!" muttered Higgins.

"We can take Hodge away from him—I know we can!" whispered Diamond, eagerly. "Say the word, and we'll jump him!"

"That's right," nodded Browning, with deliberation.

Higgins backed off a bit, still holding fast to Hodge, and handling his revolver threateningly.

"Blamed if I don't take the whole gang in!" he shouted. "I reckon you're all standin' in together with this feller."

"You will have a warm time taking in this crowd," said Frank, quickly. "We are friends of Mr. Hodge, and therefore we think it no more than right that we should know why he is arrested."

"If that's goin' to satisfy ye, you shall know. He's arrested for shovin' the queer."

"Shoving—the—queer?"

"That's whatever!"

"But—but there must be a mistake."

"Bill Higgins never makes mistakes."

Frank was shocked, stunned. He looked at Bart, and Hodge's face, which had been pale, turned crimson with apparent shame. It was like a blow to Merriwell, for the conviction that Hodge was guilty came over him.

"It was that wretched girl—she did it!" he thought. "She has led him into this. She has influenced him to put out some of that bogus money, and he, like the infatuated fool that he was, did it willingly. Oh, it is a shame!"

Bart stole a glance at Frank, and saw by the expression of Merry's face that he was convinced of his folly. Immediately Hodge seemed to wilt, as if hope had gone out of him. The color left his face, and it became wan and drawn, with an expression of anguish that aroused Frank's deepest pity.

"I don't care!" Merriwell mentally exclaimed. "He did it because he was hypnotized—because her influence compelled him to do so. If he is brought to trial now it will mean his utter ruin. What can I do for him? Can I do anything?"

Bart saw the change that came over Frank's face, but did not understand what it meant. Instead, noticing a hard, determined look, he fancied his former friend was hardening his heart against him.

Of a sudden Hodge gave the sheriff a shove and trip, sending him sprawling on the ground, his revolver being discharged as he fell. Fortunately the bullet harmed no one.

Like a flash, the desperate boy darted away. He caught his wheel, which stood against a tree, and was on it in a moment. His feet caught the pedals, and away he went down the road.

Bill Higgins scrambled up, uttering language that was shocking to hear.

"The cursed whelp!" he roared. "He can't ride faster than bullets can travel! I'll fill him full of lead!"

Then he flung up the revolver.

Merriwell was quite as swift in his movements.

“No, you don’t!”

With that cry on his lips, Frank knocked the weapon aside just as it was discharged, and the bullet sped skyward through the tree tops.

Then Bill Higgins whirled and tried to shoot the boy who had saved Bart Hodge, but the heavy fist of Bruce Browning fell on his temple, and he dropped like a log to the ground.

Frank picked up the sheriff’s revolver, which had fallen from his hand, and, when Higgins sat up, he found himself looking into the muzzle of his own weapon.

“Get out!”

Merriwell uttered the words, and Higgins took the hint.

“All right,” he snarled; “but this doesn’t end it! I’ll make all of yer suffer fer this!”

He arose, mounted his waiting horse, and galloped away after Hodge.

CHAPTER XXII.—ISA ISBAN.

Late that same afternoon the five boys were riding westward, when Frank said:

“Something mysterious has happened, fellows.”

“What is it?” asked Jack, who was instantly interested in any mystery.

“A short time ago I saw a horseman away down the road here.”

“Yes.”

“He was coming toward us.”

“Well?”

“We have not met him.”

“No.”

“Look—the road lies before us for a mile. Where is he?”

“Not in sight, that is sure.”

“He must have turned off somewhere,” said Rattleton.

“That is true, but we have seen no road that turned off from this.”

“Perhaps he saw us and turned aside to avoid us.”

“Or it may have been Bill Higgins, the sheriff, and he is lying in wait to arrest us all,” suggested Browning.

“It was not Higgins,” assured Merriwell. “It was a young man, I am sure, although I obtained but a glimpse of him through the trees. We have passed no house since then.”

“Never mind him,” said Harry. “We must find a place to stop for the night.”

“I wish we might learn what has happened to Hodge before we stop. I don’t believe Higgins recaptured him.”

“It’s ten chances to one we’ll never hear anything more about him while we are in California.”

“I know that, and I am sorry. I wanted to keep him with us, for he is in great need of friends to straighten him up. He has fallen in with bad companions, and they are ruining him.”

“I should say so!” exclaimed Diamond. “He is a fool to let himself be worked by a girl.”

