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FRANK MERRIWELL'S NEW COMEDIAN

OR,

THE RISE OF A STAR

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of the famous MERRIWELL STORIES.

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FRANK MERRIWELL'S NEW COMEDIAN

CHAPTER I.—“NEVER SAY DIE!”

It is not a pleasant experience to wake up on a beautiful morning to the realization that one has failed. There seems a relentless irony in nature herself that the day that dawns on a night when our glittering hopes have become dead, dull ashes of despair and ruin should be bright and warm with the sun's genial rays.

So Frank Merriwell felt this fine morning in Puelbo, Colorado. The night before, with high hopes, he had produced his new play, "For Old Eli." He recalled the events of that first production with almost a shudder. "For Old Eli" had been a failure, a flat, appalling, stupefying failure. From the rise of the curtain everything and everybody had gone wrong; lines were forgotten, Ephraim Gallup had had stage fright, his own best situations had been marred.

How much of this was due to the lying handbills which had been scattered broadcast, asserting that he was not the real Frank Merriwell, but an impostor, a deadbeat and a thorough scoundrel, Frank could not tell. He believed that these efforts to ruin him had little effect, for when, at the close of the performance, he had made a speech from the stage, assuring the audience that he would bring his play back and give a satisfactory performance, his reception had been cordial.

But the play had failed. Parker Folansbee, his backer, had acted queerly, and Frank knew that, after the company had reached Denver, the relations between him and his backer would cease. "For Old Eli" had been well-nigh ruinous, and when they got back to Denver, Merry and his friends would be without funds.

Then the thought came to him of the prejudice expressed against a poor black cat he had allowed to travel with the company. He could not restrain a smile as he perceived that the superstitious members of the company would feel that the cat had hoodooed them. As if a cat could affect the fortunes of men!

The thought of the cat gave a pleasant turn to his reflections, and he cheered up immensely.

He had failed?

No!

He would not acknowledge failure, defeat, disaster. He would not lie down and abandon the struggle, for he was not built of such weak material.

Where was the fault? Was it in the piece, or in the way it had been played?

He realized that, although the piece was well constructed, it was not of a high, artistic character, such as must appeal by pure literary merit to the best class of theater patrons.

It could not be ranked with the best productions of Pinero, Jones, Howard, Thomas, or even Clyde Fitch. He had not written it with the hope of reaching such a level. His aim had been to make a "popular" piece, such as would appeal to the masses.

He fell to thinking over what had happened, and trying to understand the cause of it all. He did not lay the blame entirely on the actors.

It was not long before he decided that something about his play had led the spectators to expect more than they had received.

What was it they had expected?

While he was thinking of this alone in his room at the hotel, Bart Hodge, his old friend and a member of his company, came in. Hodge looked disgruntled, disappointed, disgusted. He sat down on the bed without speaking.

"Hello, old man," said Frank, cheerfully. "What's the matter with your face? It would sour new milk."

"And you ought to have a face that would sour honey!" growled Bart. "I should if I were in your place."

"What's the use? That wouldn't improve things."

"If I were in your place, I'd take a gun and go forth and kill a few stiff's."

"I always supposed a 'stiff' was dead. Didn't know one could be killed over again."

"Oh, you can joke if you want to, but I don't see how you can feel like joking now. Anybody else would swear."

"And that would be foolish."

"Perhaps so; but you know, as well as I do, that your play was murdered and mangled last night."

"That's so, b'gosh!" drawled a doleful voice, and Ephraim Gallup, another of the company, Frank's boy friend from Vermont, came stalking into the room, looking quite as disgusted and dejected as Hodge. "An' I'm one of the murderers!"

Frank looked Ephraim over and burst out laughing.

"Why," he cried, "your face is so long that you'll be hitting your toes against your chin when you walk, if you're not careful."

"Whut I need is somebuddy to hit their toes against my pants jest where I set down, an' do it real hard," said Ephraim. "I wisht I'd stayed to hum on the farm when I went back there and giv up the idee that I was an actor. I kin dig 'taters an' saw wood a darn sight better'n I kin act!"

"You're all right, Ephraim," assured Merry. "You had to fill that part in a hurry, and you were not sure on your lines. That worried you and broke you up. If you had been sure of your lines, so that you would have felt easy, I don't think

there would have been any trouble as far as you were concerned.”

“I dunno about that. I never felt so gosh-darn scat as I did larst night. Why, I jest shook all over, an’ one spell I didn’t think my laigs’d hold me up till I got off ther stage. It was awful!”

“You had an attack of stage fright. They say all great actors have it once in their lives.”

“Waal, I never want to feel that air way ag’in! An’ I spoilt that scene in the dressin’ room of the clubhaouse. Oh, jeewhillikins! I’m goin’ aout of the show business, Frank, an’ git a job paoundin’ sand. It don’t take no brains to do that.”

“Cheer up! You are going to play that same part in this play, and you’ll play it well, too.”

“Whut? Then be yeou goin’ to keep right on with the play?” asked the Vermonter, in astonishment.

“No,” said Merry, “I am not going to keep right on with it. I am going to put it into shape to win, and then I’m going out with it again. My motto is, ‘Never say die.’ You heard what I told the audience last night. I promised them that I would play in this town and would make a success. I shall keep that promise.”

Hodge shook his head.

“You are smart, Frank, but there’s a limit. I’m afraid your luck has turned. You are hoodooed.”

Just then a coal-black cat came out from under the bed and walked across the room.

“And I suppose you think this is my hoodoo?” smiled Merry, as the cat came over and rubbed against his leg. “That’s where you are away off. This cat is my mascot, and she shall travel with me till the piece wins. She has stuck to me close enough since she walked onto the stage where we were rehearsing in Denver.”

“The cat is not the hoodoo,” said Bart, shaking his head. “I know what is.”

“You do?”

“Sure.”

“Name it.”

“I am!”

“You?”

“Yes.”

Frank stared at Bart in surprise, and then burst out laughing.

“Well, how in the world did you happen to get such a foolish notion into your head?” he cried.

“It’s not foolish,” declared Bart, stubbornly. “It’s straight, I know it, and you can’t make me think differently.”

Frank rose and walked over to Hodge, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Now you are talking silly, old man,” he said. “You never were bad luck to me in the past; why should you be now. You’re blue. You are down in the mouth and your head is filled with ridiculous fancies. Things would have happened just as they have if you had not joined the company.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You always were superstitious, but I believe you are worse than ever now. You have been playing poker too much. That’s what ails you. The game makes every man superstitious. He may not believe in luck at the beginning, but he will after he has stuck to that game a while. He will see all the odd things that happen with cards, and the conviction that there is such a thing as luck must grow upon him. He will become whimsical and full of notions. That’s what’s the matter with you, Hodge. Forget it, forget it!”

“I think you are likely to forget some things altogether too early, Merriwell. For instance, some of your enemies.”

“What’s the use to remember unpleasant things?”

“They remember you. One of them did so to an extent that he helped ruin the first presentation of your play.”

“How?”

“It isn’t possible that you have forgotten the lying notices circulated all over this city, stating that you were not the real Frank Merriwell, accusing you of being a fake and a thief?”

Something like a shadow settled on Merry’s strong face.

“No, I have not forgotten,” he declared, “I remember all that, and I’d like to know just who worked the game.”

“It was a gol-dinged measly trick!” exploded Ephraim.

"You thought it would not hurt you, Frank," said Hodge. "You fancied it would serve to advertise you, if anything. It may have advertised you, but it did you damage at the same time. When the audience saw everything was going wrong, it grew angry and became convinced that it was being defrauded. Then you had trouble with that big ruffian who climbed over the footlights with the avowed purpose of breaking up the show."

"Oh, well," smiled Merry, in a peculiar way, "that fellow went right back over the footlights."

"Yes, you threw him back. That quieted the audience more than anything else, for it showed that you were no slouch, even if you were a fake."

"Oh, I suppose I'll find out some time just who did that little piece of advertising for me."

"Perhaps so; perhaps not."

Tap, tap, tap—a knock on the door.

"Come!" Frank called.

The door opened, and Billy Wynne, the property man, looked in.

"Letter for you, Mr. Merriwell," he said.

Frank took the letter, and Wynne disappeared, after being thanked for bringing it.

"Excuse me," said Merry, and he tore open the envelope.

A moment later, having glanced over the letter, he whistled.

"News?" asked Bart.

"Just a note from the gentleman we were speaking of just now," answered Frank. "It's from the party who gave me the free advertising."

"Waal, I'll be kicked by a blind kaow!" exploded Gallup. "An' did he hev ther gall to write to ye?"

"Yes," said Frank. "Listen to this."

Then he read the letter aloud.

"MR. FRANK MERRIWELL.

"DEAR SIR: By this time you must be aware that you are not the greatest thing that ever happened. You received it in the neck last night, and I aided in the good work of knocking you out, for I circulated the 'warning' notice which denounced you as an impostor, a deadbeat and a thief. The public swallowed it all, and, in disguise, I was at the theater to witness your downfall. It was even greater than I had dared hope it would be. I understand the managers in other towns have canceled with you, Folansbee has declined to back your old show any longer, and you are on the beach. Ha! ha! ha! This is revenge indeed. You are knocked out at last, and I did it. You'll never appear again as the marvelous young actor-playwright, and the name of Frank Merriwell will sink into oblivion. It is well. Yours with satisfaction,

LESLIE LAWRENCE."

"I knew well enough it was that dirty rascal who did the job!" cried Hodge, springing up. "The cur!"

"Waal, dinged if he hadn't oughter be shot!" burst from Gallup. "An' he knows Folansbee's gone back on ye."

"It's no use, Frank," said Hodge, disconsolately; "you are done for. The story is out. Folansbee has skipped us, and——"

"He has not skipped us. He's simply decided to go out of the theatrical business. It was a fad with him, anyhow. As long as everything was going well, he liked it; but I see he is a man who cannot stand hard luck. He is changeable and that makes him a mighty poor man to back a venture. It takes a man with determination and a fixed purpose to win at anything. Changing around, jumping from one thing to another, never having any clear ideas is enough to make a failure of any man. Folansbee doesn't need to follow the show business for a living. He went into it because it fascinated him. The glamour is all worn off now, and he is ready to get out if it. Let him go."

"It's all right to say let him go, but what are you going to do without him? You are talking about putting your play out again, but how will you do it?"

"I'll find a way."

"That is easier said than done. You have been lucky, Frank, there is no question about that. You can't be that lucky all the time."

"There are more ways than one to catch an angel."

"I rather think you'll find that angels are not so thick. Once in a while there is a soft thing who is ready to gamble with his money by putting it behind a traveling theatrical company, but those soft things are growing scarcer and scarcer. Too many of them have been bitten."

"Still, I have a feeling that I'll find a way to succeed."

"Of course you can advertise for a partner to invest in a 'sure thing,' and all that, but those games are too near fraud. Rascals have worked those schemes so much that honest men avoid them."

"I shall not resort to any trickery or deception. If I catch an 'angel' I shall get one just as I obtained Folansbee, by telling him all the risks and chances of failure."

"Well, you'll not get another that way."

"Darned if I ain't afraid now!" nodded Ephraim. "But Mr. Folansbee's goin' to take keer of this comp'ny, ain't he? He's goin' to take it back to Denver?"

"He has agreed to do so."

At this moment there was another sharp rap on the door, which, happening to be near, Frank opened.

Cassie Lee walked in, followed by Roscoe Havener, the soubrette and the stage manager of "For Old Eli," Cassie showed excitement.

"Well, what do you think of him?" she cried.

"Of whom—Havener?" asked Merry,

"No, Folansbee."

"What about him?"

"He's skipped."

"Skipped?"

"Sure thing. Run away."

"Impossible!"

"It's a straight fact," declared the little soubrette.

"There's no doubt of it," corroborated Havener.

"Waal, may I be tickled to death by grasshoppers!" ejaculated Gallup.

"This caps the whole business!" burst from Hodge.

"I can't believe that," said Merriwell, slowly. "How do you know, Havener?"

"His baggage is gone. Garland and Dunton traced him to the station. They were just in time to see him board an eastbound train as it pulled out. He has deserted us."

CHAPTER II.—DARKNESS AND DAWN.

Frank could not express his astonishment.

"I can't believe it," he repeated. "Folansbee would not do such a thing."

Hodge laughed shortly, harshly.

"You have altogether too much confidence in human nature, Merry," he said. "I never took much stock in this Folansbee. He is just the sort of person I would expect to do such a trick."

"The company is hot, Merriwell," said Havener. "They're ready to eat you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"For getting them into this scrape."

"I don't see how they can blame me."

There came a sound of feet outside and a bang on the door, which was flung open before Frank could reach it. Into the room stalked Granville Garland, followed by the remainder of the company. Plainly all were excited.

"Well, Mr. Merriwell," said Garland, assuming an accusing manner and striking a stage pose, "we are here."

"So I see," nodded Frank, calmly. "What's the matter?"

"You engaged us to fill parts in your play."

"I did."

"We hold contracts with you."

"I beg your pardon. I think you are mistaken."

"What?"

"I made no contracts with you; I simply engaged you. You hold contracts with Parker Folansbee."

"Folansbee has deserted us, sir," declared Garland, accusingly. "We have been tricked, fooled, deceived! We hold contracts. You were concerned with Folansbee in putting this company on the road, and you are responsible. We have come to you to find out what you mean to do."

"I am very sorry——" began Frank.

"Being sorry for us doesn't help us a bit," cut in Garland, rudely. "I believe you knew Folansbee was going to skip."

Frank turned his eyes full on the speaker, and he seemed to look his accuser straight through and through.

"Mr. Garland," he said, "you are rude and insulting. I do not fancy the way you speak to me."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"That's what I'd like to know," put in Lloyd Fowler. "I want my money. I didn't come out here to be fooled this way."

"Mr. Fowler," spoke Frank, "you have not earned any money. Instead, you have earned a fine by appearing on the stage last night in a state of intoxication."

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"Then you li——"

Fowler did not quite finish the word. Frank had him by the neck and pinned him against the wall in a moment. Merry's eyes were flashing fire, but his voice was steady, as he said:

"Take it back, sir! Apologize instantly for that!"

Garland made a move as if he would interfere, but Bart Hodge was before him in an instant, looking straight into his face, and saying:

"Hands off! Touch him and you get thumped!"

"Get out!" cried Garland.

"Not a bit of it. If you want a scrap, I shall be pleased to give you what you desire."

"Here, fellows!" called Garland; "get in here all of you and give these two tricksters a lesson! Come on!"

"Wait!" cried Havener, stepping to the other side of Merriwell. "Don't try it, for I shall stand by him!"

"Me, too, boys!" cried Cassie Lee, getting into line with her small fists clinched, and a look of determination on her thin face. "Don't nobody jump on Frank Merriwell unless I take a hand in the racket."

The rest of the company were astonished. They realized that Frank had some friends, but it was not until after he had awakened to realize just what the situation meant that Ephraim Gallup drew himself together and planted himself with Merry's party.

"Whe-ee!" he squealed. "If there's goin' ter be a ruction, yeou kin bet I'll fight fer Merry, though I ain't much of a fighter. I'd ruther run then fight any day, onless I have ter fight, but I reckon I'll hev ter fight in this case, if there is any fightin'."

Immediately Granville Garland became very placid in his manner.

"We didn't come here to fight," he said, "but we came here to demand our rights."

"An' to sass Frank," put in the Vermonter. "But, b'gosh! yeou are barkin' up ther wrong tree when yeou tackle him! He kin jest natterally chaw yeou up."

Frank still held Fowler against the wall. Now he spoke to the fellow in a low, commanding tone:

"Apologize at once," he said. "Come, sir, make haste!"

"I didn't mean anything," faltered the frightened actor. "I think I was too hasty. I apologize."

"Be careful in the future," advised Merry, releasing him.

Then Merry turned to the others, saying:

"Ladies and gentlemen, until Havener just brought the news, I did not know that Parker Folansbee was gone. It was a great surprise for me, as I did not dream he was a person to do such a thing. Even now I cannot feel that he has entirely deserted us. He may have left town rather than face us, but I hope he has been man enough to leave money behind that will enable us to return to Denver, at least. You must see that we are in the same box together. I am hit as hard as any of you, for I had hoped that Folansbee would stand by me so that I would be able to put the play in better shape and take it out again. I have lost him as a backer, and if he has skipped without leaving us anything, I have barely enough money to enable me to get back to Denver."

"Haven't you any way of getting hold of money?" asked Harper.

"Unfortunately, I have not," answered Merry. "If I had money in my pocket I would spend the last cent to square this thing with you."

"And I know that's on the level!" chirped Cassie Lee.

"Well, it's mighty tough!" muttered Billy Wynne. "That's all I've got to say."

"We'll have to get up some kind of a benefit for ourselves," said Havener. "That's the only thing left to do."

"Come up to my room," invited Miss Stanley, "and we'll try to devise a scheme for raising the dust. Come on."

They followed her out, leaving Ephraim, Bart and Frank.

"Whew!" breathed Gallup, sitting down on the bed. "Hanged if I didn't kinder think there was goin' to be a ruction one spell. I wanted to run, but I warn't goin' to leave Frank to be thrashed by a lot of hamfatters, b'gee!"

"They were excited when they came in," said Merry, apologizing for the ones who had departed. "If it hadn't been for that, they would not have thought of making such a scene."

"Well, Frank," spoke Bart, "I hope this will teach you a lesson."

"How?"

"I hope it will teach you not to put so much confidence in human nature after this. Have less confidence and do more business in writing. I haven't a doubt but Folansbee would have stuck by you all right if the new play had proved a winner, but he saw a chance to squeal when it turned out bad, and he jumped you."

"I had a contract with him about the other piece," said Merry; "but you know he did not return from St. Louis till just before we were ready to start out, and so I had not been able to arrange matters about this piece."

"And that lets him out easy."

"Yes, he gets out without any trouble, and I don't believe I can do a thing about it."

Again there came a rap on the door. When it was opened, a bell boy, accompanied by a gray-bearded gentleman, stood outside.

"Mr. Merriwell," said the bell boy, "here is a gentleman to see you."

The man entered.

"Walk right in, sir," invited Merry. "What can I do for you?"

Frank closed the door. The stranger slowly drew off his gloves, critically looking Merriwell over.

"So you are Mr. Frank Merriwell?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I recognize you," nodded the man. "Do you remember me?"

"No, sir; I can't say that I do, although I believe I have seen your face before."

"I think you have, but I did not wear a full beard then."

"Ah! Then it is possible the beard has made the change that prevents me from recognizing you."

"Quite likely."

"Will you sit down?"

"I have some important business with you," explained the stranger, with a glance toward Gallup and Hodge.

Immediately Bart started for the door.

"See you later, Frank," he said. "Come on, Ephraim."

Gallup followed Hodge from the room.

When they were gone, Frank again invited the stranger to be seated.

"Thank you," said the man, as he accepted a chair. "For reasons I wish you would look at me closely and see if you recognize me. I recognize you, although you are older, but I must proceed with the utmost caution in this matter, and I wish you would recognize me and state my name, so that I may feel absolutely certain that I am making no mistake."

Frank sat down opposite the gentleman, at whom he gazed searchingly. He concentrated his mind in the effort to remember. Frank had found that he could do many difficult things by concentration of his mental forces. Now he sought to picture in his mind the appearance of this man without a beard. Gradually, he felt that he was drawing nearer and nearer the object he sought. Finally he made a request:

"Please speak again, sir."

"Why do you wish me to, speak again?" said the stranger, smiling.

"So that your voice may aid me in remembering. I wish to associate your voice and your face."

"Very well. What do you wish me to say?"

"You have said enough. I have your voice now."

"I'm afraid you'll not be able to remember," said the stranger. "It doesn't make any great difference, for I recognize you, and I can make assurance doubly sure by asking you a few questions. First, I wish to ask——"

"Excuse me," interrupted Merry. "You are from Carson City, Nevada. You are connected with the bank in Carson, where I deposited a certain amount of valuable treasure, found by myself and some friends years ago in the Utah Desert. Your name is Horace Hobson."

"Correct!" cried the man, with satisfaction. "Now, can you produce the receipt given you for that treasure?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Frank, immediately producing a leather pocketbook and opening it. "I have it here."

In a moment he had found the paper and handed it to Mr. Hobson.

The gentleman adjusted some gold-rimmed nose-glasses and looked the receipt over.

"This is the receipt," he nodded. "You instructed the bank officials to use every effort and spare no expense to find the relatives of Prof. Millard Fillmore and the rightful heirs to the treasure."

"I did."

"I am here to inform you that the bank has carried out your instructions faithfully."

"Then you have found Prof. Fillmore's relatives?" quickly asked Merry, his heart sinking a bit.

"On the contrary, we have found that he has no relatives living. He seems to have been the last of his family—the end of it——"

"Then——"

"It has been necessary for us to go to considerable expense to settle this point beyond a doubt, but we have done so, in accordance with your directions. Of course, we shall not lose anything. We have ascertained the exact value of the treasure, and have deducted for our expense and trouble. At a meeting of the bank directors I was instructed to turn over the remainder to you. I have here papers showing the exact valuation of the treasure as deposited with us. Here is a complete account of all our expenses and charges. We have found a balance remaining of forty-three thousand seven hundred and thirty-eight dollars. I was sent to turn this money over to you, as I could identify you beyond doubt, and there could be no mistake. To make it certain in my own mind, I wished you to recognize me. You did so, and I knew I could not be making a mistake. I will take up this receipt here, and in return will give you a check for the amount, if that is satisfactory to you."

Frank sat like one dazed, staring at Horace Hobson. Was it possible that he was not dreaming? Was he in his hour of need to receive this immense sum of money? No wonder he fancied he was dreaming.

At last he gave himself a slight shake, and his voice did not falter as he said:

"It is perfectly satisfactory to me, sir. I will accept the check."

CHAPTER III.—MERRIWELL'S GENEROSITY.

Mr. Hobson departed, and then Frank rang for a bell boy and sent for Bart and Ephraim. Merry's two friends came in a short time.

"I have called you up," said Merry, "to talk over the arrangements for putting 'For Old Eli' on the road again without delay. I have decided on that. It will take some little time to manufacture the costly mechanical effect that I propose to introduce into the third act, and we shall have to get some new paper. I believe I can telegraph a description to Chicago so a full stand lithograph from stone can be made that will suit me, and I shall telegraph to-day."

Hodge stared at Frank as if he thought Merry had lost his senses.

"You always were a practical joker," he growled; "but don't you think it's about time to let up? I don't see that this is a joking matter. You should have some sympathy for our feelings, if you don't care for yourself."

Merry laughed a bit.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I assure you I was never more serious. I am not joking. I shall telegraph for the paper immediately."

"Paper like that costs money, and the lithographers will demand a guarantee before they touch the work."

"And I shall give them a guarantee. I shall instruct them to draw on the First National Bank of Denver, where my money will be deposited."

"Your money?" gasped Hodge.

"Jeewhillikins!" gurgled Gallup.

Then Frank's friends looked at each other, the same thought in the minds of both.

Had Merry gone mad? Had his misfortune turned his brain?