“Don’t take Hodge for a fool, Jack. He is anything but a fool, but he is easily influenced, and he is proud and passionate. Fairly started on the wrong road, he may go to ruin in a hurry. If we could get him out of this State—save him from arrest! Should he be arrested, tried and condemned, it would mean his utter and complete ruin. After serving a term in prison, he would feel the disgrace so deeply that nothing could save him.”

“Well, you have taken a big contract if you are going to try to save him now,” Diamond declared.

“It might be done, but—Hello! this looks like a path.”

Frank was off his wheel in a moment, and he quickly decided that a path led from the regular trail into the dark shadows to the forest to the northward.

"Wonder where it would take us," he muttered. And then, seized by a sudden inspiration, he cried:

"Come on, fellows; let's go on an exploring expedition."

Diamond protested, and Browning growled after his usual lazy manner, but Frank was supported by Rattleton and Toots, and the majority ruled.

The path, where it turned off from the road, seemed to be somewhat hidden, but it soon became plain enough, and they were able to ride along in single file, Merriwell leading.

They had proceeded in this manner about a mile when they came in sight of a small cabin that was set down in a little hollow amid the trees.

The place looked lonely and deserted, but Frank rode straight toward it, and the others followed.

The boys dismounted before the cabin, and Merriwell rapped loudly on the door. He was forced to knock three times before he obtained a response.

The door opened slowly, and a bent and feeble-looking man with dirty white hair looked at them.

"Who are you?" he asked, in a cracked voice, suspicion showing plainly in his eyes, which were bright and clear for all of his age.

"Travelers," replied Frank, cheerfully. "We were passing, and, as night is at hand, we decided to ask shelter here."

"It is useless to ask," the man declared, with a shake of his head. "I can't keep you. It is very strange that you should be passing this place. The road does not come within a mile of here."

"That is true, but we found a path, and became convinced that it must lead to a house, so here we are."

"You have had your trouble for nothing; I shall not keep you."

"Hospitable old man!" murmured Browning, sarcastically.

Despite his age, the man was not hard of hearing, for he caught the big fellow's words and shot him a look.

"Surely you will not turn us away now," urged Frank. "It will be dark by the time we reach the road again."

"That is nothing to me."

The old man was about to close the door, when, to the astonishment of the boys, a musical, girlish voice said:

"Let them stop here, Drew. I know one of the young gentlemen."

The bicyclists looked at each other inquiringly, wondering which one of them the owner of the voice could know. They all felt a thrill, for this added zest and romance to the little adventure.

"Am I dreaming?" whispered Bruce; "or did I hear the gentle ripple of a female voice?"

"Smoly hoke!" gasped Harry. "To find a girl in this spony lot—I mean lone spot! It is a marvel!"

"An' dat voice oh hers am lek honeydew from heabben, chilluns—'deed it am!" gurgled Toots, poetically.

The old man seemed astonished and in doubt.

"Do you mean it, my dear?" he asked. "It was on your account——"

"Never mind me, Drew," came back that musical voice. "It would be a shame to turn them away."

"But—but——"

"There are no buts about it!" cried the voice sharply, almost angrily. "You have heard what I said! They may stop here."

"All right—all right, if you say so. There's nothing for them to eat, and so——"

"I'll cook something, for you have corn meal in the house. Young men who ride wheels have appetites that enable them to eat anything."

"All right—all right," repeated the old man, vaguely.

"Let them put their bicycles under the shed back of the house."

The old man came out, closing the door.

"It is my niece, young gentlemen," he explained. "She is very peculiar, and—well, when she says anything, that settles it, so you'll have to stay."

"Under the circumstances," said Frank, his natural delicacy influencing him, although he was rather curious to see the owner of that voice, "I am inclined to think we're intruding, and we had better go on."

For a moment the face of the old man expressed relief, and then that look vanished, while he shook his head.

"No," he said, "that will not do now. She has decided that you shall stop, and she will not leave any hair on my head if you go away. You must stop."

"She must be a gentle maiden!" murmured Bruce, with a faint smile.

The boys followed the old man around to a shed, under which they placed their wheels. The shed had sometimes been used to shelter horses, but no horse was there then.

"You mustn't mind my niece," said the old man, apologetically. "She has been spoiled, and she is determined to have her own way. She runs the ranch."

Again the boys looked at each other.

"I wonder which of us she knows," said Harry.

"It must be Merriwell," Diamond declared. "It could not be any one else. This is a joke on him."

Diamond's ideas of a joke were decidedly peculiar.

He seldom saw anything humorous in what pleased his companions, and he took delight in things which did not amuse them at all. He seldom laughed at anything.

Frank himself felt that he was the one the girl knew, if, indeed, she knew any of them, and he was wondering where he had met her. In the course of his wanderings over the world he had met many girls, not a few of whom he had forgotten entirely.

"If she is one of your old girls, I'm going to make a stagger at cutting you out, old fellow," chuckled Rattleton.

"Oh, I don't know!" smiled Frank. "You're not so warm!"

"Just now I don't see any steam coming out of your shoes," Harry shot back, quickly. "You're not the only good thing on the programme; you might be cut out."

"Land sakes, chilluns!" exclaimed Toots, with uplifted hands. "I nebber heard no such slanguage as dat—nebber!"

"Any of you fellows may have the girl, if you want her," said Jack. "I have not seen her, but I'm sure she is a terror, and I don't care for that kind."

They followed the old man toward the door, and entered the house.

A lamp had been lighted while they were disposing of their wheels, and the girl was standing where the unsatisfactory light showed her face as plainly as was possible.

She was strikingly handsome, with dark hair and eyes and full red lips. An expectant flush of color was in her cheeks.

As Frank entered, the girl extended her hand to him, saying:

"I am glad to see you again, Mr. Merriwell. Have you forgotten me?"

"Good gracious!" cried Merriwell. "It is Vida Milburn!"

She tossed her head, her hand dropping by her side.

"That is not complimentary to me!" she exclaimed. "It shows you remembered my half-sister far better than you did me."

"Your half-sister? Then you are not Vida!"

"No, thank you!"—with another haughty toss of the head.

"Then—then you must be—Isa Isban!"

"How remarkable that you should guess it," she said, with biting sarcasm.

"But—you—you must remember it has been some time since I saw you, and—and I saw Miss Melburn last."

"You saw me first, and you were so interested in me that you followed me from Reno to Carson City. After that you met my sister, and now you mistake me for her! I am extremely complimented, Mr. Merriwell! Never mind. You are not so many! Perhaps you will introduce your friends. Some of them may have a better memory than you."

For once in his life, at least, Frank was "rattled." He introduced Browning as Rattling and Diamond as Brownton, while he completely forgot Harry's name.

The girl laughed sharply, plainly enjoying his embarrassment. She shook hands with all but Toots, saying:

"Mr. Merriwell doesn't seem to be at his best. It is possible he has ridden too far to-day."

Then Frank pulled himself together, and immediately became as cool and collected as usual, which was no easy thing to

do.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Isban, but I was just thinking I had not ridden far enough."

He said it in his most suave manner, but the shot went home, and it brought still more color to her flushed cheeks.

"Oh!" she cried, with the same toss of her head, "if your wheel is not broken, it is not too late to make several more miles before absolute darkness comes on."

Diamond edged up to Frank, and whispered:

"Careful, Merry! You're getting her very angry, and she is a mighty fine girl. Go easy, old man!"

This was very amusing to Merriwell, for but a short time before Diamond had expressed himself quite freely in regard to the girl, and it was plain his ideas had undergone a change since seeing her.

"Don't worry," Frank returned. "She won't mind a little scrap. I think she will enjoy it. She is that kind."

This did not seem to satisfy the young Virginian, who immediately set about making himself as agreeable as possible with Isa.

The boys were invited to sit down, and seats were provided for all of them.

Frank became rather serious, for thoughts of Hodge's misfortune began to trouble him, and he remembered that this girl was responsible for it all.

Isa did not look a day older than when he had last seen her, and it was hard to realize that she was a woman with an experience and a dead husband.

Browning was silent and apparently contented. He seemed to take great satisfaction in sitting down and resting.

After a little silence, Isa observed, seeming to take a malicious satisfaction in what she said:

"One of Mr. Merriwell's friends had not forgotten me, at least."

"It might have been better for him if he had," returned Frank, in a manner that surprised himself, for never before had he made such an ungallant remark.

The girl's eyes blazed and she bit her lip. It seemed that she was on the point of an outburst, but she restrained herself and laughed. That laugh was defiant and angry.

"Oh, well, I don't know!" she said. "The person I speak of may find I will stand by him better than some of his friends who would have looked on while he was dragged away to jail."

This was a surprise to Frank, for it showed that the girl knew something about the adventure with Bill Higgins, which had taken place that day.

"So you have seen him since?" asked Merry, eagerly. "Where is he?"

"Find out."

"I shall be able to find out in time, I think, Miss Isban."

"As far as he is concerned, you need not worry, for I do not think he cares to see you again."

"I do not believe that. He knows me too well, and he trusts me."

"He thought he knew you, but he did not fancy you would remain passive and see him placed under arrest."

"I did not."

"What did you do?"

"I did not have an opportunity to do much except save his life."