"I believe I can have the effect I desire to introduce manufactured for me in Denver," Frank went on. "I shall brace up that third act with it. I shall make a spectacular climax on the order of the mechanical horse races you see on the stage. I shall have some dummy figures and boats made, so that the boat race may be seen on the river in the distance. I have an idea of a mechanical arrangement to represent the crowd that lines the river and the observation train that carries a load of spectators along the railroad that runs beside the river. I think the swaying crowd can be shown, the moving train, the three boats, Yale, Harvard and Cornell, with their rowers working for life. Harvard shall be a bit in the lead when the boats first appear, but Yale shall press her and take the lead. Then I will have the scene shifted instantly, so that the audience will be looking into the Yale clubhouse. The rear of the house shall open direct upon the river. There shall be great excitement in the clubhouse, which I will have located at the finish of the course. The boats are coming. Outside, along the river, mad crowds are cheering hoarsely, whistles are screeching, Yale students are howling the college cry. Here they come! Now the excitement is intense. Hurrah! Yale has taken the lead! The boats shoot in view at the back of the stage, Yale a length ahead, Harvard next, Cornell almost at her side, and in this form they cross the line, Yale the victor. The star of the piece, myself, who has escaped from his enemies barely in time to enter the boat and help win the race, is brought on by the madly cheering college men, and down comes the curtain on a climax that must set any audience wild."

Hodge sat down on the bed.

"Frank," he said, grimly, "you're going crazy! It would cost a thousand dollars to get up that effect."

"I don't care if it costs two thousand dollars, I'll have it, and I'll have it in a hurry!" laughed Merriwell. "I am out for business now. I am in the ring to win this time."

"Yes, you are going crazy!" nodded Hodge. "Where is all the money coming from?"

"I've got it!"

Bart went into the air as if he had received an electric shock.

"You—you've what?" he yelled.

"Got the money," asserted Frank.

"Where?" shouted Bart.

"Right here."

"May I be tickled to death by muskeeters!" gasped Gallup.

"Got two thousand dollars?" said Hodge. "Oh, come off, Merriwell! You are carrying this thing too far now!"

"Just take a look at this piece of paper," invited Frank, as he passed over the check he had received from Horace Hobson.

Bart took it, he looked at it, he was stricken dumb.

Gallup looked over Bart's shoulder. His jaw dropped, his eyes bulged from his head, and he could not utter a sound.

"How do you like the looks of it?" smiled Merry.

"What—what is it?" faltered Bart.

"A check. Can't you see? A check that is good for forty-three thousand seven hundred and thirty-eight dollars."

"Good for that? Why, it can't be! Now, is this more of your joking, Merriwell? If it is, I swear I shall feel like having a fight with you right here!"

"It's no joke, old man. That piece of paper is good—it is good for every dollar. The money is payable to me. I've got the dust to put my play out in great style."

Even then Bart could not believe it. He groped for the bed and sat down, limply, still staring at the check, which he held in his hand.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"It's for the Fillmore treasure, which I found in the Utah Desert," exclaimed Frank. "It was brought to me by the man who came in here a little while ago."

Then Gallup collapsed.

His knees seemed to buckle beneath him, and he dropped down on the bed.

"Waal, may I be chawed up fer grass by a spavin hoss!" he murmured.

Hodge sat quite still for some seconds.

"Merry," he said, at last, beginning to tremble all over, "are you sure this is good? Are you sure there is no crooked business behind it?"

"Of course I am," smiled Frank.

"How can you be?" asked Bart.

"I received it from the very man with whom I did the business in Carson when I made the deposit. In order that there might be no mistake he came on here and delivered it to me personally."

"I think I'm dyin'!" muttered Ephraim. "I've received a shock from which I'll never rekiver! Forty-three thousan' dollars! Oh, say, I know there's a mistake here!"

"Not a bit of a mistake," assured Merriwell, smiling, triumphant.

"And all that money is yourn?"

"No."

"Why—why, ther check's made out to yeou."

"Because the treasure was deposited by me."

"And yeou faound it?"

"I found it, but I did so while in company with four friends."

Now Hodge showed still further excitement.

"Those friends were not with you at the moment when you found it," he said. "I've heard your story. You came near losing your life. The mad hermit fought to throw you from the precipice. The way you found the treasure, the dangers you passed through, everything that happened established your rightful claim to it. It belongs to you alone."

"I do not look at it in that light," said Frank, calmly and positively. "There were five of us in the party. The others were my friends Diamond, Rattleton, Browning, and Toots."

"A nigger!" exclaimed Bart. "Do you call him your friend?"

"I do!" exclaimed Merry. "More than once that black boy did things for me which I have never been able to repay. Although a coward at heart so far as danger to himself was concerned, I have known him to risk his life to save me from harm. Why shouldn't I call him my friend? His skin may be black, but his heart is white."

"Oh, all right," muttered Hodge. "I haven't anything more to say. I was not one of your party at that time."

"No."

"I wish I had been."

"So yeou could git yeour share of the boodle?" grinned Ephraim.

"No!" cried Hodge, fiercely. "So I could show the rest of them how to act like men! I would refuse to touch one cent of it! I would tell Frank Merriwell that it belonged to him, and he could not force me to take it. That's all."

"Mebbe the others'll do that air way," suggested the Vermont youth.

"Not on your life!" sneered Bart. "They'll gobble onto their shares with both hands. I know them, I've traveled with them, and I am not stuck on any of them."

"I shall compel them to take it," smiled Frank. "I am sorry, fellows, that you both were not with me, so I could bring you into the division. I'd find a way to compel Hodge to accept his share."

"Not in a thousand years!" exploded Bart.

"Waal," drawled Ephraim, "I ain't saying, but I'd like a sheer of that money well enough, but there's one thing I am sayin'. Sence Hodge has explained why he wouldn't tech none of it, I be gol-dinged if yeou could force a single cent enter me ef I hed bin with yeou, same as them other fellers was! I say Hodge is jest right abaout that business. The money belongs to yeou, Frank, an' yeou're the only one that owns a single dollar of it, b'gosh!"

"That's right, Ephraim," nodded Hodge. "And there isn't another chap in the country who would insist on giving away some of his money to others under similar circumstances. Some people might call it generosity; I call it thundering foolishness!"

"I can't help what you call it," said Frank; "I shall do what I believe is right and just, and thus I will have nothing to trouble my conscience."

"Conscience! conscience! You'll never be rich in the world, for you have too much conscience. Do you suppose the Wall Street magnates could have become millionaires if they had permitted their conscience to worry them over little points?"

"I fancy not," acknowledged Merry, shaking his head. "I am certain I shall never become wealthy in just the same manner that certain millionaires acquired their wealth. I'd rather remain poor. Such an argument does not touch me, Hodge."

"Oh, I suppose not! But it's a shame for you to be such a chump! Just think what you could do with forty-three thousand dollars! You could give up this show business, you could go back to Yale and finish your course in style. You could be the king-bee of them all. Oh, it's a shame!"

"Haow much'll yeou hev arter yeou divide?" asked Ephraim.

"The division will give the five of us eight thousand seven hundred and forty-six dollars and eighty cents each," answered Frank.

"He's figured that up so quick!" muttered Hodge.

"I snum! eight thaousan' dollars ain't to be sneezed at!" cried the Vermonter.

"It's a pinch beside forty-three thousand," said Bart.

"Yeou oughter be able to go back to college on that, Frank."

"He can, if he'll drop the show business," nodded Bart.

"And confess myself a failure! Acknowledge that I failed in this undertaking? Would you have me do that?"

"Oh, you wouldn't confess anything of the sort. What were you working for? To go back to Yale, was it not?"

"Sure."

"Well, I don't suppose you expected to make so much money that you would be able to return with more than eight thousand dollars in your inside pocket?"

"Hardly."

"Then what is crawling over you? If you are fool enough to make this silly division, you can go back with money enough to take you through your course in style."

"And have the memory of what happened in this town last night rankle in my heart! Hardly! I made a speech from the stage last night, in which I said I would play again in this city, and I promised that the audience should be satisfied. I shall keep that promise."

"Oh, all right! I suppose you'll be thinking of rewarding the ladies and gentlemen who called here a short time ago and attempted to bulldoze you?"

"I shall see that the members of the company, one and all, are treated fairly. I shall pay them two weeks salary, which will be all they can ask."

Hodge got up, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and stared at Frank, with an expression on his face that was little short of disgust.

"You beat them all!" he growled. "I'd do just like that—I don't think! Not one of those people has a claim on you. I'd let them all go to the deuce! It would be serving them right."

"Well, I shall do nothing of the sort, my dear fellow."

"I presume you will pay Lloyd Fowler two weeks salary?"

"I shall."

Bart turned toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going out somewhere all alone by myself, where I can say some things about you. I am going to express my opinion of you to myself. I don't want to do it here, for there would be a holy fight. I've got to do it in order to let off steam and cool down. I shall explode if I keep it corked up inside of me."

He bolted out of the room, slamming the door fiercely behind him.

Frank and Ephraim went up to the room of Stella Stanley, which was on the next floor. They found all the members of the company packed into that room.

"May we come in?" asked Merry, pleasantly.

"We don't need him," muttered Lloyd Fowler, who was seated in a corner. "Don't get him into the benefit performance. Let him take care of himself."

"Come right in, Mr. Merriwell," invited Stella Stanley. "I believe you can sing. We're arranging a program for the benefit, you know. Shall we put you down for a song?"

"I hardly think so," smiled Frank.

"Ah!" muttered Fowler, triumphantly. "He thinks himself too fine to take part in such a performance with the rest of us."

"I rather think you've hit it," whispered Charlie Harper.

"And I know you are off your trolley!" hissed Cassie Lee, who had not missed the words of either of them. "He's on the level."

"Really!" exclaimed Miss Stanley, in surprise and disappointment. "Do you actually refuse?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because there will be no performance."

"Won't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I refuse to permit it," said Frank, a queer twinkle in his eyes.

Then several of the company came up standing, and shouted:

"What!"

"That beats anything I ever heard of in my life!" said Fowler.

"For genuine crust, it surely does!" spoke up Harper.

Cassie Lee looked surprised, and Havener was amazed.

"Surely you are not in earnest, Merriwell?" the stage manager hastened to say.

"Never more so in my life!" answered Frank, easily.

"Then you're crazy."

"Oh, I guess not."

"Well, you are," said Garland. "You have gone over the limit. We are not engaged to you in any way. You said so. You explained that we could not hold you responsible. You cannot come here and dictate to us. We shall carry out this performance. If you try to prevent it, you will make a great mistake."

"Be calm," advised Merry. "You are unduly exciting yourself, Mr. Garland."

"Well, it's enough to excite anyone!"

"Meow!"

Out of the room trotted Frank's black cat, which had followed him up the stairs.

"Put that cat out!" cried Agnes Kirk. "It has caused all our bad luck!"

Frank picked the cat up.

"I told you the cat was a mascot," he said. "It has proved so!"

"I should say so!" sneered Fowler.

"Let him take himself out of here, cat and all!" cried Charlie Harper.

"Let him explain what he means by saying we shall not give a benefit performance," urged Havener, who really hoped that Frank could say something to put himself in a better light with the company.

"Yes," urged Cassie. "What did you mean by that, Frank?"

"Such a performance is quite unnecessary," assured Merry.

"We've got to do something to raise money to get out of this city."

"I will furnish you with the money, each and every one."

"You?" shouted several.

"Yes."

"How?" asked Havener. "You said a short time ago that you hadn't enough money to amount to anything."

"At that time I hadn't. Since then I have been able to make a raise."

Now there was another bustle of excitement.

"Oh!" cried several, "that's different."

"I knew there was something behind it!" exclaimed Cassie, with satisfaction. "Have you been able to raise enough to take us all back to Denver, Frank?"

"I think so, and I believe I shall have a few dollars left after we arrive there."

"How much have you raised?" asked Havener.

"Forty-three thousand dollars," answered Frank, as coolly as if he were saying forty-three dollars.

For a moment there was silence in the room, then expressions of incredulity and scorn came from all sides.

Fowler set up a shout of mocking laughter.

"Well, of all the big bluffs I ever heard this is the biggest!" he sneered.

"Say, I don't mind a joke," said Stella Stanley; "but don't you think you are carrying this thing a trifle too far, Mr. Merriwell?"

"I would be if it were a joke," confessed Frank, easily; "but, as it happens to be the sober truth, I think no one has a chance to ask. I will not only pay your fare to Denver, but each one shall receive two weeks salary, which I think you must acknowledge is the proper way to treat you."

"I'll believe it when I get my hands on the dough," said Fowler. "Forty-three thousand fiddlesticks!"

"Any person who doubts my word is at liberty to take a look at this certified check," said Merry, producing the check and placing it on the little table.

Then they crushed and crowded about that table, staring at the check.

Fowler nudged Harper, to whom he whispered:

"I believe it's straight, so help me! I'd like to kick myself!"

"Yes, it's straight," acknowledged Harper, dolefully. "I am just beginning to realize that we have made fools of ourselves by talking too much."

"What can we do?"

"Take poison!"

"We'll have to eat dirt, or he'll throw us down."

"It looks that way."

Thus it came about that Fowler was almost the first to offer congratulations.

"By Jove, Mr. Merriwell," he cried, "I'm delighted! You are dead in luck, and you deserve it! It was pretty hard for you to be deserted by Folansbee, in such a sneaking way. I have said all along that you were a remarkably bright man and merited success."

"That's right," put in Harper; "he said so to me last night. We were talking over your hard luck. I congratulate you, Mr. Merriwell. Permit me!"

"Permit me!"

Both Harper and Fowler held out their hands.

Frank looked at the extended hands, but put his own hands in his pockets, laughing softly, somewhat scornfully.

"It is wonderful," he said, "how many true friends a man can have when he has money, and how few true friends he really has when he doesn't have a dollar."

"Oh, my dear Mr. Merriwell!" protested Fowler. "I know I was rather hasty in some of my remarks, but I assure you that you misunderstood me. It was natural that all of us should be a trifle hot under the collar at being used as we were. I assure you I did not mean anything by what I said. If I spoke too hastily, I beg a thousand pardons. Again let me congratulate you."

Again he held out his hand.

"You are at liberty to congratulate me," said Merry, but still disdainingly the proffered hand. "I shall pay you the same as the others. Don't be afraid of that. But I shall give you your notice, for I shall not need you any more. With several of the others I shall make contracts to go out with this piece again, as soon as I can make some alterations, get new paper, and start the company."

Fowler turned green.

"Oh, of course you can do as you like, sir," he said. "I don't think I care to go out with this piece again. It is probable I should so inform you, even if you wanted me."

Harper backed away. He did not wish to receive such a calling down as had fallen to the lot of Fowler.

Cassie Lee held out her hand, her thin face showing actual pleasure.

"You don't know how glad I am, Frank!" she said, in a low tone. "Never anybody deserved it more than you."

"That's right," agreed Havener.

Douglas Dunton had not been saying much, but now he stood forth, struck a pose, and observed:

"Methinks that, along with several of me noble colleagues, I have made a big mistake in making offensive remarks to you, most noble high muck-a-muck. Wouldst do me a favor? Then apply the toe of thy boot to the seat of me lower garments with great vigor."

Frank laughed.

"The same old Dunton!" he said. "Forget it, old man. It's all right. There's no harm done."

While the members of the company were crowding around Merriwell, Fowler and Harper slipped out of the room and descended the stairs.

Straight to the bar of the hotel they made their way. Leaning against the bar, they took their drinks, and discussed Frank's fortune.

Another man was drinking near them. He pricked up his ears and listened when he heard Merriwell's name, and he grew excited as he began to understand what had happened.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, after a time. "I do not wish to intrude, but I happen to know Mr. Merriwell. Will you have a drink with me?"

They accepted. They were just the sort of chaps who drink with anybody who would "set 'em up."

"Do you mind telling me just what has happened to Mr. Merriwell?" asked the stranger, who wore a full beard, which seemed to hide many of the features of his face. "Has he fallen heir to a fortune?"

"Rather," answered Harper, dryly. "More than forty-three thousand dollars has dropped into his hands this morning."

"Is it possible?" asked the stranger, showing agitation. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure. I saw the certified check on a Carson City bank. He was broke this morning, but now he has money to burn."

The stranger lifted a glass to his lips. His hand trembled somewhat. All at once, with a savage oath, he dashed the glass down on the bar, shivering it to atoms. As he did so, the hairs of his beard caught around the stone of a ring on his little finger, and the beard was torn from his face, showing it was false.

The face revealed was black with discomfiture and rage.

It was the face of Leslie Lawrence!

Frank's old enemy was again discomfited!

CHAPTER IV.—IN THE SMOKER.

So Frank took the company back to Denver. He was able to do so without depositing the check till Denver was reached, as Horace Hobson furnished the funds, holding the check as security.

Hobson went along at the same time.

While on the train Frank made arrangements with several members of his company in the revised version of "For Old Eli," when the play went on the road again.

He said nothing to Lloyd Fowler nor Charlie Harper. Although he did not make arrangements with Granville Garland, he asked Garland if he cared to go out with the company again, informing him that he might have an opening for him.

Fowler saw Merry talking with some of the members, and he surmised what it meant. He began to feel anxious as time passed, and Frank did not come to him. He went to Harper to talk it over.

Harper was in the smoker, pulling at a brierwood pipe and looking sour enough. He did not respond when Fowler spoke to him.

"What's the matter?" asked Fowler. "Sick?"

"Yes," growled Harper.

"What ails you?"

"Disgusted."

"At what?"

"Somebody."

"Who?"

"Myself for one."

"Somebody else?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You're it."

Fowler fell back and stared at Harper. He had taken a seat opposite his fellow actor. Harper returned his stare with something like still greater sourness.

"What's the matter with me?" asked Fowler, wondering.

"You're a confounded idiot!" answered Harper, bluntly.

"Well, I must say I like your plain language!" exclaimed Fowler, coloring and looking decidedly touched. "You were in a bad temper when we started for Denver, but you seem to be worse now. What's the matter?"

"Oh, I see now that I've put a foot in the soup. I am broke, and I need money. All I am liable to get is the two weeks salary I shall receive from Merriwell. If I'd kept my mouth shut I might have a new engagement with him, like the others."

"Then some of the others have a new engagement?"

"All of them, I reckon, except you and I. We are the fools of the company."

"Well, what shall we do?"

"Can't do anything but keep still and swallow our medicine."

"Perhaps you think that, but I'm going to hit Merriwell up."

"Well, you'll be a bigger fool if you do, after the calling down you received from him to-day."

At that moment Frank entered the smoker, looking for Hodge, who had been unable to procure a good seat in one of the other cars. Bart was sitting near Harper and Fowler.

As Frank came down the aisle, Fowler arose.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Merriwell," he said.

"All right," nodded Frank. "Go ahead."

"I have heard that you are making new engagements with the members of the company."

"Well?"

"You haven't said anything to me."

"No."

"I suppose it is because I made some foolish talk to you this morning. Well, I apologized, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I presume you will give me a chance when you take the play out again?"

"No, sir."

Frank said it quietly, looking Fowler full in the face.

"So you are going to turn me down because I made that talk? Well, I have heard considerable about your generosity, but this does not seem very generous."

"Ever since joining the company and starting to rehearse, Mr. Fowler, you have been a source of discord. Once or twice you came near flatly refusing to do some piece of business the way I suggested. Once you insolently informed me that I was not the stage manager. You completely forgot that I was the author of the piece. I have heard that you told others not to do things as I suggested, but to do them in their own way. Several times before we started out I was on the verge of releasing you, which I should have done had there been time to fill your place properly. Last night you were intoxicated when the hour arrived for the curtain to go up. You went onto the stage in an intoxicated condition. You did not do certain pieces of business as you had been instructed to do them, but as you thought they should be done, therefore ruining a number of scenes. You were insolent, and would have been fined a good round sum for it had we gone on. In a number of ways you have shown that you are a man I do not want in my company, so I shall let you go, after paying you two weeks salary. I believe I have given the best of reasons for pursuing such a course."

Then Frank stepped past Fowler and sat down with Hodge.

The actor took his seat beside Harper, who said:

"I hope you are satisfied now!"

"Satisfied!" muttered Fowler. "I'd like to punch his head off!"

"Very likely," nodded Harper; "but you can't do it, you know. He is a holy terror, and you are not in his class."

Behind them was a man who seemed to be reading a newspaper. He was holding the paper very high, so that his face could not be seen, and he was not reading at all. He was listening with the keenest interest to everything.

As Frank sat down beside Hodge he observed a look of great satisfaction on Bart's face.

"Well, Merriwell," said the dark-faced youth, with something like the shadow of a smile, "you have done yourself proud."

"Let's go forward," suggested Merry. "The smoke is pretty thick here, and some of it from those pipes is rank. I want to talk with you."

So they got up and left the car.

As they went out, Fowler glared at Merriwell's back, hissing:

"Oh, I'd like to get even with you!"

Instantly the man behind lowered his paper, leaned forward, and said:

"I see you do not like Mr. Merriwell much. If you want to get even with him, I may be able to show you how to do it."

With startled exclamations, both Harper and Fowler turned round. The man behind was looking at them over the edge of his paper.

"Who are you?" demanded Fowler.

"I think you know me," said the man, lowering his paper.

Lawrence sat there!

In Denver Frank was accompanied to the bank by Mr. Hobson. It happened that Kent Carson, a well-known rancher whom Frank had met, was making a deposit at the bank.

"Hello, young man!" cried the rancher, in surprise. "I thought you were on the road with your show?"

"I was," smiled Frank, "but met disaster at the very start, and did not get further than Puelbo."

"Well, that's tough!" said Carson, sympathetically. "What was the matter?"

"A number of things," confessed Frank. "The play was not strong enough without sensational features. I have found it

necessary to introduce a mechanical effect, besides rewriting a part of the play. I shall start out again with it as soon as I can get it into shape."

"Then your backer is all right? He's standing by you?"

"On the contrary," smiled Merry, "he skipped out from Puelbo yesterday morning, leaving me and the company in the lurch."

"Well, that was ornery!" said Carson. "What are you going to do without a backer?"

"Back myself. I have the money now to do so. I am here to make a deposit."

Then it came about that he told Mr. Carson of his good fortune, and the rancher congratulated him most heartily.

Frank presented his check for deposit, asking for a check book. The eyes of the receiving teller bulged when he saw the amount of the check. He looked Frank over critically.

Mr. Hobson had introduced Frank, and the teller asked him if he could vouch for the identity of the young man.

"I can," was the answer.

"So can I," spoke up Kent Carson. "I reckon my word is good here. I'll stand behind this young man."

"Are you willing to put your name on the back of this check, Mr. Carson?" asked the teller.

"Hand it over," directed the rancher.

He took the check and endorsed it with his name.

"There," he said, "I reckon you know it's good now."

"Yes," said the teller. "There will be no delay now. Mr. Merriwell can draw on us at once."

Frank thanked Mr. Carson heartily.

"That's all right," said the cattleman, in an offhand way. "I allow that a chap who will defend a ragged boy as you did is pretty apt to be all right. How long will it take to get your play in shape again?"

"Well, I may be three or four days rewriting it. I don't know how long the other work will be."

"Three or four days. Well, say, why can't you come out to my ranch and do the work?"

"Really, I don't see how I can do that," declared Frank. "I must be here to see that the mechanical arrangement is put up right."

"Now you must come," declared Carson. "I won't take no for your answer. You can give instructions for that business. I suppose you have a plan of it?"

"Not yet, but I shall have before night."

"Can you get your business here done to-day?"

"I may be able to, but I am not sure."

"Then you're going with me to-morrow."

"I can't leave my friends who are——"

"Bring them right along. It doesn't make a bit of difference if there are twenty of them. I'll find places for them, and they shall have the best the Twin Star affords. Now, if you refuse that offer, you and I are enemies."

The man said this laughingly, but he placed Frank in an awkward position. He had just done a great favor for Merriwell, and Frank felt that he could not refuse.

"Very well, Mr. Carson," he said, "if you put it in that light, I'll have to accept your hospitality."

"That's the talk! Won't my boy at Yale be surprised when I write him you've been visiting me? Ha! ha! ha!"

Mr. Carson was stopping at the Metropole, while Frank had chosen the American. The rancher urged Merry to move right over to the Metropole, and the young actor-playwright finally consented.

But Frank had business for that day. First he telegraphed to the lithographers in Chicago a long description of the scene which he wanted made on his new paper. He ordered it rushed, and directed them to draw on his bankers for any reasonable sum.

Then he started out to find the proper men to construct the mechanical effect he wished. He went straight to the theater first, and he found that the stage manager of the Broadway was a genius who could make anything. Frank talked with the man twenty minutes, and decided that he had struck the person for whom he was looking.

It did not take them long to come to terms. The man had several assistants who could aid him on the work, and he

promised to rush things. Frank felt well satisfied.

Returning to his hotel, Merry drew a plan of what he desired. As he was skillful at drawing, and very rapid, it did not take him more than two hours to draw the plan and write out an explicit explanation of it.

With that he returned to the stage manager. They spent another hour talking it over, and Frank left, feeling satisfied that the man perfectly understood his wants and would produce an arrangement as satisfactory as it could be if it were overseen during its construction by Frank himself.

Frank was well satisfied with what he had accomplished. He went back to the American and drew up checks for every member of the old company, paying them all two weeks salary. Lloyd Fowler took the check without a word of thanks. The others expressed their gratitude.

Then Frank moved over to the Metropole, where he found Kent Carson waiting for him.

Hodge and Gallup came along with Frank.

"These are the friends I spoke of, Mr. Carson," explained Frank.

"Where's the rest of them?" asked the rancher, looking about.

"These are all."

"All?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, by the way you talked, I reckoned you were going to bring your whole company along."

He remembered Hodge, whom he had seen with Frank once before, and he shook hands with both Bart and Ephraim.

"You are lucky to be counted as friends of a young man like Mr. Merriwell," said the cattleman. "That is, you're lucky if he's anything like what my boy wrote that he was. My boy is a great admirer of him."

"It's strange I don't remember your son," said Frank.

"Why, he's a freshman."

"Yes, but I know a large number of freshmen."

"So my boy said. Said you knew them because some of them had been trying to do you a bad turn; but he was glad to see you get the best of them, for you were all right. He said the freshmen as a class thought so, too."

"Your son was very complimentary. If I return to Yale, I shall look him up."

"Then you contemplate returning to college?"

"I do."

"When?"

"Next fall, if I do not lose my money backing my play."

"Oh, you won't lose forty-three thousand dollars."

"That is not all mine to lose. Only one-fifth of that belongs to me, and I can lose that sum."

"Then why don't you let the show business alone and go back to college on that?"

"Because I have determined to make a success with this play, and I will not give up. Never yet in my life have I been defeated in an undertaking, and I will not be defeated now."

The rancher looked at Frank with still greater admiration.

"You make me think of some verses I read once," he said. "I've always remembered them, and I think they've had something to do with my success in life. They were written by Holmes."

The rancher paused, endeavoring to recall the lines. It was plain to Frank that he was not a highly educated man, but he was highly intelligent—a man who had won his way in the world by his own efforts and determination. For that reason, he admired determination in others.

"I have it!" exclaimed the rancher. "Here it is:

"Be firm! One constant element in luck
Is genuine, solid, old Teutonic pluck.
See yon tall shaft; it felt the earthquake's thrill,
Clung to its base and greets the sunrise still.
Stick to your aim; the mongrel's hold will slip,
But only crowbars loose the bulldog's grip;

Small as he looks, the jaw that never yields
Drags down the bellowing monarch of the fields.”

CHAPTER V.—NATURE’S NOBLEMAN.

Frank found the Twin Star Ranch a pleasant place. The house was large and well furnished, everything being in far better taste than he had expected.

Merry knew something of ranches and ranch life which, however, he said nothing about. He was supposed to be a very tender tenderfoot. Nobody dreamed he had ever handled a lariat, ridden a bucking broncho, or taken part in a round-up.

Gallup roamed about the ranch, inspecting everything, and he was a source of constant amusement to the “punchers,” as the cowboys were called.

After one of these tours of inspection, he came back to the room where Frank and Bart were sitting, filled with amazement.

“Vermont farms are different from this one,” smiled Merry.

“Waal, naow yeou’re talkin’! I’d like ter know haow they ever do the milkin’ here. I don’t b’lieve all ther men they’ve got kin milk so menny caows. Why, I saw a hull drove of more’n five hundred cattle about here on the farm, an’ they told me them warn’t a pinch of what Mr. Carson owns. Gosh all hemlock! but he must be rich!”

“Mr. Carson seems to be pretty well fixed,” said Merry.

“That’s so. He’s got a fine place here, only it’s too gol-dinged mernoternous.”

“Monotonous? How?”

“The graound’s too flat. Ain’t any hills to rest a feller’s eyes ag’instant. I tell yeou it does a man good to go aout where he kin see somethin’ besides a lot of flatness an’ sky. There ain’t northin’ in the world purtier than the Varmount hills. In summer they’re all green an’ covered with grass an’ trees, an’ daown in the valleys is the streams an’ rivers runnin’ along, sometimes swift an’ foamin’, sometimes slow an’ smooth, like glars. An’ ther cattle are feedin’ on ther hills, an’ ther folks are to work on their farms, an’ ther farm haouses, all painted white, are somethin’ purty ter see. They jest do a man’s heart an’ soul good. An’ then when it is good summer weather in Varmount, I be dad-bimmed if there’s any better weather nowhere! Ther sun jest shines right daown as if it was glad to git a look at sech a purty country, an’ ther sky’s as blue as Elsie Bellwood’s eyes. Ther birds are singin’ in ther trees, an’ ther bees go hummin’ in ther clover fields, an’ there’s sich a gol-durn good feelin’ gits inter a feller that he jest wants ter larf an’ shaout all ther time. Aout here there ain’t no trees fer ther birds ter sing in, an’ there don’t seem ter be northin’ but flat graound an’ cattle an’ sky.”

Frank had been listening with interest to the words of the country boy. A lover of nature himself, Merry realized that Gallup’s soul had been deeply impressed by the fair features of nature around his country home.

“Yes, Ephraim,” he said, “Vermont is very picturesque and beautiful. The Vermont hills are something once seen never to be forgotten.”

Gallup was warmed up over his subject.

“But when it comes to daownright purtiness,” he went on, “there ain’t northing like Varmount in the fall fer that. Then ev’ry day yeou kin see ther purtiest sights human eyes ever saw. Then is the time them hills is wuth seein’. First the leaves on ther maples, an’ beeches, an’ oaks they begin ter turn yaller an’ red a little bit. Then ther frost comes more, an’ them leaves turn red an’ gold till it seems that ther hull sides of them hills is jest like a purty painted picter. The green of the cedars an’ furs jest orfsets the yaller an’ gold. Where there is rocks on the hills, they seem to turn purple an’ blue in the fall, an’ they look purty, too—purtier’n they do at any other time. I uster jest go aout an’ set right daown an’ look at them air hills by the hour, an’ I uster say to myself I didn’t see haow heaven could be any purtier than the Varmount hills in ther fall.

“But there was folks,” he went on, whut lived right there where all them purty sights was an’ never saw um. They warn’t blind, neither. I know some folks I spoke to abaout how purty the hills looked told me they hedn’t noticed um! Naow, what du yeou think of that? I’ve even hed folks tell me they couldn’t see northin’ purty abaout um! Naow whut du yeou think of that? I ruther guess them folks missed half ther fun of livin’. They was born with somethin’ ther matter with um.

“It uster do me good ter take my old muzzle-loadin’ gun an’ go aout in the woods trampin’ in the fall. I uster like ter walk where the leaves hed fell jest to hear um rustle. I’d give a dollar this minute ter walk through the fallen leaves in the Varmount woods! I didn’t go out ter shoot things so much as I did to see things. There was plenty of squirrels, but I never shot but one red squirrel in my life. He come aout on the end of a limb clost to me an’ chittered at me in a real jolly way, same’s to say, ‘Hello, young feller! Ain’t this a fine day? Ain’t yeou glad yeou’re livin’?’ An’ then I up an’ shot him, like a gol-durn pirut!”

Ephraim stopped and choked a little. Bart was looking at him now with a strange expression on his face. Frank did not speak, but he was fully in sympathy with the tender-hearted country youth.

Bart rose to his feet, heaving a deep sigh.

"I'm afraid I missed some things when I was a boy," he said. "There were plenty of woods for me, but I never found any pleasure in them. I used to think it fun to shoot squirrels; but now I believe it would have been greater pleasure for me if I had not shot them. I never listened to the music of the woods, for I didn't know there was any music in them. Gallup, you have shown me that I was a fool."

Then, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he walked out of the room.

Because Ephraim was very verdant the cowboys on the Twin Star fancied that Mr. Carson's other visitors must be equally as accustomed to Western ways.

Frank was hard at work on his play, and that caused him to stick pretty close to the house. However, he was a person who believed in exercise when he could find it, and so, on the afternoon of the second day, he went out and asked one of the punchers if he could have a pony.

The man looked him over without being able to wholly conceal his contempt.

"Kin you ride?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Frank, quietly.

"Hawse or kaow?" asked the cowboy.

"If you have a good saddle horse, I'd like to have him," said Merry. "And be good enough to restrain your sarcasm. I don't like it."

The puncher gasped. He was angry. The idea of a tenderfoot speaking to him in such a way!

"All right," he muttered. "I'll git ye a critter, but our Western hawses ain't like your Eastern ladies' hawses."

He departed.

Hodge had overheard all this, and he came up.

"You want to look out, Merry," he said. "That chap didn't like the way you called him down, and he'll bring you a vicious animal."

"I know it," nodded Merry, pulling on a pair of heavy gloves. "It is what I expect."

Bart said no more. He had seen Merry ride, and he knew Frank was a natural horse breaker.

The puncher returned in a short time, leading a little, wiry, evil-eyed broncho. He was followed by several other cowboys, and Merry heard one of them say:

"Better not let him try it, Hough. He'll be killed, and Carson will fire you."

"I'll warn him," returned the one called Hough, "an' then I won't be ter blame. He wants ter ride; let him ride—if he kin."

Frank looked the broncho over.

"Is this the best saddle horse you have?" he asked.

"Waal, he's the only one handy now," was the sullen answer. "He's a bit onreliable at times, an' you'd better look out fer him. I wouldn't recommend him for a lady ter ride."

"By that I presume you mean he is a buckler?"

"Waal, he may buck some!" admitted the puncher, surprised that Frank should ask such a question.

"You haven't anything but a hackamore on him," said Merry. "Why didn't you put a bit in his mouth? Do people usually ride with hackamores out here?"

"He kinder objects to a bit," confessed the cowboy, his surprise increasing. "People out here ride with any old thing. Mebbe you hadn't better try him."

"Has he ever been ridden?"

"Certainly."

"You give your word to that?"

"Yep."

"All right. Then I'll ride him."

Frank went into the saddle before the puncher was aware that he contemplated such a thing. He yanked the halter out of the man's hand, who leaped aside, with a cry of surprise and fear, barely escaping being hit by the broncho's heels, for the creature wheeled and kicked, with a shrill scream.

Frank was entirely undisturbed. He had put on a pair of spurred riding boots which he found in the house, and now the

broncho felt the prick of the spurs.

Then the broncho began to buck. Down went his head, and up into the air went his heels; down came his heels, and up went his head. Then he came down on all fours, and his entire body shot into the air. He came down stiff-legged, his back humped. Again and again he did this, with his nose between his knees, but still the tenderfoot remained in the saddle.

“Good Lord!” cried the wondering cowboys.

Bart Hodge stood at one side, his hands in his pockets, a look of quiet confidence on his face.

From an upper window of the ranch a pretty, sad-faced girl looked out, seeing everything. Frank had noticed her just before mounting the broncho. He wondered not a little, for up to that moment he had known nothing of such a girl being there. He had not seen her before since coming to the ranch.

All at once the broncho began to “pitch a-plunging,” jumping forward as he bucked. He stopped short and whirled end-for-end, bringing his nose where his tail was a moment before. He did that as he leaped into the air. Then he began to go up and down fore and aft with a decidedly nasty motion. He screamed his rage. He pitched first on one side and then on the other, letting his shoulders alternately jerk up and droop down almost to the ground.

“Good Lord!” cried the cowboys again, for through all this Frank Merriwell sat firmly in the saddle.

“Is this yere your tenderfoot what yer told us ye was goin’ ter learn a lesson, Hough?” they asked.

“Waal, I’ll be blowed!” was all the reply Hough made.

The broncho pitched “fence-cornered,” but even that had no effect on the rider.

Hough told the truth when he said the animal had been ridden before. Realizing at last the fruitlessness of its efforts, it suddenly ceased all attempts to unseat Frank. Two minutes later Merriwell was riding away on the creature’s back, and Hough, the discomfited cowboy, was the laughing-stock of the Twin Star Ranch.

CHAPTER VI.—A CHANGE OF NAME.

At the open upper window of the ranch the sad-faced, pretty girl watched and waited till Frank Merriwell came riding back over the prairie.

“Here he comes!” she whispered. “He is handsome—so handsome! He is the first man I have seen who could be compared with Lawton.”

Kent Carson had heard of Frank’s departure on Wildfire, the bucking broncho. He found it difficult to believe that his guest had really ridden away on the animal, and he was on hand, together with Bart and Ephraim, when Merry came riding back.

Near one of the corrals a group of cowboys had gathered to watch the remarkable tenderfoot, and make sarcastic remarks to Hough, who was with them, looking sulky and disgusted.

Mr. Carson hurried to greet Frank.

“Look here, young man,” he cried, “I’d like to know where you ever learned to ride bucking bronchos?”

“This is not the first time I have been on a cattle ranch, Mr. Carson,” smiled Frank, springing down from Wildfire.

One of the cowboys came shuffling forward. It was Hough.

“Say, tenderfoot,” he said, keeping his eyes on the ground, “I allows that I made some onnecessary remarks ter you a while ago. I kinder hinted as how you might ride a kaow bettern a hawse. I’ll take it all back. You may be a tenderfoot, but you knows how ter ride as well as any of us. I said some things what I hadn’t oughter said, an’ I swallows it all.”

“That’s all right,” laughed Frank, good-naturedly. “You may have had good reasons for regarding tenderfeet with contempt, but now you will know all tenderfeet are not alike. I don’t hold feelings.”

“Thankee,” said Hough, as he led Wildfire away.

Frank glanced up toward the open window above and again he caught a glimpse of that sad, sweet face.

Mr. Carson shook hands with Frank.

“Now I know you are the kind of chap to succeed in life,” he declared. “I can see that you do whatever you undertake to do. I am beginning to understand better and better how it happened that my boy thought so much of you.”

He took Frank by the arm, and together they walked toward the house. Again Merry glanced upward, but, somewhat to his disappointment, that face had vanished.

It was after supper that Merry and Hodge were sitting alone on the veranda in front of the house, when Bart suddenly said, in a low tone:

“Merriwell, I have a fancy that there is something mysterious about this place.”

“Is that so?” said Frank. “What is it?”

“I think there is some one in one of those upper rooms who is never seen by the rest of the people about the place.”

“What makes you think so?”

“There is a room up there that I’ve never seen anyone enter or leave. The door is always closed. Twice while passing the door I have heard strange sounds coming from that room.”

“This grows interesting,” admitted Frank. “Go on.”

“The first time,” said Bart, “I heard some one in there weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break.”

“Her heart?” came quickly from Merry’s lips.

“Yes.”

“Then it is a female?”

“Beyond a doubt. The second time I heard sounds in that room to-day after you rode away on the broncho. I heard some one singing in there.”

“Singing?”

“Yes. It was a love song. The voice was very sad and sweet, and still there seemed something of happiness in it.”

Hodge was silent.

“Well, you have stumbled on a mystery,” nodded Frank, slowly. “What do you make of it?”

“I don’t know what to make of it, unless some friend or relative of Carson’s is confined in that room.”

“Why confined there?”

“You know as well as I do.”

Frank opened his lips to say something about the face he had seen at the window, but at that moment Carson himself came out onto the veranda, smoking his pipe. The rancher took a chair near, and they chatted away as twilight and darkness came on.

“How are you getting along on your play, Mr. Merriwell?” asked the man.

“Very well.” answered Frank. “You know it is a drama of college life—life at Yale?”

“No, I didn’t know about that.”

“It is. Just now I am puzzled most to find a name for it.”

“What was the name before?”

“‘For Old Eli.’”

“U-hum. Who was Old Eli?”

“There!” cried Merry. “That shows me there is a fault with the name. Even though your boy is in Yale, you do not know that Yale College is affectionately spoken of by Yale men as ‘Old Eli.’”

“No, never knew it before; though, come to think about it, Berlin did write something in some of his letters about Old Eli. I didn’t understand it, though.”

“And the public in general do not understand the title of my play. They suppose Old Eli must be a character in the piece, and I do not fancy there is anything catching and drawing about the title. I must have a new title, and I’m stuck to find one that will exactly fit.”

“I suppose you must have one that has some reference to college?”

“Oh, yes! That is what I want. One that brings Yale in somehow.”

“All you Yale men seem to be stuck on that college. You’re true blue.”

Frank leaped to his feet with a cry of delight.

“I have it!” he exclaimed.

“What?” gasped Mr. Carson.

“The title!”

"You have?"

"Yes; you gave it to me then!"

"I did?"

"Sure thing."

"What is it?"

"'True Blue.' That is a title that fits the play. Yale's color is blue, you know. People may not understand just what the title means, but still I believe there is something attractive about it, something that will draw, and the audience will understand it before the play is over. 'True Blue' is the name! I have been well paid for coming out here, Mr. Carson! Besides entertaining me royally, you have given me a striking name for my play."

"Well, I'm sure I'm glad if I've done that," laughed Kent Carson.

"I must put that title down on the manuscript," said Frank. "I feel an inspiration. I must go to work at once. I am in the mood now, and I can write."

Excusing himself, he hurried into the house. Soon a light gleamed from the window of the room in which he worked, which was on the ground floor. Looking in at that window, Hodge saw Frank had started a fire in the grate and lighted a lamp. He was seated at a table, writing away swiftly.

Kent Carson got up and stood beside Hodge looking into the room.

"Merriwell is a great worker," said the rancher.

"He's a steam engine," declared Bart. "I never saw a fellow who could do so much work and so many things. There is no telling how long he will drive away at that play to-night. Now that he has the title, he may finish it to-night, and be ready to leave here in the morning."

"If that happens, I shall be sorry I gave the title so soon," said the cattleman, sincerely. "I have taken a great liking to that young man."

Frank worked away a long time, utterly unconscious of the flight of the hours. At last he became aware that the fire in the open grate had made the room uncomfortably warm. He had replenished it several times, as there was something wonderfully cheerful in an open fire. He arose and flung wide the window.

The moon, a thin, shining scimitar, was low down in the west. Soon it would drop from view beyond the horizon. There was a haze on the plain. Slowly out of that haze came two objects that seemed to be approaching.

"Cattle," said Merry, turning back from the window and sitting down at the table again.

He resumed work on the play. He did not hear the door open softly, he did not hear a light footstep behind him, he did not hear a rustling sound quite near, and it was not until a deep, tremulous sigh reached his ears that he became aware of another presence in the room.

Like a flash Frank whirled about and found himself face to face with—

The girl he had seen at the window!

In astonishment Frank gazed at the girl, who was dressed in some dark material, as if she were in mourning. He saw that she was quite as pretty as he had fancied at first, although her face was very pale and sad. The color of her dress and hair made her face seem paler than it really was.

Only a moment did Frank remain thus. Then he sprang up, bowing politely, and saying:

"I beg your pardon! I did not know there was a lady in the room."

She bowed in return.

"Do not rise," she said. "I saw you to-day from my window, and I could not sleep till I had seen you again. Somehow you seemed to remind me of Lawton. I thought so, then, but now it does not seem so much that way. Still you made me think of him. I have been shut up there so long—so long! I have not talked to anybody, and I wanted to talk to somebody who could tell me something of the world—something of the places far away. I am buried here, where nobody knows anything to talk about but cattle and horses."

Frank's heart was thrilled with sympathy.

"Do they keep you shut up in that room?" he asked.

"No; I stay there from choice. This is the first time I have been downstairs for weeks. I have refused to leave the room; I refused to see my father. I can't bear to have him look at me with such pity and anger."

"Your father—he is Mr. Carson?"

"Yes."

"It is strange he has never spoken to me of you. I was not aware he had a daughter, although he spoke proudly of his son."

In an instant Frank regretted his words. A look of anguish swept over the face of the girl, and she fell back a step, one thin hand fluttering up to her bosom.

"No!" she cried, and her voice was like the sob of the wind beneath the leaves of a deserted house; "he never speaks of me! He says I am dead—dead to the world. He is proud of his son, Berlin, my brother; but he is ashamed of his daughter, Blanche."

Frank began to suspect and understand the truth. This girl had met with some great sorrow, a sorrow that had wrecked her life. Instantly Merry's heart was overflowing with sympathy, but his situation was most embarrassing, and he knew not what to say. The girl seemed to understand this.

"Don't think me crazy because I have come here to you in this way," she entreated. "Don't think me bold! Oh, if you could know how I have longed for somebody with whom I could talk! I saw you were a gentleman. I knew my father would not introduce me to you, but I resolved to see you, hoping you would talk to me—hoping you would tell me of the things going on in the world."

"I shall be glad to do so," said Merry, gently. "But don't you have any papers, any letters, anything to tell you the things you wish to know?"

"Nothing—nothing! I am dead to the world. You were writing. Have I interrupted you?"

"No; I am through working on my play to-night."

"Your play?" she cried, eagerly. "What are you doing with a play? Perhaps—perhaps——"

She stopped speaking, seeming to make an effort to hold her eagerness in check.

"I am writing a play," Frank explained. "That is, I am rewriting it now. I wrote it some time ago and put it on the road, but it was a failure. I am going out again soon with a new company."

Her eagerness seemed to increase.

"Then you must know many actors," she said. "Perhaps you know him?"

"Know whom?"

"Lawton—Lawton Kilgore."

Frank shook his head.

"Never heard of him."

She showed great disappointment.

"I am so sorry," she said. "I hoped you might be able to tell me something about him. If you can tell me nothing, I must tell you. I must talk to somebody. You see how it is. Mother is dead. Father sent me to school in the East. It was there that I met Lawton. He was so handsome! He was the leading man in a company that I saw. Then, after the company disbanded for the season, he came back to spend the summer in the town where I was at school. I suppose I was foolish, but fell in love with him. We were together a great deal. We became engaged."

Frank fancied he knew what was coming. The girl was skipping over the story as lightly as possible, but she was letting him understand it all.

"I didn't write father about it," she went on, "for I knew he would not approve of Lawton. He wanted me to marry Brandon King, who owns the Silver Forks Ranch. I did not love King. I loved Lawton Kilgore. But the principal of the school found out what was going on, and he wrote father. Then Lawton disappeared, and I heard nothing from him. They say he deserted me. I do not believe it. I think he was driven away. I waited and waited for him, but I could not study, I could not do anything. He never came back, and, at last, father came and took me away. He brought me here. He was ashamed of me, but he said he would not leave me to starve, for I was his own daughter. His kindness was cruel, for he cut me off from the world. Still I believe that some day Lawton will come for me and take me away from here. I believe he will come—if they have not killed him!"

She whispered the final words.

"They? Who?" asked Frank, startled.

"My father and my brother," she answered. "They were furious enough to kill him. They swore they would."

She had told Merry her story, and she seemed to feel relieved. She asked him many questions about the actors he knew. He said he had the pictures of nearly all who had taken parts in his two plays. She asked to see them, and he brought them out from his large traveling case, showing them to her one by one. She looked at them all with interest.

Of a sudden, she gave a low, sharp cry. Her hand darted out and caught up one of the photographs.