"Save his life?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I kept him from being bored by a bullet from Bill Higgins' gun."

"How did you do so much?"

"I spoiled Higgins' aim."

"Well, that was most remarkable! I presume you expect him to show the utmost gratitude for a service that any man might render another!"

She snapped her fingers toward Frank, laughing scornfully:

"That's where you fool yourself. Mr. Hodge has told me that he hoped he might never meet you again. He has found other and better friends."

"Perhaps you speak the truth."

The manner in which Frank uttered the words implied not only a doubt but a positive belief that she was not speaking the truth and she did not misunderstand them. Her teeth clicked together, gleaming beyond her curved, red lips, and her hands were clinched. On her white fingers were a number of rings, set with diamonds, which flashed and blazed like her eyes.

"I care not whether you think I speak the truth or not," she said, and turned her back upon him.

Diamond evinced positive distress.

"I can't understand you, Merriwell!" he said, in an aside. "It is not at all like you. Why, you are always gallant and courteous to ladies."

"That is right," agreed Frank, with deep meaning. "I am."

Jack did not like that.

"And you mean to insinuate that this beautiful girl is not a lady?"

"I have my doubts."

"Still it seems to me that you have made a bad break in your treatment of her. You were very rude. That is not the way to treat a young lady."

"It is not the way to treat the most of them; but, my dear fellow, you will have to learn that they differ as much as men. If you were to treat all men with the utmost courtesy and consideration, you would find that not a few would regard you as a weak-kneed slob. They would impose on you, and their opinion of you would sink lower and lower as you permitted them to continue their impositions without giving back as good as they sent. In this respect, there is a class of women who resemble men. Of course you cannot handle them as you would men, but you can't be soft with them. A man who insulted you you would knock down. You can't strike a woman, but you can strike her in a different way, and, in nine cases out of ten, if she is of a certain sort, she will think all the more of you in the end."

"Well, I am sure you have made a mistake with Miss Isban. I could see her deep anger and hatred for you in her eyes. She would like to strangle you this minute."

"I haven't a doubt of it," coolly smiled Frank, his manner showing not the least concern.

"She will hate and despise you as long as she lives."

"If so, it will make little difference to me."

Up to this time Jack had not dreamed that Frank could be anything but courteous and bending to a lady, and now the Southerner saw there was a turn to his friend's character that he had not suspected.

Merriwell had not been at all brutal in his manner, but his words had touched Isa Isban like blows of a whip. They had stung her and stirred her blood, although they were spoken in a way that showed the natural polish and training of their author.

In truth the girl longed to fly at Frank Merriwell's throat. She felt that she could strike him in the face with her hands and feel the keenest delight in doing so.

As she turned toward him again, there came a sharp knock on the door.

CHAPTER XXIII.—A KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

The old man looked startled, and the girl showed signs of alarm.

"Quick, Drew!" she whispered. "Is the door fastened?"

"Yes!" quavered the old man.

"My revolver—where is it?"

"On the shelf—where you placed it."

With a spring that reminded the boys of the leap of a young pantheress, she reached the shelf and snatched a gleaming pistol from it. Then she faced the door again, the weapon half raised.

The boys were on their feet.

"Land ob wartermillions!" chattered Toots, his eyes rolling. "Looks lek dar am gwan teh be a rucshun fo' suah!"

Then he looked around for some place of concealment.

"What is it?" asked Frank. "Is there danger?"

"To me—yes," nodded Isa. "But you do not care! I expect no aid from you, sir."

"Who is at the door?"

"It may be Bill Higgins, the sheriff!"

"Come to arrest you?"

"Perhaps."

"He can't do it!" hissed Diamond, as he caught up a heavy chair and held it poised. "We won't let him!"

The girl actually laughed.

"At least, I have one champion," she said.

"To the death!" Diamond heroically declared.

The knock was repeated, and this time it was given in a peculiar manner, as if it were a special signal.

An expression of relief came to the faces of the old man and the girl, but they seemed very much surprised.

"Who can it be?" Isa asked, doubtfully.

"It is the secret signal," said the man with the gray hair.

"That is true, but who should come here to give the signal?"

"It must be all right."

"Wait. I will go into the back room. If it is repeated, open the door. Should it be an enemy or enemies, give me time to get away. That's all. Hold them from rushing into the back room."

"We will do that," declared Diamond.

In a moment Isa disappeared.

The knock was given for the third time, and the old man approached the door, which he slowly and deliberately opened.

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

The reply was muffled and indistinct, but something like an exclamation of relief escaped the man, and he flung the door wide open.

Into the room walked a young man with a smooth-shaved face and a swaggering air.

"Hello, Drew!" he called, and then he stopped and stared at the boys. "I didn't know you had visitors," he said.

"So it's you, Kent—so it's you!" exclaimed the old man, with relief. "I didn't know—I reckoned it might be somebody else."

"You knew I was coming."

"Yes; but I didn't 'low you'd get here so soon. It's a long distance to Carson, and——"

"Never mind that," quickly spoke the man, interrupting Drew, as if he feared he would say something it were better the boys did not hear. "My horse is outside. Where shall I put him?"

"In the shed. I'll show ye. Come on."

The old man went out, followed by the newcomer, and the door was left open slightly. Toots quietly slipped out after them.

Isa Isban came back into the room.

"I do not care to be seen here by everybody who may come along," she explained; "but this person is all right, for Drew knows him."

This was rather strange to all of the boys except Frank, but Merry instantly divined that she was afraid of Higgins and more than half expected the big sheriff would follow her there.

The secret signal and the air of mystery and apprehension shown by the girl and the old man convinced Merriwell that all was not right.

Isa had at one time "shoved the queer" for a band of men who made counterfeit money, and Bart Hodge had told Frank quite enough to convince Merriwell that she was still in the same dangerous and unlawful business.

The thoughts which ran riot in Merry's head were of a startling nature, but his face was calm and passive, betraying nothing of what was passing in his mind.

Once more Diamond set about making himself agreeable to Isa, and she met him more than halfway. She laughed and chatted with him, seeming to have forgotten that such a person as Frank Merriwell existed.

Browning sat down in a comfortable position where he could lean against the wall, and proceeded to fall asleep.

After a short time Toots came slipping into the cabin, his eyes rolling, and his whole manner betraying excitement and fear. He would have blurted out something, but Frank gave him a signal that caused him to be silent.

At the first opportunity the colored boy whispered in Merry's ear:

"Marser Frank, de bes' fing we can do is teh git out ob dis 'bout as soon as we kin do it, sar."

"What makes you think that?" asked Merriwell, cautiously.

"We am in a po'erful ba-ad scrape, sar."

"What do you mean?"

"It am mighty ba-ad folks dat libs heah, sar."

"Bad? In what way?"

"Dey hab done suffin' dat meks dem skeered ob de ossifers ob de law."

"How do you know?"

"I done hears de ol' man and de young man talkin'."

"What did they say?"

"Say dat ossifers am arter 'em. De young man say dat he have to run from Carson City to 'scape arrest, sar."

"He is the horseman I saw ahead of us in the valley," said Frank. "He must have seen us coming and concealed himself, expecting we would pass him. It is plain he did not wish to be seen."

"Suah's yeh bawn, boy! He has been doin' suffin' mighty ba-ad, an' he's dangerous. He said he wouldn't be 'rested alive, sar."

"This is very interesting," nodded Frank. "It seems that we are in for one more exciting adventure before we finish the tour."

"I don' like it, sar—'deed I don'! No tellin' what such folks will do. He am feelin' po'erful ugly, fo' he say suffin' 'bout trubble wif his wife an' 'bout habbin' her follerin' him. Dat am how it happen he wur comin' from de wes' 'stead ob de eas'. He done dodge roun' teh git 'way from his wife, sar."

"He is a brave and gallant young man," smiled Merriwell. "I admire him very much—nit!"

"Now don' yeh go teh bein' brash wif dat chap, Marsar Frank. Dar ain't no tellin' what he might do."

"Don't worry. Keep cool, and wait till I take a fancy to move. I want to look him over some more. He will be coming back with Drew in a moment, and— Here they come now!"

Into the cabin came the old man, and the young man was at his heels. There was a sullen, unpleasant look on the face of the latter, and he glared at the boys as if he considered them intruders.

Isa looked up and arose as they entered.

The light of the lamp fell fairly on her face, and the newcomer saw her plainly.

He uttered a shout of astonishment and staggered back, his eyes opened to their widest and his manner betraying the utmost consternation.

"Is it possible!" he grated.

Then he clutched the old man by the shoulder, snarling:

"Confound your treacherous old hide! You have betrayed me. You said the woman was Isa Isban, and she is——"

The girl interrupted him with a laugh.

"You seem excited," she said. "I am Isa Isban, and no one else."

He took a step toward her, his face working and his hands clinched.

"How did you get here ahead of me?" he hoarsely demanded.

"In the most natural manner possible," she answered. "A friend brought me, Mr. Kent."

"You know my real name—you know everything! I suppose you are here to secure evidence against me. You are looking for a divorce."

"A divorce?"