"Here—here!——" she panted. "You have his picture here! This is Lawton Kilgore—Lawton, my lover!"

It was the picture of Leslie Lawrence!

CHAPTER VII.—THE TRAGEDY AT THE RANCH.

"That?" exclaimed Frank. "You must be mistaken! That man's name is not Kilgore, it is Lawrence."

He fancied the girl was crazy. He had wondered if her misfortune had affected her brain.

"This is the picture of Lawton Kilgore!" she repeated, in a dull tone.

"Do you think I would not know him anywhere—under any circumstances? This is the man who promised to marry me! This is the man my father hates as he hates a snake!"

"Well, that man is worthy of your father's hatred," said Merry, "for he is a thoroughbred villain. But I think you must be mistaken, for your father met him in Denver. This man had me arrested, and your father followed to the police station, and was instrumental in securing my release. If this man was Kilgore, your father would have found his opportunity to kill him."

"You do not understand," panted the girl. "Father has never seen him to know him—has never even seen his picture. If Lawton was known by another name, father would not have recognized him, even though they met in Denver."

Frank began to realize that the girl was talking in a sensible manner, and something told him she spoke the truth. To his other crimes, Lawrence had added that of deceiving an innocent girl.

"And he is in Denver?" panted the rancher's daughter. "He is so near! Oh, if he would come to me!"

Frank was sorry that he had permitted her to see the photographs, but it was too late now for regrets.

The girl pressed the picture to her lips.

"You must give it to me!" she panted. "I will take it to my room! I wish to be alone with it at once! Oh, I thank you!"

Then she hurried from the room, leaving Merry in anything but a pleasant frame of mind.

There was a sound outside the window. Frank got up and went over to the window. Looking out, he saw two horses standing at a little distance from the ranch. A man was holding them, and the faint light of the moon fell on the man's face.

"Well, I wonder what that means?" speculated Frank. "Those horses are saddled and bridled. Who is going to ride them to-night?"

Then he remembered the two forms he had seen coming out of the mist that lay on the plain, and he wondered if they had not been two horsemen.

Something about the appearance of the man at the heads of the horses seemed familiar. He looked closer.

"About the size and build of Lloyd Fowler," he muttered. "Looks like Fowler, but of course it is not."

There was a step on the veranda, and a figure appeared at the open window. Into the room stepped a man.

Frank sprang back, and was face to face with the intruder.

"Leslie Lawrence!" he whispered.

"Yes," said the man, advancing insolently; "I am Leslie Lawrence."

"What do you want?"

"I want an engagement in your new company. I have come here for it. Will you give it to me?"

Frank was astounded by the insolence of the fellow.

"I should say not!" he exclaimed. "What do you take me for? No, Leslie Lawrence, alias Lawton Kilgore, villain, deceiver of innocent girls, wretch who deserves hanging, I will not give you an engagement, unless it is with an outraged father. Go! If you wish to live, leave instantly. If Kent Carson finds you here, he will know you now, and your life will not be worth a cent!"

At this moment the door was flung open, and Ephraim Gallup came striding into the room, saying as he entered:

"Darned if I knowed there was a purty young gal in this haouse! Thought I'd come daown, Frank, an' see if yeou was goin' to stay up all night writin' on that play of— Waal, I be gosh-blamed!"

Ephraim saw Lawrence, and he was astounded.

"Didn't know yeou hed visitors, Frank," he said.

"So you refuse me an engagement, do you, Merriwell?" snarled Lawrence. "All right! You'll wish you hadn't in a minute!"

He made a spring for the table and caught up the manuscript lying on it. Then he leaped toward the open grate, where the fire was burning.

"That's the last of your old play!" he shouted, hurling the manuscript into the flames.

Both Frank and Ephraim sprang to save the play, but neither of them was in time to prevent Lawrence's revengeful act.

"You miserable cur!" panted Frank.

Out shot his fist, striking the fellow under the ear, and knocking him down.

At the same time Ephraim snatched the manuscript from the fire and beat out the flames which had fastened on it.

Lawrence sat up, his hand going round to his hip. He wrenched out a revolver and lifted it.

Frank saw the gleam of the weapon, realized his danger, and dropped an instant before the pistol spoke.

The shot rang out, but even as he pressed the trigger, Lawrence realized that Merriwell had escaped. But beyond Frank, directly in line, he saw a pale-faced girl who had suddenly appeared in the open door. He heard her cry "Lawton!" and then, through the puff of smoke, he saw her clutch her breast and fall on the threshold, shot down by his own hand!

Horror and fear enabled him to spring up, plunge out of the open window, reach the horses, leap on one and go thundering away toward the moonlight mists as if Satan were at his heels.

There was a tumult at the Twin Star. There was hot mounting to pursue Lawrence and his companion. Carson had heard the shot. He had rushed down to find his daughter, shot in the side, supported in the arms of Frank Merriwell.

A few words had told Carson just what had happened.

He swore a fearful oath to follow Lawrence to death.

The girl heard the oath. She opened her eyes and whispered:

"Father—don't! He didn't mean—to shoot—me! It was—an—accident!"

"I'll have the whelp stiff at my feet before morning!" vowed the revengeful rancher.

He gave orders for the preparing of horses. He saw his daughter carried to her room. He lingered till the old black housekeeper was at the bedside to bind up the wound and do her best to save the girl.

Then Carson bounded down the stairs and sent a cowboy flying off on horseback for the nearest doctor, a hundred miles away.

"Kill the horse under ye, if necessary, Prescott!" he had yelled at the cowboy. "Get the doctor here as quick as you can!"

"All right, sir!" shouted Prescott, as he thundered away.

"Now!" exclaimed Kent Carson—"now to follow that murderous hound till I run him to earth!"

He found men and horses ready and waiting. He found Frank Merriwell and Bart Hodge there, both of them determined to take part in the pursuit.

"We know him," said Merriwell. "He fired that shot at me. We can identify him."

Frank believed that Lawrence had murdered the rancher's daughter, and he, like the others, was eager to run the wretch down.

They galloped away in pursuit, the rancher, four cowboys, Merriwell and Hodge, all armed, all grim-faced, all determined.

The sun had risen when they came riding back to the ranch. Ephraim Gallup met Frank.

"Did ye git ther critter?" he asked, in a whisper.

"No," was the answer.

"Then he got erway?" came in accents of disappointment from the Vermonter.

"No."

"Whut? Haow's that?"

"Neither Lawrence nor Fowler escaped."

"Then it was Fowler with him?"

"I believe so."

"Whut happened to um?"

"They attempted to ford Big Sandy River."

"An' got drowned?"

"No. Where they tried to cross is nothing but a bed of quicksands. Horses and men went down into the quicksands. They were swallowed up forever."

The doctor came at last. He extracted the bullet from Blanche Carson's side, and he told her she would get well, as the wound was not dangerous.

Kent Carson heard this with deep relief. He went to the bedside of the girl and knelt down there.

"Blanche," he whispered, huskily, "can you forgive your old dad for treating you as he has? You are my own girl—my little Blanche—no matter what you have done."

"Father!" she whispered, in return, "I am glad you have come to me at last. But you know you are ashamed of me—you can never forget what I have done."

"I can forget now," he declared, thinking of the man under the quicksands of Big Sandy. "You are my daughter. I am not ashamed of you. You shall never again have cause for saying that of me."

"Kiss me, papa!" she murmured.

Sobbing brokenly, he pressed his lips to her cheeks.

And when he was gone from the room she took a photograph from beneath her pillow and gazed at it long and lovingly.

She knew not that the man had been swallowed beneath the quicksands of the Big Sandy.

The tragic occurrences of the night hastened the departure of Frank and his friends from Twin Star Ranch, although Kent Carson urged them to remain. Frank had, however, finished his play, which, thanks to the prompt act of Ephraim, had been only slightly injured by its fiery experience, and was anxious to put it in rehearsal.

So, a day or so later, Frank, Bart and Ephraim were once more in Denver.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE OLD ACTOR'S CHAMPIONS.

Along a street of Denver walked a man whose appearance was such as to attract attention wherever seen. That he had once been an actor could be told at a glance, and that he had essayed great rôles was also apparent. But, alas! it was also evident that the time when this Thespian trod the boards had departed forever, and with that time his glory had vanished.

His ancient silk hat, although carefully brushed, was shabby and grotesque in appearance. His Prince Albert coat, buttoned tight at the waist, and left open at the bosom, was shabby and shining, although it also betokened that, with much effort, he had kept it clean. His trousers bagged at the knees, and there were signs of mannish sewing where two or three rents and breaks had been mended. The legs of the trousers were very small, setting tightly about his thin calves. His shoes were in the worst condition of all. Although they had been carefully blackened and industriously polished, it was plain that they could not hold together much longer. The soles were almost completely worn away, and the uppers were breaking and ripping. The "linen" of this frayed gentleman seemed spotlessly white. His black silk necktie was knotted in a broad bow.

The man's face was rather striking in appearance. The eyes had once been clear and piercing, the mouth firm and well formed; but there was that about the chin which belied the firmness of the mouth, for this feature showed weakness. The head was broad at the top, with a high, wide brow. The eyes were set so far back beneath the bushy, grayish eyebrows that they seemed like red coals glowing in dark caverns—for red they were and bloodshot. The man's long hair fell upon the collar of his coat.

And on his face was set the betraying marks of the vice that had wrought his downfall. The bloodshot eyes alone did not reveal it, but the purplish, unhealthy flush of the entire face and neck plainly indicated that the demon drink had fastened its death clutch upon him and dragged him down from the path that led to the consummation of all his hopes and aspirations.

He had been drinking now. His unsteady step told that. He needed the aid of his cane in order to keep on his feet. He slipped, his hat fell off, rolled over and over, dropped into the gutter, and lay there.

The unfortunate man looked round for the hat, but it was some time before he found it. When he did, in attempting to pick it up, he fell over in the gutter and rolled upon it, soiling his clothes. At last, with a great effort, he gathered himself up, and rose unsteadily to his feet with his hat and cane.

"What, ho!" he muttered, thickly. "It seems the world hath grown strangely unsteady, but, perchance, it may be my feet."

Some boys who had seen him fall shouted and laughed at him. He looked toward them sadly.

"Mock! mock! mock!" he cried. "Some of you thoughtless brats may fall even lower than I have fallen!"

"Well, I like that—I don't think!" exclaimed one of the boys. "I don't 'low no jagged stiff to call me a brat!"

Then he threw a stone at the old actor, striking the man on the cheek and cutting him slightly.

The unfortunate placed his crushed and soiled hat on his head, took out a handkerchief, and slowly wiped a little blood from his cheek, all the while swaying a bit, as if the ground beneath his feet were tossing like a ship.

"Now let it work," he quoted. "'Mischief, thou art afoot; take thou what course thou wilt. How now, fellow?'"

The thoughtless young ruffians shouted with laughter.

"Looker the old duffer!" cried one. "Ain't that a picture fer yer!"

"Look!" exclaimed the actor. "Behold me with thy eyes! Even lower than I have fallen may thou descend; but I have aspired to heights of which thy sordid soul may never dream. Out upon you, dog!"

With these words he reached the walk and turned down the street.

"Let's foller him!" cried one of the gang. "We can have heaps of fun with him."

"Come on! come on!"

With a wild whoop, they rushed after the man. They reached him, danced around him, pulled his coat tails, jostled him, crushed his hat over his eyes.

"Give the old duffer fits!" cried the leader, who was a tough young thug of about eighteen.

There were seven boys in the gang, and four or five others came up on the run, eager to have a hand in the "racket."

The old actor pushed his hat back from his eyes, folded his arms over his out-thrown breast and gazed with his red, sunken eyes at the leader. As if declaiming on the stage he spoke:

"You have done that you should be sorry for.
There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats;
For I am armed so strong in honesty
That they pass me by as the idle wind,
Which I respect not."

This caused the boys to shout with laughter.

"Git onter ther guy!"

"What ails him?"

"He's locoed."

"Loaded, you mean."

"He's cracked in the nut."

"And he needs another crack on the nut," shouted the leader, dancing up, and again knocking the hat over the old man's eyes.

Once more pushing it back, the aged actor spoke in his deep voice, made somewhat husky by drink:

"Be patient till the last. Romans, countrymen and lovers! hear me for my cause; and be silent that you may hear; believe me for mine honor; and have respect to mine honor, that you may believe; censure me in your wisdom, and awaken your senses, that you may——"

"Oh, that's too much!" cried the ruffianly young leader. "We can't stand that kind of guy. What're yer givin' us, anyway?"

"He's drunk!" shouted several.

"Alas and alack!" sighed the old man. "I fear thou speakest the truth."

"Boundless intemperance
In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
The untimely emptying of the happy throne,
And the fall of many kings."

"That's what causes your fall," declared the ruffianly leader, as he tripped the actor, causing him to fall heavily.

"What's this?" exclaimed Frank Merriwell, who, with Hodge for a companion, just returned from Twin Star Ranch, at this moment came into view round a corner. "What are those fellows doing to that poor man?"

"Raising hob with him," said Bart, quickly. "The old fellow is drunk and they are abusing him."

"Well, I think it's time for us to take a hand in that!"

"I should say so!"

"Come on!"

Frank sprang forward; Bart followed.

The old actor was just making an effort to get up. The young ruffian who led the gang kicked him over.

The sight made Frank's blood leap.

"You cowardly young cur!" he cried, and he gave the fellow a crack on the ear that sent him spinning.

Hodge struck out right and left, quickly sending two of the largest fellows to the ground.

"Permit me to assist you, sir," said Frank, stooping to aid the actor to rise.

The leader of the gang had recovered. He uttered a mad howl.

"At 'em fellers! Knock the stuffin's outer them!" he screamed, rushing on Frank.

Merry straightened up instantly. He whirled about and saw the biggest tough coming at him, with the rest of the gang at his back. Then Frank laughed.

"Walk right up, you young terriers!" he cried, in a clear, ringing voice. "We'll make it rather interesting for you! Give it to them, Hodge!"

Hodge did so. Together the two friends met the onslaught of the gang. Their hard fists cracked on the heads of the young ruffians, and it was astonishing how these fellows were bowled over. Bart was aroused. His intense anger was betrayed by his knotted forehead, his flashing eyes, and his gleaming teeth. He did not speak a word, but he struck swift, strong and sure.

If those chaps had expected an easy thing with the two well-dressed youths who had interfered with their sport, they met the disappointment of their lives.

It actually seemed that, at one time, every one of the gang had been knocked sprawling, and not one was on his feet to face the fighting champions of the old actor.

It was a terrible surprise for the toughs. One after another, they sprang up and took to their heels.

"What have we struck?" gasped the leader, looking up at Frank.

"Get up!" invited Merry, standing over him—"get up, and I will give you another dose!"

"Excuse me!" gasped the fellow, as he scrambled away on his hands and knees, sprang up and followed the rest of the young thugs.

It was over; the gang had been put to flight, and it had been accomplished in a very few moments.

Hodge stood there, panting, glaring about, looking surprised and disappointed, as well as angry.

"That was too easy!" he exclaimed. "I thought we were in for a fight."

"Evidently they did not stand for our kind of fighting," smiled Frank. "It surprised them so that they threw up the sponge before the fight was fairly begun."

"I didn't get half enough of it," muttered Bart.

During the fight the old actor had risen to his feet. Now Frank picked up his hat and restored it to him, after brushing some dirt from it. The man received it with a profound bow. Placing it on his head, he thrust his right hand into the bosom of his coat, struck a pose, and cried:

"Are yet two Romans living such as these?
The last of all the Romans!"

"We saw you were in trouble," said Merry, "and we hastened to give you such assistance as we could."

"It was a goodly deed, a deed well done. Thy arms are strong, thy hearts are bold. Methinks I see before me two noble youths, fit to have lived in the days of knighthood."

"You are very complimentary," smiled Frank, amused at the old man's quaint way.

The actor took his hand from his bosom and made a deprecating gesture, saying:

"Nay, do not think I flatter; for what advancement may I hope from thee? I but speak the thoughts my heart bids me speak. I am old, the wreck of a once noble man; yet you did not hesitate to stand by me in my hour of need, even at peril to yourselves. I cannot reward you. I can but offer the thanks of one whose name it may be you have never heard—one whose name to-day, but for himself and his own weakness, might be on the tongues of the people of two continents. Gentlemen, accept the thanks of William Shakespeare Burns."

"Mr. Burns," said Frank, "from your words, and your manner, I am led to believe that you are an actor."

"Nay, nay. Once I trod the boards and interpreted the characters of the immortal bard, for whom I was named. That time is past. I am an actor no longer; I am a 'has been.' My day is past, my sun hath set, and night draweth on apace."

"I thought I could not be mistaken," said Frank. "We, too, are actors, although not Shakespearian ones."

"Is this true?" exclaimed the old tragedian. "And I have been befriended by those who wouldst follow the noble art! Brothers, I greet thee! But these are sad, sad days, for the drama hath fallen into a decline. The legitimate is scoffed at, the stage is defiled by the ribald jest, the clownish low-comedy star, the dancing and singing comedian, and vaudeville—ah, me! that we should have fallen into such evil ways. The indecencies now practiced in the name of art and the drama are enough to make the immortal William turn in his grave. Oh, for the good old days! But they are gone—forever gone!"

"It seems strange to meet an actor like you 'at liberty,' and so far from the Rialto," declared Merry.

"I have been touring the country, giving readings," Burns hastened to explain. "Ah, it is sad, sad! Once I might have packed the largest theater of the metropolis; to-day I am doing well if I bring out a round dozen to listen to my readings at some crossroad schoolhouse in the country. Thus have the mighty fallen!"

"I presume you are thinking of getting back to New York?"

"Nay, nay. What my eyes have beheld there and my ears have heard is enough. My heart is sick within me. I was there at the opening of the season. One Broadway theater was given over to burlesque of the very lowest order, while another was but little better in character. A leading theater close to Broadway was packed every night by well-dressed people who went there to behold a vile French farce, in which the leading lady disrobed upon the stage. Ah, me! In truth, the world hath gone wrong! The ways of men are evil, and all their thoughts are vile. It is well that Shakespeare cannot rise from his grave to look upon the horrors now perpetrated on the English-speaking stage. If he were to be restored to life and visit one of our theaters, I think his second funeral would take place the following day. He would die of heart failure."

Frank laughed heartily.

"I believe you are right. It would give William a shock, that is certain. But there are good modern plays, you know."

The actor shook his head.

"I do not know," he declared. "I have not seen them. If there is not something nasty in the play of to-day, then it must of a certainty have its 'effect' in the way of some mechanical contrivance—a horse race, a steamboat explosion, a naval battle, or something of the sort. It seems that a piece cannot survive on its merits as a play, but must, perforce, be bolstered up by some wretched device called an 'effect.'"

"Truer words were never spoken," admitted Frank. "And still there are a few plays written to-day that do not depend on such devices. In order to catch the popular fancy, however, I have found it necessary to introduce 'effects.'"

"You speak as one experienced in the construction of plays."

"I have had some experience. I am about to start on the road with my own company and my own play."

Of a sudden Frank seemed struck by an idea.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Did you say you were at liberty?"

"Just at present, yes."

"Then, if I can get you, you are the very man I want."

The old man shook his head.

"Your play can contain no part I would care to interpret," he said, with apparent regret.

"But I think it is possible that you might be induced to play the part. I had a man for it, but I lost him. I was on my way to the Orpheum, to see if I could not find another to fill his place."

"What sort of a part is it?" asked Burns, plainly endeavoring to conceal his eagerness.

"It is comedy."

"What!" cried the old actor, aghast and horrified. "Wouldst offer me such a part? Dost think I—I who have played *Hamlet*, *Brutus*, *Lear* and *Othello*—would stoop so low? 'This is the most unkindest cut of all!'"

"But there is money in it—good, sure money. I have several thousand dollars to back me, and I am going out with my piece to make or break. I shall keep it on the road several weeks, at any cost."

The old actor shook his head.

"It cannot be," he sadly said. "I am no comedian. I could not play the part."

"If you will but dress as you are, if you will add a little that is fantastic to your natural acting, you can play the part. It is

that of a would-be tragedian—a Shakespearian actor.”

“Worse and worse!” moaned the old man. “You would have me burlesque myself! Out upon you!”

“I will pay you thirty-five dollars a week and railroad expenses. How can you do better?”

“Thirty-fi——”

The old actor gasped for breath. He seemed unable for some moments to speak. It was plain that the sum seemed like a small fortune to him. At last his dignity and his old nature reasserted itself.

“Young man,” he said, “dost know what thou hast done? I—I am William Shakespeare Burns! A paltry thirty-five per week! Bah! Go to!”

“Well, I’ll make it forty, and I can get a hundred good men for that at this time of the season.”

The aged Thespian bowed his head. Slowly he spoke, again quoting:

“Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck to the heart of my mystery.”

“But the money, you seem to need that. Money is a good thing to have.”

“‘Methinks there is much reason in his sayings.’ It is true. Ah! but how can I thus lower myself?”

“As you have said, the good old days are past. It is useless to live for them. Live for the present—and the future. Money is base stuff, but we must have it. Come, come; I know you can do the part. We’ll get along splendidly.”

“‘Good reasons must, of force, give place to better.’ As Cassius saith, ‘Men at some time in their lives are masters of their fates;’ but I think for me that time is past. But forty dollars—ye gods!”

“It is better than reading to a scant dozen listeners at crossroads schoolhouses.”

“Ah, well! You take advantage of my needs. I accept. But I must have a dollar at once, with which to purchase that which will drown the shame my heart doth feel.”

“You shall have the dollar,” assured Frank. “Come along with us, and we will complete arrangements.”

So the old actor was borne away, outwardly sad, but inwardly congratulating himself on the greatest streak of luck he had come upon in many moons.

CHAPTER IX.—WELCOME LETTERS.

Frank Merriwell was determined to give a performance of his revised play in Denver for advertising purposes. He had the utmost confidence in “True Blue,” as he had rechristened the piece, but the report of his failure in Puelbo had spread afar in dramatic circles, being carried broadcast by the Eastern dramatic papers, and managers were shy of booking the revised version.

Some time before, after receiving the fortune from the Carson City Bank, Merry had made a fair and equal division, sending checks for their share to Browning, Diamond and Rattleton. Toots’ share he had been unable to forward, not knowing the address of the faithful darky, who had been forced to go forth into the world to win his way when Frank met with the misfortune that caused him to leave Yale.

And now came three letters from three Yale men. Diamond’s was brief.

“DEAR OLD COMRADE: It is plain you are still a practical joker. Your very valuable (?) check on the First National of Denver received. I really do not know what to do with so much money! But I am afraid you are making a mistake by using a check on an existing bank. Why didn’t you draw one on ‘The First Sand Bank of Denver’? It would have served your purpose just as well.

“Can’t write much now, as I am making preparations for vacation, which is only a month away. I’m afraid it will be a sorry vacation for me this year; not much like the last one. Then we were all together, and what times we did have at Fardale and in Maine! I’m blue to-night, old friend, and do not feel like writing. I fancy it has made me feel bluer than ever to read in the *Dramatic Reflector* of your unfortunate failure in Puelbo and the disbanding of your company after your backer deserted you. Hard luck, Frank—hard luck! All the fellows have been hoping you would make money enough to come back here in the fall, but all that is over now.

“What are you doing? Can’t you find time to write to us and let us know? We are very anxious about you. I will write you again when I am more in the mood. Hoping your fortune may turn for the better, I remain,

“Always your friend,
“JACK DIAMOND.”

Frank read this aloud to Hodge and Gallup in his room at the Metropole Hotel.

"Waal, by ginger!" exploded Ephraim. "What do yeou think of that?"

"Now you see what your reputation as a practical joker is doing for you, Merry," said Hodge.