"Exactly."

"I do not understand you."

"You understand well enough. We have not been married so very long, and our married life hasn't been any too happy. You have accused me of abusing you—you have threatened to leave me."

The girl looked bewildered.

"What is the matter with the man?" she murmured. "Is he crazy?"

The man seemed puzzled by her manner, and the witnesses of the remarkable scene were absolutely at sea; they could not understand what it was about.

"I am not crazy," said the young man; "but I was a fool to marry you. You were not worth the trouble I took to get you. I should have let the other fool have you, instead of plotting to disgrace him in the eyes of your uncle and aunt, so I could get you."

A great light dawned on Frank Merriwell.

"Great fortune!" he mentally exclaimed. "This is the fellow who married Vida Melburn, Isa's half-sister, and he thinks this girl is his wife! They used to look so much alike that it was difficult to tell one from the other.

"Married—married to you?" cried the girl. "Not on your life! Why, I never saw you before, although I have heard of you."

The man seemed staggered for a moment, and then, with a cry of anger, he leaped upon her.

"What is your game?" he hissed, as he shook her savagely. "What are you up to? I thought you a soft, innocent little girl, and now you are showing yourself something quite different. I believe you played me for a sucker! And you want a divorce! Well, here is cause for it!"

Then he choked her.

Frank went at him like a cyclone.

"You infernal villain!" he cried, as his hands fell on the man, and he tore the gasping girl from his clutches. "No one but a brute ever lays hands on a woman in anger, and a brute deserves a good drubbing almost any time. Here is where you get it!"

Then he proceeded to polish off the girl's assailant in a most scientific manner, ending by flinging him in a limp and battered condition into a corner of the room.

Diamond had hastened to support the girl when Frank snatched her from her assailant, but she repulsed him and flung him off, saying, hoarsely:

"Let me alone! I am all right! I want to see this fight!"

With interest she watched Frank whip the man whom she had called Kent, though she swayed and panted with every blow, her eyes glittering and her cheeks flushed.

As Merriwell flung the fellow into the corner, the girl straightened up and threw back her head, laughing:

"Well, he was a soft thing, and that is a fact! Think of being thrashed by a boy! Drew, is it possible this is our Carson City agent, whom you called 'a good man,' when you were speaking of him this evening? Such a chap would blow the whole game if he were pinched. I wouldn't trust him."

The old man stood rubbing his shaking hands together, greatly agitated and unable to say a word.

Then there came a thunderous knock on the door, and a hoarse voice demanded admittance.

CHAPTER XXIV.—THE SHERIFF'S SHOT.

Old Drew was greatly frightened, and Davis showed alarm.

"Hold that door—hold that door one minute!" cried Isa. "It will give us time to get out of the way!"

Bruce Browning's shoulder went against the door, and he calmly drawled:

"Anybody won't come in here in a hurry."

"Come!" whispered the girl, catching hold of Hart; "we must get away! quick!"

Davis leaped after them.

"It will not be a good thing for me to be seen here," he said. "If there is a way of getting under cover, you must take me along."

"That's right," nodded Isa, "for you would peach if you were pinched. Come!"

By the way of the door that led into the back room they disappeared.

Rap-bang! rap-bang! rap-bang!

"Open this door instanter!"

Higgins roared the order from the outside.

"What's your great rush?" coolly inquired Browning.

A volley of fierce language flew from the sheriff's lips.

"I'll show yer!" he thundered. "Down goes ther door if ye don't open it immediate!"

"Be good enough, Mr. Drew, to ascertain if our friends are under cover yet," said Frank.

The old man hobbled into the back room, was gone a moment, and then reappeared, something like a look of relief on his withered face.

"They're gone," he whispered.

"Will it be all right to open the door?"

"I reckon ye'll have to open it."

"All right. Admit Mr. Higgins, Bruce."

Browning stepped away from the door, lifting the iron bar.

Instantly it flew wide open, and, with a big revolver in each hand, the sheriff strode heavily into the room.

Behind him came another man, who was also armed and ready to do shooting if necessary.

Higgins glared around.

"Whatever does this mean?" he asked, astonished by the presence of the bicycle boys.

"Whatever does what mean?" asked Frank, innocently.

"You critters bein' here. I don't understand it."

"We are stopping here for the night."

"Sho! Is that it? Well, you're not the only ones. Where are the others?"

"What others?"

"One in particler—the one you helped to get away to-day. You'll have to square with me for that."

"I presume you mean Mr. Hodge?"

"That's whatever."

"I think your memory is at fault, sir. I did not aid him in getting away, but you owe me thanks for keeping you from shooting him. He would have made the unlucky thirteenth man."