"Well, I'll be hanged if I don't believe Diamond considers it a joke!" laughed Frank.

"Of course he does," nodded Bart.

"Well, he is putting a joke on himself. He'll be somewhat surprised when he discovers that."

Ephraim began to grin.

"That's so, by thutter!" he cried.

"Here is a letter from Rattleton," said Merry, picking up another from the mail he had just received. "I wonder how he takes it?"

"Read it and find aout," advised Gallup.

"A wise suggestion," bowed Frank, with mock gravity, tearing it open.

This is what he read:

"DEAR MERRY: Cheese it! What do you take us for—a lot of chumps? We're onto you! Eight thousand fiddlesticks! I'm going to have the check framed and hang it in my room. It will be a reminder of you.

"Say, that was tough about your fizzle in Puelbo! It came just when we were hoping, you know. The fellows have been gathering at the fence and talking about you and your return to college since Browning came back and told us how you were making a barrel of money with your play. Now the report of your disaster is spread broadcast, and we know you cannot come back. It's tough.

"Diamond is in a blue funk. He hasn't been half the man he was since you went away. Hasn't seemed to care much of anything about studying or doing anything else, and, as a result, it is pretty certain he'll be dropped a class.

"But Diamond is not the only one. You know Browning was dropped once. He is too lazy to study, but, in order to keep in your class, he might have pulled through had you been here. Now it is known for an almost certain thing that he will not be able to pass exams, and you know what that means.

"I'm not going to say anything about myself. It's dull here. None of your friends took any interest in the college theatricals last winter, and the show was on the bum. The whole shooting match made a lot of guys of themselves.

"Baseball has been dead slow, so far this season. We are down in the mud, with Princeton crowing. It takes you, Merry, to twist the Tiger's tail! What was the matter? Everything. All the pitchers could do for us was to toss 'em up and get batted out of the box. The new men were not in it. They had glass arms, and the old reliables had dead wings. It was pitiful! I can't write any more about it.

"I'd like to see you, Frank! Would I? Ask me! Oh, say! don't you think you can arrange it so you can come East this summer? Come and see me. Say, come and stay all summer with me at my home! We won't do a thing but have a great time. Write to me and give me your promise you will come. Don't you refuse me, old man.

"Yours till death,
"RATTLES.

"Here's another!" cried Frank. "If that doesn't beat! Why, they all think those checks fakes!"

"As I said before," said Hodge, "you see what your reputation as a practical joker is doing for you."

"I see," nodded Frank. "It is giving me a chance to get a big joke on those fellows. They will drop dead when they learn those checks actually are good."

"Waal, I should say yes!" nodded Ephraim. "Jest naow they're kainder thinkin' yeou are an object fer charity."

"Here's Browning's letter."

"MR. FRANK MERRIWELL, Millionaire and Philanthropist.

"DEAR SIR: I seize my pen in my hand, being unable to seize it with my foot, and hasten to acknowledge the receipt of your princely gift. With my usual energy and haste, I dash off these few lines at the rate of ten thousand words a minute, only stopping to rest after each word. After cashing your check with the pawnbroker, I shall use the few dollars remaining to settle in part with my tailor, who has insisted in a most ungentlemanly manner on the payment of his little bill, which has been running but a short time—less than two years, I think. The sordid

greed and annoying persistence of this man has much embarrassed me, and I would pay him off entirely, if it were not that I wish to get my personal property out of my 'uncle's' safe-deposit vault, where it has been resting for some time.

"It is evident to me that you have money to burn in an open grate. That is great, as Griswold would say. And it was so kind of you to remember your old friends. The little hint accompanying each check that thus you divided the spoils of our great trip across the continent was not sufficient to deceive anyone into the belief that this was other than a generous act on your part and a free gift.

"There is not much news to write, save that everybody is in the dumps and everything has turned blue. I suppose some of the others will tell you all about things, so that will save me the task, which you know I would intensely enjoy, as I do love to work. It is the joy of my life to labor. I spend as much time as possible each day working on a comfortable couch in my room; but I will confess that I might not work quite so hard if it was not necessary to draw at the pipe in order to smoke up.

"When are you coming East? Aren't you getting tired of the West? Why can't you make a visit to Yale before vacation time? You would be received with great *éclat*. Excuse my French. I have to fling it around occasionally, when I can't think of any Latin or Greek. Why do you suppose Latin and Greek were invented? Why didn't those old duffers use English, and save us poor devils no end of grinding?

"Unfortunately, I have just upset the ink, and, having no more, I must quit.

"Yours energetically,
"BRUCE BROWNING."

"Well, it's simply marvelous that he stuck to it long enough to write all that!" laughed Frank. "And he, like the others, thinks the check a fake."

Hodge got up and stood looking sullenly out of the window.

"What's the matter, Bart?" asked Merry, detecting that there was something wrong.

"Nothing," muttered the dark-faced fellow.

"Oh, come! Was there anything in those letters you did not like?"

"No. It was something there was not in the letters."

"What?"

"Not one of those fellows even mentioned me!" cried Hodge, fiercely whirling about. "I didn't care a rap about Diamond and Rattleton, but Browning would have showed a trace of decency if he had said a word about me. He made a bad blunder and was forced to confess it, but I'll bet he doesn't think a whit more of me now."

"Oh, you are too sensitive, old man. They did not even write anything in particular for news, and think how many of my friends at college they failed to mention."

"Oh, well; they knew I was with you, and one of them might have asked for me. I hope you may go back to Yale, Merry, but wild horses could not drag me back there! I hate them all!"

"Hate them, Hodge?"

"Yes, hate them!" Bart almost shouted. "They are a lot of cads! There is not a whole man among them!"

Then he strode out of the room, giving the door a bang behind him.

Of course Frank made haste to reply to the letters of his college chums, assuring them that the checks were perfectly good, and adding that, although he had some reputation as a practical joker, he was not quite crazy enough to utter a worthless check on a well-known bank, as that would be a criminal act.

Frank mentioned Hodge, and, without saying so in so many words, gave them to understand that Bart felt the slight of not being spoken of in any of the letters from his former acquaintances.

One thing Frank did not tell them, and that was that he was on the point of starting out again with his play, having renamed it, and rewritten it, and added a sensational feature of the "spectacular" order in the view of a boat race between Yale, Harvard and Cornell.

Even though he was venturing everything on the success of the piece, Merry realized now better than ever before that no man was so infallible that he could always correctly foretell the fate of an untried play.

It is a great speculation to put a play on the road at large expense. The oldest managers are sometimes deceived in the value of a dramatic piece of property, and it is not an infrequent thing that they lose thousands of dollars in staging and producing a play in which they have the greatest confidence, but which the theater-going public absolutely refuses to accept.

Frank had been very confident that his second play would be a winner in its original form, but disaster had befallen it at the very start. He might have kept it on the road as it stood, for, at the very moment when he seemed hopelessly stranded without a dollar in the world, fortune had smiled upon him by placing in his hands the wealth which he had found in the Utah Desert at the time of his bicycle tour across the continent.

But Merry had realized that, in the condition in which it then stood, it was more than probable that the play would prove an utter failure should he try to force it upon the public.

This caused him to take prompt action. First he brought the company to Denver, holding all of them, save the two men who had caused him no small amount of trouble, namely, Lloyd Fowler and Charlie Harper.

Calmly reviewing his play at Twin Star Ranch, Frank decided that the comedy element was not strong enough in the piece to make it a popular success on the road; accordingly he introduced two new characters. It would be necessary, in order to produce the effect that he desired, to employ a number of "supers" in each place where the play was given, as he did not believe he would be warranted in the expense of carrying nonspeaking characters with him.

On his return to Denver Frank had hastened at once to look over the "mechanical effect" which had been constructed for him. It was not quite completed, but was coming on well, and, as far as Frank could see, had been constructed perfectly according to directions and plans.

Of course, one man had not done the work alone. He had been assisted by carpenters and scene painters, and the work had been rushed.

Merry got his company together and began rehearsing the revised play. His paper from Chicago came on, and examination showed that it was quite "up to the mark." In fact, Havener, the stage manager, was delighted with it, declaring that it was the most attractive stuff he had seen in many years.

But for the loss of one of the actors he had engaged to fill one of the comedy parts, Merry would have been greatly pleased by the manner in which things moved along.

Now, however, he believed that in William Shakespeare Burns he had found a man who could fill the place left vacant.

Although Hodge had been ready enough to defend Burns from the young ruffians who were hectoring him on the street, he had little faith in the man as a comedian. Hodge could see no comedy in the old actor. To tell the truth, it was seldom that Hodge could see comedy in anything, and low comedy, sure to appeal to the masses, he regarded as foolish.

For another reason Hodge felt uncertain about Burns. It was plain that the aged tragedian was inclined to look on the wine "when it was red," and Bart feared he would prove troublesome and unreliable on that account.

"I am done with the stuff!" Hodge had declared over and over. "On that night in the ruffians' den at Ace High I swore never to touch it again, for I saw what brutes it makes of men. I have little confidence in any man who will drink it."

"Oh, be a little more liberal," entreated Frank. "You know there are men who drink moderately, and it never seems to harm them."

"I know there are such men," admitted Bart; "but it is not blood that runs in their veins. It's water."

"Not all men are so hot-blooded and impulsive as you and Jack Diamond."

"Don't speak of Diamond! I don't think anything of that fellow. I am talking about this Burns. He is a sot, that's plain. Drink has dragged him down so far that all the powers in the world cannot lift him up. Some night when everything depends on him, he will fail you, for he will be too drunk to play his part. Then you will be sorry that you had anything to do with him."

"All the powers in this world might not be able to lift him up," admitted Frank; "but there are other powers that can do so. I pity the poor, old man. He realizes his condition and what he has missed in life."

"But the chances are that the audience will throw things at him when he appears as a comedian."

"Instead of that, I believe he will convulse them with laughter."

"Well, you have some queer ideas. We'll see who's right."

Frank kept track of Burns, dealing out but little money to him, and that in small portions, so that the old actor could not buy enough liquor to get intoxicated, if he wished to do so.

The first rehearsal was called on the stage of the theater in Denver. Merry had engaged the theater for that purpose. The entire company assembled. Frank addressed them and told them that he was glad to see them again. One and all, they shook hands with him. Then Burns was called forward and introduced as the new comedian. At this he drew himself up to his full height, folded his arms across his breast, and said:

"Ay! 'new' is the word for it, for never before, I swear, have I essayed a rôle so degraded or one that hath so troubled me by night and by day. Comedy, comedy, what sins are committed in thy name!"

Granville Garland nudged Douglas Dunton in the ribs, whispering in his ear:

"Behold your rival!"

"Methinks he intrudeth on my sacred territory," nodded Dunton. "But he has to do it on the stage, and on the stage I am

a villain. We shall not quarrel."

Burns proved to be something of a laughing-stock for the rest of the company.

"He's a freak," declared Billy Wynne, known as "Props."

"All of that," agreed Lester Vance.

"I don't understand why Merriwell should pick up such a creature for us to associate with," sniffed Agnes Kirk. "But Merriwell is forever doing something freakish. Just think how he carried around that black tramp cat that came onto the stage to hoodoo us the first time we rehearsed this piece."

"And there is the cat now!" exclaimed Vance, as the same black cat came walking serenely onto the stage.

"Yes, here is the cat," said Frank, who overheard the exclamation. "She was called a hoodoo before. I have determined that she shall be a mascot, and it is pretty hard to get me to give anything up when I am determined upon it."

"Well, I haven't a word to say!" declared Agnes Kirk, but she looked several words with her eyes.

The rehearsal began and progressed finely till it was time for Burns to enter. The old actor came on, but when he tried to say his lines the words seemed to stick in his throat and choke him. Several times he started, but finally he broke down and turned to Frank, appealingly, saying, huskily:

"I can't! I can't! It is a mockery and an insult to the dead Bard of Avon! It's no use! I give it up. I need the money, but I cannot insult the memory of William Shakespeare by making a burlesque of his immortal works!"

Then he staggered off the stage.

CHAPTER X.—AT THE FOOT OF THE BED.

Late that evening, after the work and rehearsing of the day was over, Frank, Bart and Ephraim gathered in the room of the first-mentioned and discussed matters.

"I told you Burns was no good," said Hodge, triumphantly, "I knew how it would be, but he showed up sooner than I expected. I suppose you will get rid of him in a hurry now?"

"I think not," answered Merry, quietly.

"What?" cried Hodge, astounded. "You don't mean to say you will keep him after what has happened?"

"I may."

"Well, Frank, I'm beginning to believe the theatrical business has turned your head. You do not seem to possess the good sense you had once."

"Is that so?" laughed Merry.

"Just so!" snapped Hodge.

"Oh, I don't know! I rather think Burns will turn out all right."

"After making such a fizzle to-day? Well, you're daffy!"

"You do not seem to understand the man at all. I can appreciate his feelings."

"I can't!"

"I thought not. It must be rather hard for him, who has always considered himself a tragedian and a Shakespeare scholar, to burlesque the parts he has studied and loved."

"Bah! That's nonsense! Why, the man's a pitiful old drunkard! You give him credit for too fine feelings."

"And you do not seem to give him credit for any feelings. Even a drunkard may have fine feelings at times."

"Perhaps so."

"Perhaps so! I know it. It is drink that degrades and lowers the man. When he is sober, he may be kind, gentle and lovable."

"Well, I haven't much patience with a man who will keep himself filled with whisky."

Frank opened his lips to say something, but quickly changed his mind, knowing he must cut Hodge deeply. He longed, however, to say that the ones most prone to err and fall in this life are often the harshest judges of others who go astray.

"I ruther pity the pore critter," said Ephraim; "but I don't b'lieve he'll ever make ennyboddy larf in the world. He looks too much like a funeral."

"That is the very thing that should make them laugh, when he has his make-up on. I have seen the burlesque tragedian overdone on the stage, so that he was nauseating; but I believe Burns can give the character just the right touch."

"Well, if you firmly believe that, it's no use to talk to you, for you'll never change your mind till you have to," broke out Hodge. "I have seen a sample of that in the way you deal with your enemies. Now, there was Leslie Lawrence——"

"Let him rest in peace," said Frank. "He is gone forever."

"An' it's a dinged good riddance!" said Gallup. "The only thing I'm sorry fer is that the critter escaped lynchin'!"

"Yes, he should have been lynched!" flashed Bart. "At the Twin Star Ranch now the poor girl he deserted is lying on a bed of pain, shot down by his dastardly hand."

"He did not intend the bullet for her," said Frank, quickly.

"No; but he intended it for you! It was a great case of luck that he didn't finish you. If you had pushed the villain to the wall before that, instead of dealing with him as if he had the least instinct of a gentleman in his worthless body, you would have saved the girl from so much suffering."

"She loves him still," said Frank. "Her last words to me were a message to him, for she does not know he is dead beneath the quicksands of Big Sandy."

"The quicksands saved him from the gallows."

"An' they took another ungrateful rascal along with him, b'gee!" said Ephraim, with satisfaction.

"Yes," nodded Frank; "I think there is no doubt but Lloyd Fowler perished with Lawrence, for I fancied I recognized Fowler in the fellow who accompanied Lawrence that fatal night."

"And Fowler was a drinking man, so I should think he would be a warning to you," said Hodge. "I shouldn't think you'd care to take another sot into the company."

"You must know that there is as little resemblance between Fowler and Burns as there is between night and day."

"Perhaps so, but Burns can drink more whisky than Fowler ever could."

"And he is ashamed of himself for it. I have talked with him about it, and I know."

"Oh, he made you believe so. He is slick."

"He was not trying to deceive me."

"So you think. He knows where his money comes from to buy whisky. It's more than even chance that, when you are ready to start on the road, he will give you the slip."

"He asked me to release him to-day."

"And you refused?"

"I did. I urged him to stay with us."

Hodge got up.

"That settles it!" he exclaimed. "Now I know theatricals have wrought your downfall! Your glory is fast departing."

"Then let it depart!" laughed Frank. "You have been forced to confess yourself mistaken on other occasions; you may on this."

"Good-night," said Hodge, and he went out.

Ephraim grinned.

"Some fellows would say it'd be a gol-danged sensible thing fer yeou to git rid of that feller," he said, nodding toward the door. "He's gittin' to be the greatest croaker I ever knew."

"Hodge is getting worse," admitted Frank, gravely. "I think the unfortunate end of his college course has had much to do with it. He broods over that a great deal, and it is making him sour and unpleasant. I can imagine about how he feels."

"If he ever larfed he'd be more agreeable. Danged if I like a feller that alwus looks so sollum an' ugly. Sometimes he looks as ef he could snap a spike off at one bite an' not harf try."

"Wait," said Frank. "If I am successful with this play, I hope to go back to Yale in the fall and take Hodge with me. I think he is getting an idea into his head that his life career has been ruined at the very start, and that is making him bitter. I'll take him back, run him into athletics, get his mind off such unpleasant thoughts, and make a new man of him."

"Waal, I hope ye do," said Gallup, rising and preparing to go. "There's jest one thing about Hodge that makes me keer a rap fer him."

“What’s that?”

“It’s ther way he sticks to yeou. Be gosh! I be’lieve he’d wade through a red-hot furnace to reach yeou an’ fight for yeou, if yeou was in danger!”

“I haven’t a doubt but he’d make the attempt,” nodded Frank.

“An’ he kin fight,” the Vermonter went on. “Aout at Ace High, when we was up against all them ruffians, he fought like a dozen tigers all rolled inter one. That’s ernnther thing that makes me think a little somethin’ of him.”

“Yes,” agreed Merry, “Bart is a good fighter. The only trouble with him is that he is too ready to fight. There are times when one should avoid a fight, if possible; but Hodge never recognizes any of those times. I never knew him to try to avoid a fight.”

“Waal,” drawled Ephraim, with a yawn, “I’m goin’ to bed. Good-night, Frank.”

“Good-night.”

Merry closed the door after Gallup and carefully locked and bolted it. Then he sat down, took a letter from his pocket, and read it through from beginning to end. When he had finished, he pressed the missive to his lips, murmuring:

“Elsie! Elsie! dear little sweetheart!”

For some time he sat there, thinking, thinking. His face flushed and paled softened and glowed again; sometimes he looked sad, and sometimes he smiled. Had a friend been there, he might have read Frank’s thoughts by the changing expressions on his face.

At last Merry put away the letter, after kissing it again, and, having wound up his watch, undressed and prepared for bed. His bed stood in a little alcove of the room, and he drew the curtains back, exposing it. Donning pajamas, he soon was in bed. Reaching out, he pressed a button, and—snap!—out went the gas, turned off by electricity.

Frank composed himself to sleep. The dull rumble of the not yet sleeping city came up from the streets and floated in at his open window. The sound turned after a time to a musical note that was like that which comes from an organ, and it lulled him to sleep.

For some time Merry seemed to sleep as peacefully as a child. Gradually the roaring from the streets became less and less. Frank breathed softly and regularly.

And then, without starting or stirring, he opened his eyes. He lay quite still and listened, but heard no sound at first. For all of this, he was impressed by a feeling that something was there in that room with him!

It was a strange, creepy, chilling sensation that ran over Frank. He shivered the least bit.

Rustle-rustle! It was the lightest of sounds, but he was sure he heard it.

Some object was moving in the room!

Frank remembered that he had closed and locked the door. Not only had he locked it, but he had bolted it, so that it could not be opened from the outside by the aid of a key alone.

What was there in that room? How had anything gained admittance?

Frank attempted to convince himself that it was imagination, but he was a youth with steady nerves, and he knew he was not given to imagining such things without cause.

Rustle—rustle!

There it was again! There was no doubt of it this time!

Something moved near the foot of the bed!

Still without stirring, Merriwell turned his gaze in that direction.

At the foot of the bed a dark shape seemed to tower!

Impressed by a sense of extreme peril, Frank shot his hand out of the bed toward the electric button on the wall.

By chance he struck the right button.

Snap!—up flared the gas.

And there at the foot of the bed stood a man in black, his face hidden by a mask.

The sudden up-flaring of the gas seemed to startle the unknown intruder and disconcert him for a moment. With a hiss, he started backward.

Bolt upright sat Frank.

Merry’s eyes looked straight into the eyes that peered through the twin holes in the mask.

Thus they gazed at each other some seconds.

There was no weapon in the hands of the masked man, and Merriwell guessed that the fellow was a burglar.

That was Frank's first thought.

Then came another.

Why had the man sought the bed? Frank's clothes were lying on some chairs outside the alcove, and in order to go through them it had not been necessary to come near the bed.

Then Merry remembered the feeling of danger that had come over him, and something told him this man had entered that room to do him harm. Somehow, Frank became convinced that the fellow had been creeping up to seize a pillow, fling himself on the bed, press the pillow over the sleeper's face, and commit a fearful crime.

Even then Frank wondered how the man could have gained admittance to the room.

Up leaped the former Yale athlete; backward sprang the masked man. Over the foot of the bed Merry recklessly flung himself, dodging a hand that shot out at him, and placing himself between the man and the door.

As he bounded toward the door, Merriwell saw, with a feeling of unutterable amazement, that it was tightly closed and that the bolt was shot in place, just as he had left it.

He whirled about, with his back toward the door.

"Good-evening!" he said. "Isn't this rather late for a call? I wasn't expecting you."

The man was crouching before him, as if to spring toward him, but Frank's cool words seemed to cause further hesitation. A muttering growl came from behind the mask, but no words did the unknown speak.

"It is possible you dropped into the wrong room," said Merry. "I trust you will be able to explain yourself, for you are in a rather awkward predicament. Besides that, you have hidden your face, and that does not speak well for your honest intentions."

Without doubt, the intruder was astonished by Merriwell's wonderful coolness. Although startled from slumber in such a nerve-shocking manner, Frank now seemed perfectly self-possessed.

Silence.

"You don't seem to be a very sociable sort of caller," said Merry, with something like a faint laugh. "Won't you take off your mask and sit down a while."

The youth asked the question as if he were inviting the stranger to take off his hat and make himself at home.

The man's hand slipped into his bosom. Frank fancied it sought a weapon.

Now it happened that Merry had no weapon at hand, and he felt that he would be in a very unpleasant position if that other were to "get the drop" on him.

Frank made a rush at the stranger.

The man tried to draw something from his bosom, but it seemed to catch and hang there, and Merry was on him. The unknown tried to dodge, and he partly succeeded in avoiding Frank's arms.

However, he did not get fully away, and, a second later, they grappled.

The man, however, had the advantage; for all that Frank had rushed upon him, he had risen partly behind Merry, after dodging. He clutched Frank about the waist and attempted to hurl him to the floor with crushing force.

Frank Merriwell was an expert wrestler, and, although taken thus at a disadvantage, he squirmed about and broke his fall, simply being forced to one knee.

"Now I have ye!" panted the man, hoarsely.

"Have you?" came from Frank's lips. "Oh, I don't know!"

There was a sudden upward heaving, and the ex-Yale athlete shot up to his feet.

But the man was on his back, and a hand came round and fastened on Merry's throat with a terrible, crushing grip.

Frank realized that he was dealing with a desperate wretch, who would not hesitate at anything. And Merriwell's life was the stake over which they were struggling!

Frank got hold of the man's wrist and tore those fingers from his throat, although it seemed that they nearly tore out his windpipe in coming away.

On his back the fellow was panting, hoarsely, and Merry found it no easy thing to dislodge him.

Round and round they whirled. Frank might have shouted for aid, but he realized that his door was bolted on the inside,

and no assistance could reach him without breaking it down.

Besides that, Merry's pride held him in check. There was but one intruder, and he did not feel like shouting and thus seeming to confess himself outmatched and frightened.

They were at a corner of the alcove. The partition projected sharply there, and, of a sudden, with all his strength, Merry flung himself backward, dashing the man on his back against that projecting corner.