"Well, hang me if you ain't got nerve! All the same, you'll have to take your medicine for aiding a criminal."

"He has not been proved a criminal yet, sir."

"Oh, you know all about it! Well, he's somewhere round this ranch, and I'm going to rope him. Watch the front, Britts."

"All right, sir," said the man who accompanied Higgins.

Then the big sheriff strode into the back room, picking up the lamp to aid him in his search.

Frank held his breath, wondering what Higgins would find.

After four or five minutes the sheriff came back, and he was in a furious mood.

"I know the critter is here somewhere!" he roared; "and I'll have him, too! Can't hide from me!"

"That's right," smiled Frank, with a profound bow. "You have an eagle eye, Mr. Higgins, and you should be able to find anything there is about the place. I wouldn't think of trying to hide from you."

"Ye-he! ye-he! ye-he!" giggled Toots.

Higgins' face was black with fury. He pointed a revolver straight at Frank, and thundered:

"You think you're funny, but I'm going ter bore yer if you don't talk up instanter! You know where that galoot Hodge is hid, and you'll tell, too."

"My dear sir," returned Frank, as he folded his arms and looked the furious man fairly in the eyes, "I do not know where Bart Hodge is hidden, and I would not tell if I did."

Higgins ground his teeth.

"Say yer prayers!" he grated. "I'm goin' to make you the thirteenth!"

He was in deadly earnest, yet it did not seem that Frank quailed in the least before him. Indeed, in the face of such peril, Merriwell apparently grew bolder, and a scornful smile curled his lips.

"Shoot!" he cried, his voice ringing out clear and unshaken—"shoot and prove yourself a detestable coward!"

The other lads held their breath. They felt like interfering, but something in Frank's manner seemed to warn them to keep still and not try to aid him.

"You think I won't do it," muttered Higgins. "Well, I'll show ye! I always do exactly as I say. Now, you eat lead!"

There was a scream, a swish, a rush of feet, a flitting form, and Isa Isban had flung herself in front of Frank, protecting him with her own body!

The heavy revolver spoke!

Bang!

Frank had realized with wonderful quickness that the girl meant to save him by protecting him with her body, and he caught her by the shoulders, flinging her to the floor in an effort to keep her from being shot at any cost to himself.

He would not have been successful, however, but for big Bruce Browning.

The big fellow had been watching Higgins as a hawk watches a chicken. At first, he had not thought it possible the sheriff would fire. He could not conceive that the man was such a ruffian. At the last moment, however, he saw Higgins meant to shoot.

Browning's hand rested on the back of a chair. With a swiftness that was simply marvelous in one who naturally moved with the greatest slowness, he swung that chair into the air and flung it at the furious sheriff.

Higgins saw the movement out of the corners of his eyes, and, although the missile had not reached him when he pulled the trigger, his aim had been disconcerted.

The bullet touched Frank's ear as it passed and buried itself in the wall.

Then old Drew dashed out the light, and the place was plunged in darkness.

CHAPTER XXV.—ESCAPE—CONCLUSION.

The sheriff's assistant lost no time in getting out of the cabin, rushing to one of the horses, which had been left a short distance away, and mounted. Then he rode madly away through the forest, deserting Higgins in a most cowardly manner.

When the lamp in the cabin was relighted, Higgins was found stretched senseless on the floor, the chair having struck him on the head and cut a long gash, from which blood was flowing.

"I'm afraid I've killed him!" exclaimed Browning. "I didn't mean to do that, but I had to do something. I couldn't keep still and see him shoot Frank down like a dog."

"It serves him right!" said Diamond, but his face was pale, and he looked very anxious.

"I sincerely hope he will come around all right," said Frank, as he knelt by the man's side. "This scrape is bad enough, and, although he has shown himself a ruffian, I do not think we care to take the life of any human being."

Isa Isban was looking down at the man, and her face softened and showed pity.

"You are right, Mr. Merriwell," she gently said. "You have taught me a lesson. Higgins was a handsome man in his way, and it is a pity to have him die with his boots on like this. We'll see what we can do to fix him up."

Frank looked up at her, and one glance was enough to convince him of her sincerity.

"Poor girl!" he thought. "She has never been taught the difference between right and wrong. Even now, if she had a show, she might become something far better than she is."

She knelt on the opposite side of the unconscious man.

"Bring some water, Drew," she sharply commanded. "Bring something with which we can bandage his head."

"Why don't ye let him die?" whined the old man.