There was a grunt, a groan, and a curse.

It seemed that, for an instant, the shock had hurt and dazed the man, and, in that instant, Merry wrenched himself free.

"Now this thing will be somehow more even," he whispered, from his crushed and aching throat. He whirled to grapple with the fellow, but again the slippery rascal dodged him, leaping away.

Frank followed.

The man caught up a chair, swung it and struck at Merriwell's head with force enough to crush Frank's skull.

Merry could not dodge, but he caught the chair and saved his head, although he was sent reeling backward by the blow.

Had the fellow followed him swiftly then it is barely possible he might have overcome Frank before Merry could steady himself. A moment of hesitation, however, was taken advantage of by the youth.

The chair was tossed aside, and Merry darted after the fellow, who was astounded and dismayed by his persistence.

Round to the opposite side of the table darted the intruder, and across the table they stared at each other.

"Well," said Frank, in grim confession, "you are making a right good fight of it, and I will say that you are very slippery. I haven't been able to get a hold of you yet, though. You'll come down on the run when I do."

The man was standing directly beneath the gas jet which Merry had lighted by pressing the electric button. Of a sudden he reached up and turned off the gas, plunging the room in darkness. Then, as Frank sprang toward the jet, something swooped down on him, covering his head and shoulders in a smothering manner!

CHAPTER XI.—A MYSTERY TO SOLVE.

Frank realized that some of the clothing from the bed had been torn off and flung over his head. He attempted to cast it aside, but it became tangled so he could not accomplish his purpose as readily as he wished, although he was not long in doing so.

Retreating, he was prepared for an assault, for it seemed that the masked unknown would follow up the advantage he had gained.

No assault came.

Frank paused and listened, and, to his amazement, he could hear no sound in the room. Still, he felt that the man must be there, awaiting for an opportunity to carry out the deadly purpose which had brought him into his apartment at that hour.

It was not pleasant to stand there in the darkness, half expecting to feel a knife buried between his shoulders at any instant.

Gradually Frank's eyes became accustomed to the semi-gloom of the room. Still, he could see nothing that lived and moved. Beyond him was the window, standing open as he had left it, the light wind gently moving the draperies.

"Well," thought Merry, "I wonder how long the fellow will keep still. He'll have to make a move sometime."

He backed up against the door and stood there, facing the window. Placing a hand behind him, he took hold of the knob of the door, which he found was still locked securely. This assured him that the intruder had not escaped in that direction.

Merry felt certain that the man was close at hand. He knew he could unlock and unbolt the door and leap out quickly. He could slam the door behind him and lock it, thus penning the man in there. Then he could descend to the office and inform the clerk that he had captured a burglar.

Somehow, he did not feel like doing that; that seemed too much as if he were running away. He did not fancy doing anything that seemed in the least cowardly, even though it might be discreet.

Further than that, however, it was by no means certain that, even though he locked and secured the door behind him after leaping out of the room, he could hold the intruder captive.

In some manner the man had entered that room without disturbing the lock or bolt on the door.

How had he entered?

Frank looked toward the open window, but he knew it opened upon the face of the hotel, four stories from the level of

the street, and that settled in his mind all doubts about the window, for he instantly decided that it had not been possible for the masked unknown to get into the room that way.

Had he been in some old colonial house he would have fancied the fellow had gained admittance by means of a panel in the wall and a secret passage; but he was in a modern hotel, and it was beyond the range of probability that there were secret passages or moving wall panels in the structure.

These thoughts flitted through his mind swiftly as he stood there, trying to hear some sound that would tell him where the intruder was in the room.

All was still.

Below in the street a cab rattled and rumbled along.

The silence was even more nerve-racking than the unexpected appearance of the masked man had been. The mystery of the whole affair was beginning to impress Merry, and a mystery always aroused his curiosity to the highest pitch.

"Take your time, sir," he thought, as he leaned against the door and waited. "I believe I can stand it as long as you can."

Near at hand the door of another room swiftly opened and closed. The sound of hurried footsteps passed the door of Merriwell's room.

Frank was tempted to fling open his door and call to the man, but he hesitated about that till it was too late.

"Let him go," he thought. "Perhaps he would have been frightened to death had I called him in here."

The push button by which he could call assistance from the office was in the alcove. At this time of night it was not likely there would be anything but a tardy answer to his call should he make it.

But the electric button which turned on and ignited the gas was also in the alcove.

Frank longed to reach that button. He longed to light the gas in order to look around for the intruder.

Of course he could have lighted it with a match; but he realized that such a thing might be just what the unknown hoped for and expected. The man might be waiting for him to strike a match.

The minutes fled.

"Something must be done," Merry at last decided.

Then he resolved to leave the door, move slowly along the wall, reach the button and light the gas—if possible.

With the silence of a creeping cat, he inched along. Every sense was on the alert.

It took him a long time to come to the foot of the bed at the opening of the alcove, but he reached it at last. Was the masked man waiting for him in the darkness of the alcove? It seemed certain that he could be nowhere else in the room.

Frank hesitated, nerving himself for what might come. Surely it required courage to enter that alcove.

He listened, wondering if he could hear the breathing of the man crouching in the alcove.

He heard nothing.

Then every nerve and muscle seemed to grow taut in Merriwell's body, and, with one panther-like spring, he landed on the bed. In the twinkling of an eye he was at the head of the bed, and his fingers found the push button.

Snap!—the gas came on, with a flare.

It showed him standing straight up on the bed, his hands clinched, ready for anything that might follow.

Nothing followed.

Frank began to feel puzzled.

"Why in the name of everything peculiar doesn't he get into gear and do something—if he's going to do anything at all?" thought the youth on the bed.

Again a bound carried him over the footboard and out into the middle of the room, where he whirled to face the alcove, his eyes flashing round the place.

The bed covering which had been flung over his head lay in the middle of the floor, where he had cast it aside.

Nothing stirred in the room. On a chair near at hand Frank could hear his watch ticking in his pocket.

Then the intruder had not taken the watch, which was valuable.

Frank glanced toward his clothes. He had carefully placed them in a certain position when he undressed, and there they lay, as if they had not been touched or disturbed in the least.

"Queer burglar," meditated Merry. "Should have thought he'd gone through my clothes first thing."

But where was the fellow? There seemed but one place for him, and Frank stopped to look beneath the bed.

There was no one under the bed. The wardrobe door stood slightly ajar.

"Ah!" thought Frank. "At last! He must be in there, for there is no other place in this room where he could hide."

Without hesitation, Frank flung open the door of the wardrobe, saying:

"Come out, sir!"

But the wardrobe was empty, save of such clothing and things as Frank had placed there with his own hands.

Merriwell fell back, beginning to feel very queer. He looked all around the room, walking over to a sofa across a corner and looking behind that. In the middle of the floor he stopped.

"This beats anything I ever came against!" he exclaimed. "Was it a spook?"

Then the pain in his throat, where those iron hands had threatened to crush his windpipe, told him that it was no "spook."

"And it could not have been a dream," he decided. "I know there was a living man in this room. How did he escape? That is one question. When it is answered, I shall know how he obtained admittance. And why did he come here?"

Frank examined his clothes to make sure that nothing had been taken. He soon discovered that his watch, money and such valuables as he carried about with him every day, were there, not a thing having been disturbed. That settled one point in Frank's mind. The man had not entered that room for the purpose of robbery.

If not for robbery, what then?

It must have been for the purpose of wreaking some injury on Merriwell as he slept.

"I was warned by my feelings," Frank decided. "I was in deadly peril; there is no doubt of that."

Frank went to the window and looked out. It seemed a foolish thing to do, for he had looked out and seen that there was not even a fire escape to aid a person in gaining admittance to his room. The fire escape, he had been told, was at the end of the corridor.

It was a night without a moon, but the electric lights shone in the street below. Something caused Merry to turn his head and look to his left.

What was that?

Close against the face of the outer wall something dangled.

A sudden eagerness seized him. He leaned far out of the window, doing so at no small risk, and reached along the wall toward the object. With the tip of his fingers he grasped it and drew it toward him.

It was a rope!

"The mystery is solved!" muttered Frank, with satisfaction. "This explains how the fellow entered my room."

He shook the rope and looked upward. He could see that it ran over the sill of a window two stories above.

"Did he come down from there? Should have thought he would have selected a window directly over this. And did he climb back up this swaying, loosely dangling rope?"

Frank wondered not a little. And then, as he was leaning out of his window, the light of the street lamps showed him that a window beyond the dangling rope, on a level with his, was standing open.

The sight gave Merry a new idea.

"I believe I understand how the trick was worked," he muttered.

"That must explain how the fellow was able to vanish so swiftly while my head was covered by the bedclothes. With the aid of this rope, he swung out from his window and into mine. He could do it easily and noiselessly. While my head was covered, he plunged out of the window, caught the rope, and swung back. That's it!"

Frank drew his head in quickly, but he still clung to the end of the rope. This he drew in and lay over the sill.

"Yes," he decided, "that is the way the fellow escaped. He had the rope right here, so that he could catch it in a moment, and, grasping it, he plunged outward through the window. His momentum carried him right across and into the other window. It was a reckless thing to do, but perfectly practical."

Then he remembered how he had heard, while standing with his back against his own door, the door of an adjoining room open and close, followed by the sound of swift footsteps passing outside.

"That was when he left his room," Merry decided.

It did not take Frank long to resolve to explore that room—to seek for some clew to the identity of the masked intruder.

With the aid of the rope, he could swing into the open window; with its aid he could swing back to his own room.

He would do it.

Of course, Merry realized what a rash thing he was about to do. Of course he understood that he might be rushing to the waiting arms of his late antagonist.

Still he was not deterred. All his curiosity was aroused, and he was bent on discovering the identity of the man, if such a thing were possible.

He grasped the rope and climbed upon the window sill. Looking out, he carefully calculated the distance to the next window and the momentum he would require to take him there. Having decided this, he prepared to make the swing.

And then, just at the very instant that he swung off from the window sill, he heard a hoarse, triumphant laugh above.

He looked up.

Out of the window from which ran the rope, a man was leaning. In his hand was something on which the light from the street lamps glistened.

It was a knife!

With that knife the wretch, whose face was covered by a mask, gave a slash at the rope, just as Merry swung off from the sill.

With a twang, the rope parted!

It was sixty feet to the street below.

Frank fell.

CHAPTER XII.—THE NAME ON THE REGISTER.

Not far, however, for he released the rope and shot out his arms. He had swung across so that he was opposite the open window when the rope was cut.

Merriwell knew all his peril at the instant when he swung from the sill of his own window, but it was too late for him to keep himself from being carried out by the rope.

In a twinkling, his one thought was to reach the other window quickly, knowing he would be dashed to death on the paving below if he did not. He flung himself toward that window, just as the rope parted. His arms shot in over the sill, and there he dangled.

Down past his head shot the rope, twisting and writhing in the air, like a snake. He heard it strike on the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

An exclamation of rage broke from the lips of the man in the window above, for he realized that Frank had not fallen with the rope.

He leaned far out, lifted his arm, made a quick motion, and something went gleaming and darting through the air.

He had flung the knife at Frank.

It missed Merriwell, shot downward, and struck with a ringing clang on the stones below.

"Missed!" snarled the man. "Well, I'll get you yet!"

Then Merriwell drew himself in at the window, and the peril was past.

No wonder he felt weak and limp. No wonder that he was jarred and somewhat bewildered. It was a marvel that he was not lying dead in the street below.

Frank understood the full extent of the peril through which he had passed, and a prayer welled from his lips.

"Thank God!"

He was grateful in his heart, and he felt that he had been spared through the kindness of an all-wise Providence.

It was some moments before he could stir. He lay on the floor, panting, and regaining his strength.

He heard no sound in the room, for all the noise he had made in coming in, and more than ever he became convinced that the room had been occupied by his desperate enemy who had sought to destroy him that night.

There was now no longer a doubt concerning the purpose of the man who had gained admission to Frank's room. The fellow had not come there for plunder, but for the purpose of harming Merriwell.

Frank rose and sought the gas jet, which he lighted. Then he looked around.

Somehow, it seemed that the room had been occupied that night, although the bed was undisturbed, showing that no person had slept in it.

Frank fancied that his enemy had sat by the window, waiting, waiting till he felt sure Merry was sound asleep.

And Frank had been sleeping soundly. He realized that, and he knew something had caused him to awaken, just in time.

What was it? Was it some good spirit that hovered near to protect him?

He looked all round the room, but could find nothing that served as a clue to the identity of the man who had occupied the apartment.

But the register would tell to whom the room had been let.

Having decided to go down and look the register over, Frank wondered how he was to get back into his own room, for the door was locked and bolted on the inside.

He went to the window and looked out. There was no way for him to reach his window now that the rope had been cut.

"And I should not be surprised if I am locked in this room," thought Merry.

Investigation showed, however, that the door was unlocked, and he was able to step out into the corridor.

But there he was, shut out from his own room by lock and bolt, and dressed in nothing but a suit of pajamas.

The adventure had assumed a ludicrous aspect. Frank wondered what he could do. It was certain that they would not break into his room at that hour of the night, for the sound of bursting the bolt would disturb other sleepers.

The watchman came down the corridor. He saw Frank and came onward with haste, plainly wondering what Merry was doing there.

"Look here," said Frank, "I want to know the name of the man who occupies No. 231, this room next to mine."

"What is the matter?" asked the watchman.

"This person has disturbed me," said Frank, truthfully. "I am not going to raise a kick about it to-night, but I shall report it to the clerk in the morning."

"Does he snore loudly?" inquired the watchman. "I didn't think you could hear through those partitions."

"Here," said Frank, who had seen the watchman before, "you know me. My name is Merriwell. I haven't a cent in these pajamas, but I'll give you two dollars in the morning if you will go down to the office, look on the register, find out who occupies No. 231, and come back here and tell me."

Now it happened that Frank had given the watchman fifty cents the night before to do something for him, and so the man was persuaded to go down to the office, although it is quite probable that he did not expect to see the promised two dollars in the morning.

Frank waited.

The watchman came back after a time.

"Well," asked Merry, "did you look on the register and find out the name of the man who was given No. 231?"

"I did," nodded the watchman.

"What is his name?"

"William Shakespeare Burns," was the astonishing answer.

Frank staggered. He told the watchman he had made a mistake, but the man insisted that he had not. That was enough to excite Merry more than anything that had happened to date.

Could it be that Burns, the old actor, whom he had befriended, had sought his life?

It did not seem possible.

If it were true, then, beyond a doubt, the man had been bribed to do the deed by some person who remained in the background.

It did not take Frank long to tell the watchman what had happened. The man could scarcely believe it. He seemed to regard Merriwell as somewhat deranged.

"If you do not think I am telling the truth," said Merry, "get your keys and try my door. If you are able to open it, I shall be greatly pleased."

The watchman did so, but he could not open the door of the room.

"Now," said Merry, "to make yourself doubly sure, go down to the sidewalk in front of the hotel and you will find the rope there."

The man went down and found the rope. He came back greatly agitated.

"This is a most astonishing occurrence," he said. "Never knew anything like it to happen here before."

"Keep your eyes open for the man who had No. 231," said Merry. "I am going to take that room and sleep there the rest of the night. In the morning the door of my room must be opened for me."

He went into that room, closed the door, locked it and bolted it, closed and fastened the window, and went to bed. Of course he did not go to sleep right away, but he forced himself to do so, after a time, and he slept peacefully till morning.

In the morning Frank found the door of his room had been forced, so he was able to go in immediately on rising. He had been unable to obtain a room with a private bath connected, but there was a bathroom directly across the corridor, and he took his morning "dip," coming out as bright as a new dollar.

But the mystery of the midnight intruder weighed heavily on Merry. He felt that he would give anything to solve it, and it must be solved in some manner.

Bart came around before breakfast, and he found Merriwell standing in the middle of his room, scowling at the carpet. Frank was so unlike his accustomed self that Hodge was astounded.

"What's happened?" asked Bart.

"One of the most singular adventures of my life," answered Frank, and he proceeded to tell Bart everything.

"Singular!" cried Hodge. "I should say so! You are dead in luck to be alive!"

"I consider myself so," confessed Merry; "but I would give any sum to know who entered my room last night. Of course the name on the register was false."

"Are you certain?"

"Certain! Great Scott! You do not fancy for an instant that Burns was the man, do you?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I do!"

"You mean you think you do."

"No; I mean that I know. Burns was not the man."

"How do you know?"

"Why, hang it, Hodge! Why should that unfortunate old fellow wish to harm me, who has been his friend?"

"Somebody may have hired him to do it."

"Oh, you're daffy on that point! Reason will teach you that. If it had been Burns, he would not have registered under his own name. But I absolutely know it was not Burns I encountered. Besides being ridiculous that a man of his years and habits should venture to enter my room in such a manner, the man whom I encountered was supple, strong, and quick as a flash. Burns could not have fought like that; he could not have escaped in such an astonishing manner."

"Oh, well, perhaps not," admitted Hodge, who seemed reluctant to give up. "But I have warned you against Burns all along, and——"

"Oh, drop him now! Somebody else is trying to injure the poor fellow. I want to know who did the job last night, and W. S. Burns will not be able to tell me anything."

Bart had no more to say, and they went down to breakfast together.

Of course the hotel people promised to do everything possible to discover who had made the assault, but Frank had little confidence in their ability to accomplish anything. In fact, he believed the time had passed to do anything, for it seemed that his enemy had escaped from the hotel without leaving a trace behind him.

Frank thought over the list of enemies who had sought to injure him since he entered theatricals, and he was startled. Three of his enemies were dead. Arthur Sargent had been drowned; Percy Lockwell was lynched, and Leslie Lawrence met his death in the quicksands of Big Sandy River. Of his living enemies, who might be desperate enough to enter his room and seek to harm him Philip Scudder stood alone.

Where was Scudder? Was he in Denver? If so——

"If so, he is the man!" decided Frank.

Merry resolved to be on his guard, for something told him another attempt would be made against him.

All that forenoon he worked in the theater setting up the new mechanical arrangement, which had been completed, and preparing for the rehearsal that afternoon.

Rehearsal time came, and the members of the company assembled.

All but Burns.

He was missing.

"What do you think about it now?" asked Bart, grimly.

"The same as I thought before," declared Frank. "Burns was almost broken-hearted at rehearsal yesterday. It is possible he may not come to-day, for you know he wished to be released."

"Ah," said a sad voice, as the person in question appeared; "it is necessity that brings me. I fain would have remained away, but I need the money, and I must do that which my heart revolts against."

"I believed you would come," said Frank, greeting the old tragedian. "You will get used to the part after a while. It is better to make people laugh than to make them weep."

"But it is too late for me to turn myself into a clown."

"Where did you stay last night?" asked Merry.

"At my humble lodgings," was the answer.

"A man by your name registered at the hotel where I stop, and had the room next to mine. Is it possible there are two William Shakespeare Burns in the city of Denver?"

The old man drew himself up, thrusting his hand into the bosom of his coat, with his familiar movement of dignity.

"There is but one," he said—"but one real William Shakespeare Burns in the whole world! I am he!"

"But you were not at the hotel last night?"

"Of a certainty I was not. To that I will pledge mine honor. If another was there under my name, he is an impostor."

Frank was satisfied, but Bart was not; or, if Hodge was satisfied, he would not confess it.

The rehearsal began. Frank had engaged some people to work the mechanical arrangement used in the third act, and they had been drilled and instructed by Havener.

The first act went off well, the storm at the conclusion being worked up in first-class style. Scarcely a word of that act had Frank altered, so there was very little trouble over it.

The second act was likewise a success, Havener finding it necessary to interrupt and give instructions but twice.

Then came the third act, which Merry had almost entirely rewritten. In that act the burlesque tragedian was given an opportunity, and Burns showed that he had his lines very well, although he ran over them after the style of the old-time professional who disdains to do much more than repeat the words till the dress rehearsal comes.

The third act was divided into three scenes, the second scene being an exterior, showing the river in the distance, lined by a moving, swaying mass of people. Along the river raced the three boats representing Yale, Harvard and Cornell. Keeping pace with them on the shore was the observation train, black with a mass of spectators. As the boats first came on, Harvard had a slight lead, but Yale spurted on appearing, and when they passed from view Yale was leading slightly.

All this was a mechanical arrangement made to represent boats, a train, the river, and the great crowd of spectators. The rowers in the boats were inanimate objects, but they worked with such skill that it was hard to believe they were not living and breathing human beings. Even the different strokes of the three crews had been imitated.

This arrangement was an invention of Merriwell's own. In fact, it was more of an optical illusion than anything else, but it was most remarkable in its results, for, from the front of the house, a perfect representation of the college boat race appeared to be taking place in the distance on the stage.

Havener was a man who said very little, but he showed excitement and enthusiasm as this scene was being worked out.

When the boats had disappeared, the stage grew dark, and there was a quick "shift" to the interior of the Yale boathouse. The entire front of the house, toward the river, had been flung wide open. Behind the scenes the actors who were not on the stage at the moment and the supers hurrahed much like the cheering of a vast multitude. Whistles shrieked, and then the three boats shot into view, with Yale still in the lead. The characters on the stage proper, in the boathouse, had made it known that the finish was directly opposite the boathouse, and so, when the boats flew across with Yale in advance, it was settled that the blue had won.

Then Frank Merriwell, who had escaped from scheming enemies, and rowed in the race for all the attempts to drug him, was brought on by his admirers, and with the Yale cheer of victory, the curtain came down.

Roscoe Havener came rushing onto the stage and caught Frank Merriwell by the hand, crying:

"Merriwell, you are a genius! I want to say right here that I have doubted the practicability of this invention of yours, but now I confess that it is the greatest thing I ever saw. Your sawmill invention in 'John Smith' was great, but this lays way over it! You should make your fortune with this, but you must protect it."

"I shall apply for a patent on the mechanism," said Frank. "I am having a working model made for that purpose."

"That's right. You have your chance to make a fortune, and I believe you can make it with this piece."

"It is a chance," agreed Frank, gravely; "but I shall take it for better or worse. I am going into this thing to make or break. I've got some money, and I'll sink every dollar I'm worth in the attempt to float this piece."

Frank spoke with quiet determination.

Hodge stood near and nodded his approval and satisfaction.

"It's great, Merry," he said, in approval. "It's something new, too. You will not have any trouble over this, the way you did about the sawmill scene."

"I hope not."

Cassie Lee, the little soubrette, who was engaged to Havener, found an opportunity to get hold of Frank's hand. She gave it a warm pressure.

"I'm so glad!" she whispered, looking into his eyes. "If Ross says it will go, you can bet it will! He knows his business. I've been waiting for him to express himself about it, and, now that he has, I feel better. You are right in it, Frank! I think you are a dandy!"

"Thank you, Cassie," smiled Frank, looking down at her.

And even though he liked Cassie, who had always been his friend, he was thinking at that moment of another little girl who was far away, but whom he had once hoped would create the part in "True Blue" that had been given to Cassie.

In the fourth act Frank had skillfully handled the "fall" of the play, keeping all in suspense as he worked out the problem, one of the chief arts of successful play constructing. Too often a play falls to pieces at once after the grand climax is reached, and the final act is obviously tacked on to lengthen it out.

This one fault Frank had worked hard to avoid, and he had succeeded with masterly skill, even introducing a new element of suspense into the final act.

Merry had noticed that, in these modern days, the audience sniffs the "and-lived-happy-forever-after" conclusion of a play from afar, and there was always a rustling to get hats and coats and cloaks some moments before the end of most plays. To avoid this, he determined to end his play suddenly and in an original manner. This he succeeded in doing in a comedy scene, but not until the last speech was delivered was the suspense entirely relieved.

Havener, who could not write a play to save his life, but who understood thoroughly the construction of a piece, and was a discriminating critic, was nearly as well pleased by the end of the piece as by the mechanical effect in the third act.

"If this play does not make a big hit I shall call myself a chump," he declared. "I was afraid of it in its original form, but the changes have added to it the elements it needed to become immensely popular."

When the rehearsal was over Cassie Lee found Burns seated on a property stump behind the scenes, his face bowed on his hands, his attitude that of one in deep sorrow.

"Now, what's the matter with you?" she asked, not unkindly. "Are you sick?"

The old tragedian raised his sad face and spoke:

"Join not with grief, fair woman, do not so,
To make my end too sudden; learn good soul,
To think our former state a happy dream;
From which awaked, the truth of what we are
Shews to us but this: I am sworn brother, sweet,
To grim necessity; and he and I
Will keep a league till death."

There was something strangely impressive in the old man's words and manner, and the laugh she tried to force died on Cassie's lips.

"I s'pose that's Shakespeare you are giving me," she said. "I don't go much on Shake. He was all right in his day, but his day is past, and he won't go down with people in general now. The public wants something up to date, like this new play of Merriwell's, for instance."

"Ah, yes," sighed Burns; "I think you speak the truth. In these degenerate days the vulgar rabble must be fed with what it can understand. The rabble's meager intellects do not fathom the depths of the immortal poet's thoughts, but its eyes can behold a mechanical arrangement that represents a boat race, and I doubt not that the groundlings will whoop themselves hoarse over it."

"That's the stuff!" nodded Cassie. "That's what we want, for I rather reckon Mr. Merriwell is out for the dust."

"The dust! Ah, sordid mortals! All the world, to-day, seems 'out for the dust.'"

"Well, I rather think that's right. What do you want, anyway? If you have plenty to eat and drink and wear you're in luck."

"What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more."

"That's all right; but just think of the ones who can't get all they want to eat, and who are driven to work like dogs, day after day, without ever getting enough sleep to rest them."

"Ah, but few of them have hopes or aspirations. They are worms of the earth."

"Oh, I don't know! I reckon some of them are as good as anybody, but they're down on their luck. The world has gone against them."

"But they have never climbed to the heights, only to slip back to the depths. Then is when the world turns dark."

The old tragedian bowed his head again, and, feeling that she could say nothing to cheer him up, Cassie left him there.

Frank came in later, and had a talk with Burns. The old man acknowledged that he believed the play would be a success, but he bemoaned his fate to be forced to play a part so repulsive to him. Merry assured him that he would get over that in time, and succeeded in putting some spirit into the old fellow.

CHAPTER XIV.—FRANK'S NEW COMEDIAN.

The day came for the great dress rehearsal of "True Blue," to which the theatrical people of Denver, the newspaper men, and a great number of prominent people had been invited.

Frank had determined on this course at great expense, but he believed he would be repaid for the outlay.

His chief object was to secure good newspaper notices and recommendations from the theater managers in the city.

It was to be an afternoon performance, so that it would not interfere with any of the regular theatrical attractions to play in town that night.

Early in the day Hodge advised Frank to keep a sharp watch on Burns.

"Don't let him have any money, Merry. He fancies he will have to go through a terrible ordeal this afternoon, and he wishes to brace up for it. If he gets all he wants to drink, he will be loaded to the muzzle when the time comes to play."

Frank feared this, and so, when Burns appealed to him for money, he refused the old man, telling him he could have some after the performance.

Then Merry set Gallup to watch the tragedian.

Frank was at work in the theater, where various members of the company were practicing specialties, and the stage hands were arranging everything so that there would be no hitch about the performance.

Within thirty minutes after Gallup was set to watch the old actor, he came to Frank in a hurry, saying:

"If you want to keep Mr. Burns sober, I advise yeou to come with me an' git him aout of a grog shop daown the street, Merry."

"What's that?" exclaimed Frank. "Why, he hasn't the money to buy liquor, even if he has gone into a saloon."

"He won't hev to buy it, I guess."

"Why not?"

"Well, I saw two men pick him up an' take him inter the gin mill. They axed him would he come in an' have somethin' with them."

"Did he know them?"

"Didn't seem ter. He looked kainer s'prised, but he accepted the invite in a hurry."

"Then it is time that we looked after him," nodded Merry, grimly. "Show me where he has gone, Ephraim."

Hodge followed them. They left the theater and hurried along the street to a saloon.

"He went in here," said Ephraim.

Without a word, Frank entered.

The moment Merry was within the place he saw Burns standing near the bar, while a crowd had gathered around him. The old man had placed his hat on the bar, tossed back his long, black hair, which was streaked with gray, struck a pose, and was just beginning to declaim from Shakespeare.

"Go it, old chap!" cried a half-intoxicated man. "We'll put up the red eye for you as long as you will spout."

The old man's voice rang out clear and strong. His pronunciation was perfect, and his enunciation clear and distinct. Involuntarily Merry paused a moment to listen. At that moment it came to Frank that Burns might, beyond a doubt, have been an actor of no small merit had he eschewed drink and followed his ambition with unswerving purpose. For the first time Merry fully appreciated the outraged feelings of the old fellow who was compelled to burlesque the tragedian on the stage.

Frank strode forward into the crowd, followed by his friends.

"Burns," he said, quietly, interrupting the old man, "I want you to come with me."

The aged actor stopped speaking, all the dignity seemed to melt from him in a moment, and he reached for his hat, murmuring:

"I merely came in for one small bracer. I needed it, and the gentlemen were good enough to invite me."

"Here!" coarsely cried a man. "What's this mean? Who's this that's comin' here to spoil our fun?"

"Throw the feller out!" cried another.

Growls of anger came from the others gathered about, and they crowded nearer.

"Look out for trouble!" whispered Hodge, in Frank's ear.

"Get out of here," ordered the first speaker, confronting Merry. "We're bein' entertained."

"I beg your pardon—gentlemen," said Merry, smoothly, hesitating slightly before the final word. "There are reasons why I come here to take Mr. Burns with me. I am sorry to spoil your entertainment, but it is necessary."

"Is the old fellow bound out to you?" sneeringly, asked one. "Do you own him?"

"No man owns me!" cried the tragedian, drawing himself up and staring round. "I am my own master."

"I'll bet you don't dare take another drink," said the man, quickly thrusting a brimming glass of whisky toward Burns. "You're afraid of the young gent."

"I'm afraid of nobody," declared Burns, eagerly reaching for the glass. "I have drunk all I could get, and I always shall, for all of anybody."

"That's the talk!"

"Down with it!"

"Take your medicine!"

"You're the boy!"

The crowd shouted its approval.

Burns lifted the glass.

Frank's hand fell gently on his arm.

"Mr. Burns," he said, swiftly, "I ask you as a particular favor not to drink that liquor. I ask you as a gentleman not to do it."

Merry knew how to appeal to the old man in a manner that would touch the right spot. Burns looked straight into Frank's eyes an instant, and then he placed the glass on the bar.

"If you ask me that way," he said, "ten thousand fiends cannot force me to touch the stuff!"

There was a groan from the crowd.

"The old duffer caves!" sneered one man. "He hasn't any backbone."

"Oh, say!" sibilated Hodge, in Merry's ear; "get him out of here in a hurry! I can't stand much of this! I feel like thumping a few of these ruffians."

"Steady!" cautioned Frank. "We do not want to get into a barroom brawl if we can avoid it."

"They're a purty darn tough-lookin' craowd," muttered Ephraim.

"Why wouldn't it be a purty good thing fer ther young chaps all ter take a drink?" suggested somebody.

"That's right!" cried the leader. "I'll stand for them all, and the actor shall drink with them."

"Don't let them git out, gents, till they've taken their bitters."

The rough men hemmed them in.

"I fear you are in an unfortunate predicament," said Burns. "You will have to drink with them."

"I never drink," said Merry, quietly.

"Yer can't refuse here," declared the man who had offered to buy the drinks. "It's a mortal insult ter refuse ter drink hyar."

"I never took a drink in my life, gentlemen," said Merriwell, speaking calmly, and distinctly, "and I shall not begin now. You will have to excuse me."

He started to force his way through the crowd. A hand reached out to clutch him, and he wheeled like a flash toward the man, at whom he pointed squarely, crying:

"Take off that false beard! If you are a man, show your face! You are in disguise! I believe you are a criminal who does not dare show his face!"

His ringing words drew the attention of the crowd to the man whom he accused.

Merry improved the opportunity and hurried his friends and Burns toward the door. Before the gang was aware of it, they were out of the saloon, and Frank breathed his relief.

Not till they had reached the theater did a thought come to Frank that made him regret his hasty departure from the saloon.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "I believe the man who wore the false beard was the same one who entered my room at the hotel by means of the rope!"

He dashed back to the saloon, followed by Hodge and Gallup; but when he reached the place nearly all the crowd had left, the man he sought having departed with the others.

Frank was disappointed. He learned at the saloon that the accused man had not removed the beard, but had sneaked out in a hurry after Frank was gone.

Returning to the theater, Merry was informed that Burns was behaving strangely.

"He seems to be doped," declared Hodge. "I think he has been drugged."

Burns was in a dressing room, and Havener was working to keep the man awake, although the old actor was begging to be allowed to sleep.

As soon as Frank saw him he dispatched one of the supers for a physician.

The doctor came and gave Burns a powerful emetic, following that with a dose of medicine that seemed to brace the man up. Thus Burns was pulled into shape for the afternoon performance, although Frank realized that he had very nearly wrecked everything.

Burns remained in the theater, and lunch was brought him there.

"Mr. Merriwell," he said, "I will surprise you by the manner in which I'll play my part this afternoon. It shall be burlesque of a kind that'll satisfy you."

The performance was to begin at two o'clock. Some time before that people began to arrive, and they came fast. At two o'clock there were nearly five hundred persons in the auditorium.

The company was all made up and waiting behind the scenes.

Cassie Lee started to find Frank to ask him how he liked her make-up. In a corner behind the scenes she saw a man stopping near a mass of piled-up scenery. Something about the man's appearance and his actions attracted her attention. She saw him pick up a can and pour some of the contents on the scenery. Then he crouched down there, taking a match safe from his pocket.

In a moment it dawned on Cassie that the fellow was up to deviltry. He had saturated the scenery with oil, and he was about to set it on fire!

Cassie screamed, and Frank Merriwell, who was near at hand, heard her. He came bounding to the spot, just as the startled man lighted his match.

"Quick, Frank!" cried Cassie. "He's setting the scenery afire!"

Frank saw the fellow and leaped at him. The scenery flared up where the match had touched it. Then the fire bug turned to run.

Merriwell was on him, had him, hurled him down.

"No, you don't, you dog!" grated Frank. "You shall pay for this dastardly trick!"

Cassie, with rare presence of mind, caught up a rug, which happened to be near, and beat out the fire before it had gained much headway.

A terrible struggle was going on between Frank and the man he had captured. The fellow was fighting with all his strength to hurry off and escape.

"No, you don't!" came through Merriwell's teeth. "I know you! You are the chap who entered my room! You it was who attempted to drug Burns so that this performance would be ruined! And now you have made a fatal mistake by attempting to fire the theater. I have you, and I shall hold you. You will be safely lodged behind prison bars for this trick."

"Curse you!" panted the man.

"That does not hurt me," said Merry. "Now, be quiet."

He pinned the fellow to the floor and held him till others came up. Then the man's hands were tied.

"Now, we'll have a look at him," said Merry, rolling the captive over on his back and pulling the old hat from his head.

Then he gave a cry of amazement, staggering back.

Hodge was there, and he was no less astounded.

Gallup was speechless with astonishment and incredulity.

"The dead alive!" cried Frank.

The man he had captured was the one he believed beneath the quicksands of Big Sandy River, Leslie Lawrence!

"I'm not dead yet!" grated Lawrence. "Fowler went down in the quicksands, but I managed to float away. I hid under the river's bank, and there I stayed, like a hunted wolf, till you gave up looking for me. I swore to settle the score with you, but——"

"You tried hard enough. You were the one who entered my room at the hotel."

"Was I? Prove it."

"I don't have to. The job you tried to do here is enough. That will put you safely away. Somebody call an officer."

An officer was called, and Lawrence was taken away.

The audience in front had heard some of the commotion behind the scenes and had grown rather restless, but they were soon calmed. An orchestra was on hand to play, and everything was carried out as if it had been a regular performance.

The first act went off well, and it received mild applause. The second act seemed to take full better, but still, the audience had not been aroused to any great show of enthusiasm.

Then came the third act. The first surprise was Burns. He literally convulsed the audience by the manner in which he burlesqued the Shakespearian tragedian. He astonished Frank, for Merry had not dreamed the old actor could be so intensely funny. Even Hodge was seen to smile once!

When Burns came off after doing an exceptionally clever piece of work, which caused the audience to applaud most heartily, Frank met him and grasped his hand, saying:

"My dear Mr. Burns, you have made the comedy hit of the piece! Your salary shall be fifty dollars a week, instead of forty."

But William Shakespeare Burns burst into tears, sobbing brokenly:

"The comedy hit of the piece! And I have broken my own heart!"

It was impossible to cheer him up.

The boat race followed swiftly, and it wrought the audience up to a high pitch of enthusiasm and excitement. When the curtain came down, there was a perfect shout of applause, such as an enthusiastic Western audience alone can give.

"Frank Merriwell! Frank Merriwell!" was the cry that went up from all parts of the house.

Frank was obliged to come before the curtain and make a speech, which he did gracefully and modestly. When he was behind the curtain again, Havener had him by the hand, saying:

"You will get some rousing press notices to-morrow, Merriwell! This play will be the hit of your life!"

A manager of one of the local theaters came behind the scenes and offered Frank three thousand dollars for the piece. When Frank declined, the man promptly made it five thousand, but even that sum was not accepted.

Then came the fourth act, in which Burns again appeared as the burlesque tragedian. In this he was to repeat a parody on *Hamlet's* soliloquy, but, apparently, before he was aware of it, he began to give the soliloquy itself.

In a moment the man had flung off the air of the clown. He straightened to his full height, his eyes gleamed with a strange fire, his chest heaved, and his voice sounded clear as the ring of steel. He electrified every person who heard him. With all the dramatic fire of a Booth, he swung into the soliloquy, and a hush fell over the audience. He held them spellbound, he swayed them at his will, he thrilled them as never had they been thrilled. At that moment William Shakespeare Burns was the tragedian sublime, and it is probable that he reached such heights as he had never before attained.

He finished. It was over, and then, realizing what he had done, he tottered off the stage.

Then the audience applauded long and loud, trying to call him back again; but behind the scenes he had fallen into Frank Merriwell's arms, faintly murmuring:

"It is finished!"

Frank bore the man to a dressing room. The play went on to the end without a break, but it was not necessary for Burns to enter again.

When the curtain fell on the final act, Havener came hurrying to Merry:

"Burns wants to see you in the dressing room," he said. "You had better come at once."

Frank went there. The moment he saw the old actor, who was reclining on some rugs, his face ashen, his eyes looking dim and sunken still deeper into his head, Frank said:

"Somebody go for a doctor at once!"

He knelt beside the man, and the old actor murmured:

"It is useless to go for a doctor. I heard you tell them, but it is—no use. I told you—my heart—was broken. I spoke the—truth. It broke my heart when I—had to—burlesque—"

His words died out in his throat.

"He's going!" somebody whispered, for the company was gathered around.

There was a brief silence, and then the old man seemed to draw himself up with pride, as they had seen him do in life.

"Yes, sir," he said, distinctly, "my name is Burns—William Shakespeare Burns—tragedian—at liberty."

The old eyes closed, a faint sigh escaped his bloodless lips, and the old actor was "at liberty."

CHAPTER XV.—A NEWSPAPER NOTICE.

"Yesterday afternoon, through the courtesy of Manager Frank Merriwell, an invited audience of at least five hundred persons witnessed the first performance of Mr. Merriwell's revised and rewritten play at the Orpheum Theater, and the verdict of that audience, which represented the highest and most cultured element of Denver society, was that the sprightly, sensational, four-act comedy drama was a success in every way. The play, which is now named 'True Blue,' was originally christened 'For Old Eli,' and, after a single performance, Mr. Merriwell withdrew it for the purpose of rewriting it, correcting certain faults he had discovered, and strengthening one or two weak points. As he wrote the piece, he was able to do this work of reconstruction quickly and thoroughly, and the result is a play of which he, as author, manager and star performer, may well be proud. The following is the cast:

DICK TRUEHEART FRANK MERRIWELL
Barry Hattleman Douglas Dunton
Spruce Downing Rufus Small
Crack Hyerman Bartley Hodge
Reuben Grass Ephraim Gallup
Manny Sizzwell William Wynne
Prof. Gash Roscoe Havener
Edwin Treadwell William Shakespeare Burns
Carius Dubad Granville Garland
Spike Dubad Lester Vance
Millie Blossom Miss Cassie Lee
Inez Dalton Miss Stella Stanley
Nancy Noodle Miss Agnes Kirk

"College life is the principal theme of 'True Blue,' and Mr. Merriwell, having studied at Yale, is quite capable of catching the air and spirit of Old Eli, and reproducing it on the stage. This he has done with a deftness and fidelity that makes the play remarkable in its class, or, possibly with greater accuracy, lifts it out of its class, for, up to the production of this piece, all college plays have been feeble attempts to catch the spirit of the life they represent, or have descended into the realm of farce or burlesque.

"While the author of 'True Blue' has written a play to suit the popular fancy, he has not considered it necessary to write down to the general public, and, for all of the college slang, which of a necessity is used by several of the characters, there is nothing offensive in the entire piece—nothing to shock the sensibilities of the most refined. The comedy in places is a trifle boisterous, but that was to be expected, and it does not descend to mere buffoonery. It is the kind of

comedy at which the spectator must laugh, even though he may resolve that he will not, and, when it is all over, he feels better for his laughter, instead of feeling foolish, as he does in many cases after witnessing other 'popular plays.'

"The pathos strikes the right chord, and the strongest situations and climaxes are stirring enough to thrill the most sluggish blood. In some respects the story of the play is rather conventional, but it is handled in a manner that makes it seem almost new. Through the four acts *Dick Trueheart*, the hero, is pursued by his enemies, *Carius Dubad*, and his, worthy son, *Spike*, and on various occasions they succeed in making things extremely unpleasant for the popular young athlete.

"Through two acts the villains pursue the hero, keeping the audience on the *qui vive*.

"The climax of the third act was the great sensational feature of the play. In this act *Dick* escapes from his enemies and all sorts of crafty snares, and is barely in time to take his place in the Yale boat, which is to race against Harvard and Cornell. *Carius Dubad* has appeared on the scene, and, at the last moment, in order to break *Dick's* spirit, he reveals that *Dick's* guardian has squandered his fortune, so that the hero is penniless and will be forced to leave college. For all of this revelation, *Trueheart* enters the boat and aids in winning the race against Harvard and Cornell, greatly to the discomfiture of the villainous father and son, who have bet heavily against Yale. Of course, Mr. Merriwell made Yale win in his play. The mechanism that showed the boat race on the distant river, the moving observation train, the swaying crowds with waving flags, hats, and handkerchiefs, was truly a most wonderful arrangement, and it filled the spectators with admiration and astonishment. A quick 'dark shift' followed, and then the boats actually appeared, with Yale the winner, and *Trueheart* was brought onto the stage in the arms of his admiring fellow collegians, while the curtain descended amid a burst of genuine enthusiastic applause such as is seldom heard in any theater. Mr. Merriwell was called before the curtain, and he made a brief speech, which seemed modest and characteristic of this young actor and playwright, who is certain to follow a brilliant career on the American stage.

"In the final act the hero was in straitened circumstances, but all ends well, with the discomfiture of old *Dubad* and his worthy son, and the final settlement of all jealousies between the other characters.

"Not only as author of the play, but as the star does Frank Merriwell merit a full meed of credit and praise. Although he is young and impulsive, and his acting might not meet the approval of certain critics, there was a breeziness and freshness about him that captivated and carried the audience. It is said that he has never attended a school of acting, and this may readily be believed, for there is nothing affected, nothing stiff, nothing stilted and mechanical about his work on the stage. In his case, at least, it has been greatly to his advantage not to attend a dramatic school. He is a born actor, and he must work out his own methods without being hampered by convention and instruction from those who believe in doing everything by rule. He is a handsome young man, and his stage presence is both striking and effective. Worthy of note was it that he enunciated every word distinctly and pronounced it correctly, in great contrast to many other stars, who sometimes mangle speech in a most distressing manner. He has a voice that seems in perfect keeping with his splendid figure, being clear as a mellow bell, full of force, and delightful to hear.

"The work of Douglas Dunton as *Barry Hattleman* was good. Mr. Small, who is a very large man, faithfully portrayed *Spruce Downing*, the lazy student. *Crack Hyerman*, the hot-blooded Southerner, as represented by Bartley Hodge, who made the Southerner a thorough fire-eater, who would fight for his 'honor' at the drop of the hat. As *Reuben Grass*, Ephraim Gallup literally convulsed the audience. Without doubt his delineation of the Down-East Yankee was the best ever seen in Denver.

"Miss Cassie Lee played the sweet and winsome *Millie Blossom*, and her singing and dancing met approval. The *Inez Dalton* of Miss Stanley was handled with great skill, and she was jealous, passionate, resentful, and loving in turn, and in a manner that seemed true to life. As *Nancy Noodle*, an old maid in love with *Prof. Gash*, Miss Agnes Kirk was acceptable.

"And now comes the duty of mentioning a man who was the surprise of the evening. His name was given on the program as William Shakespeare Burns, and, as he represented a burlesque tragedian, it was supposed that the name was assumed. It has been learned, however, that this is the name by which he was known in real life. Mr. Burns first appeared in the second act, and as *Edwin Treadwell*, the frayed, back-number tragedian, he literally caused many of the audience to choke in the effort to repress their uncontrollable laughter. At the close of the third act, a local theatrical man declared that W. S. Burns far excelled as a comedian anybody he had ever seen essay a similar part. But the sensation came in the fourth act, when the actor started to parody *Hamlet's* soliloquy, but seemed to forget himself and the parody together, and swung into the original William Shakespeare. The laughter died out, the audience sat spellbound, scarcely breathing. The eyes of every person were fixed on the actor, who went through the soliloquy to the end, giving it with all the power of a Forrest or a Booth. As the actor retired, the audience awoke, realized it had seen and heard a man who was no clown, but a real tragedian, and the applause was long and loud.

"William Shakespeare Burns did not appear again on the stage of that theater; he will not appear again on any stage. He is dead! But few particulars have been learned about him, but it seems that this was his first attempt to play comedy—and his last. He regarded himself as the equal of any interpreter of Shakespeare, living or dead, but misfortune and his own weakness had never permitted him to rise to the heights to which he aspired. Grim necessity had compelled him to accept Mr. Merriwell's offer to play in 'True Blue' the part of the burlesque tragedian. His heart and soul had rebelled against doing so, and often at rehearsals he had wept with mortification after going through with his part. His body was weakened by privation. He declared last night that his heart was broken. A few minutes after leaving the stage the last time he expired in one of the dressing rooms of the theater. Thus ended a life that might have been a grand success but for the failings of weak human nature.

"Mr. Merriwell will go on the road at once with 'True Blue.' He has engaged a competent man to fill the place made vacant by the death of Mr. Burns. His route for some little time is booked, and he leaves Denver to-day for Puelbo, where he opens to-morrow. The play, the star, and the company merit success, and we hope Mr. Merriwell will find it convenient to play a regular engagement in this city before long. It is certain, if he does, he will be greeted by packed

houses."—*Denver Herald and Advertiser*.