"It would be a bad thing for you if we did," she returned. "His deputy has puckacheed, and he won't do a thing but bring a posse here as soon as possible. It will be all the better for you if Bill Higgins is all right when the posse appears."

"I'm ruined anyway," declared Drew. "I'll have to git out. They will search, and they're bound to find everything if they do."

"We'll have everything out of here before morning, and then let them search. The first job is to fix Bill Higgins up."

Water was brought, and she bathed the head of the unconscious man, who groaned a little once or twice. Then Frank aided her in adjusting a bandage. Once their hands touched, and she drew away quickly, catching her breath, as if she had been stung.

Frank looked at her in wonder, and saw that she had flushed and then grown very pale. Her eyes met his, and then her lashes drooped, while the blush crept back into her cheeks.

What did it mean?

More than ever was this girl an enigma to him.

The boys lifted Higgins and placed him on an improvised couch in the corner, as Drew would not permit them to place him on the bed in the little back room.

By this time Hart Davis had become convinced that Isa Isban was not the girl he had married, although she looked so much like Vida that he was filled with wonder whenever he regarded her.

He asked her pardon for his actions of a short time before, but she gave him no heed, as she seemed fully intent on making the sheriff comfortable and restoring him to consciousness.

Hodge did not look at Davis, whom he hated with the utmost intensity, as he feared he would spring upon the man if he did so.

After a while, Higgins opened his eyes and stared around in a blank manner.

"Did we stop the mill, pards?" he huskily asked. "The whole herd was stampeded and goin' like a cyclone down the range, horns clanking, eyes glaring, nostrils smoking and hoofs beating thunder out of the ground."

"What is the man talking about?" asked Frank, in wonder.

"He was a cowboy once," Isa explained. "He seems to be thinking of that time."

"It was a wild ride through the night, wasn't it, pards?" Higgins went on, although he did not seem to be speaking to any one in particular. "It was dark as ten million black cats, and the cold wind cut like a knife. But we stopped 'em—we stopped 'em at last."

Then he turned his face toward the wall and closed his eyes.

"I hope he isn't going to die," said Frank.

"So do I," muttered Browning, sincerely. "I don't want to have that to think about."

When morning came Bill Higgins seemed quite strong, but his head was filled with the wildest fancies. He talked of strange things, and it was evident that his mind wandered.

Higgins did not wish to eat anything, but Isa brought him bread and coffee, and he took it from her.

"Pretty girl," he muttered, with a gleam of reason. "Fine girl! Wonder how such a girl came to be out here on the ranch?"

In vain they waited for the appearance of the deputy and a posse. The expected did not happen.

Frank had a long talk with Bart.

"Old man," he said, "you must come with me—you must do it! I will not take no for an answer. If Bill Higgins comes around all right in his head to-morrow he will be after you again. You must make for San Francisco and lose no time in shipping for some foreign port. After this affair blows over, you can come back."

Frank was not satisfied till he saw Bill Higgins delivered into the hands of friends.

As for the deputy who took to flight, he met with a fatal accident while passing through the forest. Either he was swept from the back of his horse by a limb or was thrown off. Be that as it may he was found with a broken neck.

And Higgins still wandered in his mind when Frank left him.

The boys made great speed on the road to San Francisco, which they reached in due time, and there, with the other

mail that awaited him, Frank found a brief letter from Isa Isban.

"I wish to let you know what the physicians who have examined Bill Higgins have to say," she wrote. "They say he has lost his memory, and, although he may recover from the injury otherwise, it is doubtful if he will ever regain his memory. In that case, Hodge is safe anywhere, but it will be well for him to get out of California."

The news was gratifying to Hodge, and he lost no time in disappearing from view.

The arrival of the bicycle boys in San Francisco was the cause of two celebrations, one among themselves and another among their friends in the East.

The tour across the continent had been a success, and the papers were loud in their praise of plucky Frank Merriwell and his companions.

"And now we can take it easy," said Bruce, lazily.

"That's Bruce," laughed Diamond. "Always willing to take a rest."

"Dunno but wot we hab earned a rest," put in Toots.

"Doking snownuts—no, smoking doughnuts! what a lot of adventures we have had since we left New York!" came from Harry. "Any of us could write a book of travels without half trying."

"We'll take it easy for a while," said Frank. "But not for long. I've got an idea for more sport, while we are out here."

Long letters followed telegrams to the East and long letters were received in return.

"You've done the trick," wrote one fellow student. "When you get back to Yale, well—I reckon the town won't be big enough to hold you."

"Dear old Yale!" exclaimed Frank.

That night the boys sang college songs far into the wee small hours of the morning. They were more than happy, and all their past perils were forgotten.

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