All the Denver papers contained notices of the performance, but the one quoted was the longest and the most elaborate. Not one of the notices was unfavorable. They were enough to make the heart of any manager glad, and it was not strange that Frank felt well satisfied.

But he was inexpressibly saddened by the sudden and tragic death of William Burns, for he had recognized the genius in the old actor, who had been dragged down from a highroad to prosperity and fame by the hands of the relentless demon that has destroyed so many men of genius, drink.

On account of his bookings, Frank could not remain in Denver to attend the funeral of the veteran tragedian, but he resolved that Burns should be buried with all honors, and he made arrangements for a suitable funeral.

Of course, the papers announced the funeral, and, the story of Burns' remarkable death having become familiar to all, the church was packed to the doors. The man whose wretched life had promised a wretched death and a nameless grave was buried without pomp, but with such honors as might have been given to one well known and highly esteemed.

Above his grave a modest marble was placed, and chiseled on it was a single line from the "Immortal Bard," whom he loved and understood and interpreted with the faithfulness and fire of genius:

"After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

And every expense Frank Merriwell provided for. Nothing was neglected; everything was done that good taste and a good heart demanded.

CHAPTER XVI.—THE VEILED WOMAN.

As may be understood, the members of Frank's company were individually and collectively delighted with the apparent success of the play and their efforts. Perhaps Agnes Kirk was the only one who complained. She was not at all pleased by the notices she obtained.

Frank immediately secured a supply of Denver papers and, marking the notices, mailed them to the managers of theaters and the editors of papers along the route "True Blue" was to follow.

Then he had typewritten copies made of extracts from these notices, which he added to his collection of press notices already manufactured for advertising purposes, and sent them on to his advance agent, who had been out on the road several days.

Frank knew how to work every point to the best advantage, and he did not lose anything. He was tireless in his efforts, and it was wonderful what an immense amount of work he accomplished. No one knows how much he can do till he makes the test.

Hodge aided him as far as possible, and Frank found Bart a valuable assistant. Hodge was fully as eager as Merriwell for the play to be a great success.

Frank had opened with the piece under its original name in Puelbo, and it had met disaster there. He vowed that he would return to that place with the play and make a success of his engagement. He engaged the leading theater in the city for three nights, being obliged to pay in advance for it, as the manager had no confidence in the revised play.

Frank had been working the papers of the city. One of them was edited by a remarkably genial gentleman by the name of Osgood, and this editor had seen in the original play material for a strong piece. He admired Merry's pluck in opening the second time in that city, and he literally opened the columns of his paper to Frank, who telegraphed down extracts from the Denver papers as soon as the notices appeared.

The house in Puelbo was to be well "papered" the first night, but was to depend entirely on the drawing qualities of the play for the audience on the following two nights.

Frank was making a great hustle to get away from Denver, and he was returning from the theater to his hotel, after seeing the last of the special scenery moved to the railroad station, when a heavily veiled woman stopped directly in his path. As he was walking hastily, he nearly ran against her.

"I beg your pardon, madam!" exclaimed Frank, lifting his hat. "Very awkward of me."

"Not at all," she said, in a low voice, that was not unpleasant nor unmusical. "You were hurrying, and I stopped directly in your way. I am the one who should beg to be excused."

"Not at all," he hastened to say. "I assure you that it was entirely on account of my awkwardness."

He was about to pass on, but her gloved hand fell on his arm, and she said:

"I wish to speak with you, Mr. Merriwell."

"You know me?" exclaimed Frank, surprised.

"Indeed, I do. Why should I not? All Denver knows you to-day."

"Am I so famous as that?" smiled Merry. "I fear you flatter, madam."

"It is not flattery. You must not doubt my sincerity."

"Very well, I will not; but you must speak hastily, for I have a train to catch in an hour and thirty minutes, and I haven't too much time to attend to all I have to do."

"But you must give me a little of your time—you really must," she said, persuasively, putting her hand on his arm again. "If you will come with me—please do!"

"Where?"

"Oh, I know a nice, quiet place, where we can talk."

Somehow Frank did not like her words or manner. A feeling that there was something wrong about her came over him.

"Really, you must excuse me," he said. "I have not the time to go anywhere to talk. If you have anything to say to me, you can say it here."

"Now, don't be obstinate. You'll not regret it if you come."

"But I do not even know who you are. That veil——"

"If you come, I may remove the veil," she murmured.

Frank drew back, so that her hand fell from his arm.

"Madam," he said, "you have placed me in a very awkward position. I do not like to appear rude to a lady, but——"

"Of course you do not, and so you will grant my request. It is a small matter."

"But not to me, for my time is valuable just now. I am ready to hear anything you have to say, but you must say it here."

"Would you keep a lady standing on the street?" she exclaimed, with a slight show of resentment. "I cannot say all I have to tell you in a minute."

"And I have explained that I cannot spare time to talk over anything for more than a few moments. I think you will have to excuse me. Good-day."

He lifted his hat and started to pass on, but again she placed herself squarely in front of him, to his great annoyance.

"Mr. Merriwell," she said, "I have seen you on the stage, and I admire you greatly. You will not be rude to one of your admirers, I know. You are far too gallant for that."

It was plain she sought to cajole him by flattery, and that was the surest way to repulse him.

"Is it possible she is one of those foolish women who fall in love with actors?" Frank asked himself.

Somehow she did not seem like that. There was nothing of the giddy, gushing girl about her. He could not see her face, but her figure was that of a matured woman, and he judged that she must be twenty-five years old, at least. It seemed, too, that there was a purpose in her words and movements.

But Frank resolved on action, for he had found that it was useless to waste words talking to her. He made a quick move to one side and passed her, intending to hasten away.

Barely had he done so when she flung her arms about his neck and screamed loudly!

Frank was astounded by this unexpected move of the veiled woman.

"She's crazy!"

That was the thought that flashed through Merry's mind.

He realized that he was in an awkward predicament, and he attempted to whirl about.

The woman was very strong, and, having taken him by surprise, she nearly threw him down. To save himself, he caught hold of her.

"Help!" she cried.

Some men came running up.

"Madam," said Frank, hurriedly, "are you demented? What is the meaning of this?"

"You wretch!" she blazed. "Oh, you cowardly scoundrel, to assault a lady on the public street in broad daylight!"

"Surely you are——"

"I saw him do it!" declared a little man, with red whiskers. "I saw him assault you, madam."

"Call an officer!" palpitated the woman. "Quick, before he gets away!"

"He shall not get away," declared a big man with a crooked eye, glowering at Frank. "If he tries it, I'll attend to him!"

"Looks like a would-be masher," piped a slim man, with a very long neck, ducking and nodding his head in an odd manner. "He should be taught a lesson."

One or two others expressed themselves in a similar manner.

Frank had thought of making a break and hastening away, but now he saw it would not do, for he would have a howling mob at his heels the instant he attempted such a move. He realized it would seem cowardly to run away in such a manner, and would look like a confession of guilt, which caused him to decide to stay and face it out, even though the predicament was most embarrassing.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking squarely at them, and seeming to pay very little attention to the mysterious woman, even though he was perfectly on his guard, not knowing what move she might make next, "I trust you will give me a chance to explain what has happened."

"Explain it in the police court," growled the big man with a crooked eye. "That's the proper place for you to make your explanations."

"The judge will listen to you," cried the slim man, his head bobbing on his long neck, like the head of a crane that is walking along the edge of a marsh.

"Don't attempt to escape by means of falsehoods, you rascal!" almost shouted the little man with the red whiskers, bristling up in a savage manner, but dodging back the moment Frank turned on him.

"Gentlemen, I have been insulted by this fellow!" came from behind the baffling veil worn by the woman. "He is a low wretch, who attacked me in a most brutal manner."

"We will see that you are protected, madam," assured the little man, his red whiskers seeming to bristle like porcupine quills, as he dodged round Frank and placed himself on the opposite side of the veiled unknown. "Madam," he repeated, "I will see that you are protected—I will!"

"You are very kind," she fluttered; "but where is the officer? The reaction—the shock—the weakness!"

"Permit me to offer you any assistance possible," gallantly spoke a man in a sack coat and a silk hat, stepping forward and raising the latter piece of wearing apparel, thereby disclosing a shining bald spot on the top of his head, which he covered as quickly as possible, evidently hoping it had escaped the woman's notice. "You are in a city, my dear lady, where insults to the fair sex never go unpunished."

He attempted to smile on her in a pleasant manner, but there was a sort of leer in his eyes and around his sensual mouth that betrayed his true character plainly enough.

The woman did not accept his arm which was half tendered, but she made a great show of agitation and distress, which affected the various witnesses.

"It's a shame!" piped the man with the long neck and the bobbing head.

"It's an outrage!" blustered the little man with the bristling whiskers and savage manner.

"It's most unfortunate!" murmured the gallant man with the silk hat and sack coat.

"It's a bad break for Mr. Masher!" ejaculated the big man with the crooked eye and glowering look.

Frank smiled; he could not help it, for he was impressed by the comedy of the affair, despite the unpleasantness of the situation he was in at that moment.

"This would be good stuff for a scene in a play," he thought, and he made a mental note of it.

Then he turned to the woman.

"Madam," he said, "what have I ever done to you that you should attempt to injure me in this manner?"

"Don't let him speak to me, the scoundrel!" she entreated, appealing to the men.

"But it is no more than fair that you should answer me," persisted Merry. "I do not know you; I have not even seen your face. Will you not lift your veil and permit me to see your face, so that I may know who has brought me into this unpleasant position?"

"He adds to his insults by requesting me to expose my identity on the street after such an affair as this!" she almost sobbed. "He would disgrace me! He would have my name in all the newspapers!"

"Reprehensible!" purred the gallant man.

"Terrible!" cackled the man with the bobbing head.

"Dastardly!" exploded the individual with the red whiskers.

"Criminal!" grated the giant with the crooked eye.

And they all glared at Frank—at least all of them but the one with the crooked eye. It is possible that he, also, glared at the supposed offender, but he seemed to be glaring at a white horse on the opposite side of the street.

Repressing his laughter with difficulty, Merry said:

"I assure you, gentlemen, I never saw this lady, to my knowledge, before a few minutes ago, when she stopped me on the street, and——"

Again the woman screamed.

"Will you listen to his base falsehoods?" she cried, with a show of the greatest indignation and distress. "He is trying to disgrace me still further by asserting that I stopped him on the street—stopped him! As if a lady would do such a thing!"

"The idea!" squawked the man with the long neck, his head seeming to bob faster than ever, as if it sought to express by its excited movements the indignant emotions his tongue could not utter.

"My dear lady, I would not remain here to be thus insulted," declared the gallant man, bending toward her, and endeavoring to summon a look of concern to his treacherous countenance.

"He should be placed in irons!" blurted the fierce-appearing little man, his red whiskers seeming to work and squirm with intense excitement and anger.

"He ought to have his head broken!" roared the big man, his crooked eye still seeming to glare at the white horse in a most terrible and awesome manner.

Others of the assembled crowd murmured to themselves in a most indignant manner, all seeming to regard Frank as the offender.

Frank took out his watch and looked at it.

"Gracious!" he mentally exclaimed, "time is flying. If this keeps up much longer, I'll not reach Puelbo to-day."

"Now he shows his anxiety and concern," said a voice in the crowd.

"He's beginning to be frightened," said another voice.

"He's anxious to get away," said a third.

"But he can't get away," said a fourth.

"This is all very interesting," thought Frank; "but it is decidedly unpleasant."

"Waal, whut in time's sake is goin' on here, I'd like ter know?" cried a voice that was familiar to Frank, and a tall, lank, countrified-appearing youth came up to the outskirts of the crowd, stood on his tiptoes, and peered over.

It was Ephraim Gallup, and he saw Frank.

"Waal, darned if it ain't——"

Merry made a swift movement, clapping a finger to his lips, and Gallup, usually rather slow to tumble to anything, understood him at once, relapsing into silence.

"Let me git in here where I kin see the fun," he said, and he elbowed the people aside as he forced his way through the crowd.

It did not take him long to reach the center of the throng, although a number of persons were indignant at his manner of thrusting them aside or stepping on their feet.

"Whut's up?" he asked. "Ef there's anything goin' on, I kainder want to see it."

"This young masher has insulted this lady!" explained the man with the bobbing head.

"Sho!" exclaimed Gallup. "Yeou don't say so, mister! Waal, I am s'prised!"

"He has treated her in an outrageous manner!" added the man with the agitated and fiery whiskers.

"I do declare!" ejaculated Ephraim. "I'd never thought it of him, by thutter!"

"The lady requires protection," declared the gallant man with the mismated wearing apparel.

"Yeou don't tell me!" gasped the Vermonter, his surprise seeming to increase. "Ain't it awful!"

"But the fellow needs a lesson!" rasped the man with the eye that persisted in looking in the wrong direction. "I think I'll hit him once or twice."

"My gracious!" fluttered Gallup. "Hev ye gotter hit him real hard? Don't yeou s'pose he might hit back?"

"Let him try it!" came fiercely from the giant.

"Be yeou goin' to hit where ye're lookin'?" asked the country youth. "Cause ef yeou be, I'd advise that man with the wart on his nose to move."

At this the man who owned the wart dodged with a suddenness that provoked a titter of laughter from several witnesses.

Ephraim was adding to the comedy of the affair, and Frank bit his lips to keep from laughing outright, despite his annoyance over being thus detained.

The big man with the crooked eye flourished his fists in the air in a most belligerent fashion, and instantly Merriwell gazed at him sternly, saying:

"Be careful, sir! You are imperiling the lives of everyone near you, and you may strain yourself."

"That's right, by gum!" nodded Gallup, whimsically. "Yeou may warp one of them air arms, flingin' it araround so gol-darn permiscuous like."

"Here comes an officer!"

Somebody uttered the cry.

"It is high time!" exclaimed the little man, trying to soothe his agitated whiskers by pulling at them.

"It surely is," croaked the lank individual, his head bobbing with renewed excitement.

"Madam, the law will give you redress," bowed the gallant man, again taking off his silk hat and again clapping it on suddenly, as if a breath of cool air on his shining pate had warned him of the exposure he was making.

"Oh, why didn't the officer stay away a minute longer, so I might have thumped him!" regretfully grunted the fighting man with the misdirected eye.

The policeman came up and forced his way through the crowd, demanding:

"What does this mean? What is happening here?"

"A lady is in trouble," the bobbing man hastened to explain.

"In serious trouble," chirped the bewhiskered man.

"She has been insulted," declared the gallant man.

"By a masher," finished the man with the errant eye.

"Where is the lady?" asked the officer.

"There!"

All bowed politely toward the masked woman.

"Where is the masher?" was the next question.

"There!"

Their scornful fingers were leveled straight at Frank Merriwell.

CHAPTER XVII.—ARRESTED.

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed the woman, "I beg you to protect me from his insults!"

The officer was a gallant fellow. He touched his hat and bowed with extreme politeness. Then he frowned on Merry, and that frown was terrible to behold. He gripped Frank by the collar, gruffly saying:

"You'll have to come with me."

Merry knew it was useless to attempt to explain under such circumstances. Every one of the assembled crowd would be a witness against him.

"Very well," he said, quietly. "I am quite willing to do so. Please do not twist my necktie off."

"Don't worry about your necktie!" advised the policeman, giving it a still harder twist. "I know how to deal with chaps of your caliber."

Now of a sudden Ephraim Gallup began to grow angry. He did not fancy seeing his idol treated in such a manner, and his fists were clenched, while he glared at the officer as if contemplating hitting that worthy.

"It's a gol-dern shame!" he grated. "This jest makes my blood bile!"

"I don't wonder a bit," piped the long-necked man, misunderstanding the Vermonter; "but the officer will take care of

him now. He'll get what he deserves."

"Oh, will he!" exploded Gallup. "Waal, ef I was yeou, I'd hire myself aout to some dime museum as the human bobber. Yeou teeter jest like a certun bird that I won't name."

"Wh—a—at?" squealed the individual addressed, in great excitement. "This to me! Why, I'll—"

"I wish ter great goshfrey yeou would!" hissed Ephraim, glaring at him. "I'd jest like to hev yeou try it! I'd give yeou a jolt that'd knock yeou clean inter the middle of next week!"

"Why, who is this fellow that seeks to create a disturbance?" blustered the little man, his fiery whiskers beginning to bristle and squirm again. "He should be sat upon."

The country youth turned on him.

"I wish yeou'd tackle the job, yeou condemned little red-whiskered runt;" he shot at the blusterer with such suddenness that the little man staggered back and put up his hands, as if he had been struck. "Yeou are another meddler! I'd eat yeou, an' I'd never know I'd hed a bite!"

"This is very unfortunate, madam," purred the gallant man at the veiled woman's side. "I am extremely sorry that you have had such an unpleasant experience. Now, if that creature——"

He designated Ephraim by the final word, and Gallup cut him short right there.

"Yeou're the cheapest one of the hull lot, old oil-smirk!" he flung at the speaker. "Such fellers as yeou are more dangerous to real ladies than all the young mashers goin', fer yeou are a hypocrite who pretends to be virtuous."

The man gasped and tried to say something, but seemed stricken speechless.

Now the cock-eyed man was aroused once more. He seemed on the point of making a swing at somebody or something. He pushed his face up close to Ephraim, but still his rebellious eye seemed looking in quite another direction.

"If you want any trouble here," he said, hoarsely, "I'll attend to you. I can do that very well."

Ephraim looked at him, began to smile, broke into a grin, and burst into a shout of laughter.

"Haw! haw! haw!" he roared. "I couldn't fight with yeou ef I wanted to, fer I'd think yeou didn't mean me all the time, but that yeou really ought to be fightin' with some other feller yeou was lookin' at. Yeou're the funniest toad in the hull puddle!"

"I'll arrest the whole lot of you!" threatened the policeman. "Quit that business! Come along to the police station if you want to make any complaints."

Then he turned to the woman, saying:

"Madam, I presume you will make a complaint against this fellow," indicating Frank.

"I certainly shall," she promptly answered; "for it is my duty to teach him a lesson."

"Will you come to the station?"

"Yes."

"Permit me to accompany you," urged the gallant man.

"You are very kind," she said; "but I think I can get along. I will follow at a distance."

"All right," nodded the officer, once more gripping Merriwell's collar savagely. "March, sir!"

And then they started toward the station.

The bobbing man, the little man, the cock-eyed man, and the gallant man formed behind. Then the crowd fell in, and away they went, with the mysterious veiled woman following at a distance.

Ephraim placed himself at Frank's side.

"This is a gol-darn outrage!" fumed the Vermonter, speaking to Merry. "Whut be yeou goin' to do abaout it?"

"I shall have to do the best I can," answered the unfortunate youth, quietly.

"But yeou won't be able to start for Puelbo with the rest of the people."

"It doesn't look that way now."

"That's tough!"

"It is decidedly unfortunate, but I hope to get off in time to join the company before the first performance to-morrow night."

"Haow did it happen?"

"I hardly know. The woman stopped me and insisted that I should go somewhere to talk with her. I explained that my time was limited, but that seemed to make no impression on her. When I tried to get away she flung her arms around me and screamed. That brought a crowd together, and then she declared I had assaulted her."

The policeman on the other side of Frank laughed in ridicule. Although he said nothing, it was plain he took no stock in Frank's story.

"Larf!" grated Gallup, under his breath. "Yeou think yeou know so gol-darned much that——"

"Hush!" warned Frank. "I do not wish you to get into trouble. You must inform the others what has happened to me."

"It's purty gol-darn hard to keep still," declared Ephraim. "I never see sich a set of natteral born fools in all my life! How many of the craowd saw what happened 'tween yeou an' the woman?"

"No one, I think."

"An' I'll bet a squash they'll all go up an' swear to any kind of a story she'll tell. Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"That's queer. Wut was her little game?"

"Don't know that."

"By gum! it's some kind of a put-up job!"

"I have a fancy there is something more than appears on the surface. It is an attempt to make trouble for me."

"That's right."

"I hope to see the woman's face at the police station."

"Yeou won't!"

"Why not?"

"She won't show it."

"Perhaps the judge will request her to lift her veil."

"Not by a gol-darned sight! Men are too big fools over women. They'll take any old thing she'll say abaout yeou, an' lock yeou up fer it. She'll give some kind of name and address, an' they'll let her go at that."

"Well, unless I can get bail right away I shall be in a bad fix. If Kent Carson were in town he would pull me out of it, as he did before."

The officer pricked up his ears.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Then you have been arrested in Denver before? This is a second offense! I rather think you'll not get off as easy as you did the first time."

"Oh, yeou are enough to——"

"Ephraim!"

With that word Frank cut Gallup short.

In a short time they approached the police station.

"I have been here before," said Merry, quietly. "This is the station to which I was taken when Leslie Lawrence made his false charge against me."

Entering, he was taken before the desk of the sergeant, the bobbing man, the little man, the cock-eyed man, and the gallant man following closely, while others also came in.

The sergeant looked up.

"Ah, Brandon," he said to the officer, "another one?"

"Yes, sir," answered the policeman.

"What is the charge?"

"Insulting a lady on the street."

"Who was the lady?"

"She is coming. She will be here directly to make the complaint against him."

Then the sergeant took a good look at the accused. He started, bent forward, and looked closer.

"Mr. Merriwell!" he exclaimed; "is it you?"

"Yes, sergeant," bowed Frank, with a smile. "It seems to be my luck to cause you trouble once more."

"Trouble!" ejaculated the man behind the desk. "Why, this is very surprising! And you are accused of insulting a lady?"

"I am," was the quiet answer.

"Well! well! well! It hardly seems possible. I fail to understand why you should do such a thing. It was very kind of you to send me tickets for your performance yesterday, and I was fortunate to be able to attend. I was greatly pleased, both with your play and yourself, to say nothing of your supporting company. I see the papers have given you a great send-off, but it is no better than you merit."

"Thank you, sir," said Frank, simply.

The policeman began to look disturbed, while the bobbing man, the little man, the gallant man, and the cock-eyed man all stared at Frank and the sergeant in surprise.

"You seem to recognize the offender, sir," said the officer who had arrested Frank.

"I recognize the gentleman, Brandon," said the sergeant, putting particular emphasis on the word "gentleman."

"He said he had been arrested before."

"He was, on a trumped-up charge, and he was promptly dismissed by me."

The officer looked still more disturbed.

"But this is no trumped-up charge," he declared. "I have witnesses."

"Where are they?"

"Here."

He motioned toward the men, who had followed closely on entering the station, whereupon the little man drew himself up stiffly, as if he imagined he must be six feet tall, at least; the bobbing man bobbed in a reckless manner, as if he had quite lost control of himself; the gallant man lifted his hat and mopped the shiny spot on the top of his head with a silk handkerchief, attempting to appear perfectly at ease; and the cock-eyed man made a desperate attempt to look the sergeant straight in the eye, but came no nearer than the upper corner of the station window, which was several yards away to the left.

"And where is the lady who makes the charge?" demanded the man behind the desk.

Where, indeed! It was time for her to appear, but all looked for her in vain.

"She must be here directly," said the sergeant, "if she is coming at all."

"Oh, she is coming!" hastily answered the officer.

"She may be waiting outside, hesitating about coming in," said the sergeant. "You may go out and bring her in, Brandon."

The policeman hesitated an instant, as if he feared to leave Frank.

"It is all right," asserted the sergeant. "I will guarantee that Mr. Merriwell is quite safe."

Then Brandon hurried out.

"I believe you are going on the road with your play, Mr. Merriwell?" said the sergeant, in a most friendly and affable manner.

"I am," answered Frank, "if I succeed in getting started."

"How is that?"

"Well," smiled Merry, "I was due to take a train in one hour and thirty minutes when I was accosted by the unknown woman whom it is said I insulted. I hardly think I shall be able to catch that train now."

The sergeant looked at his watch.

"How much time have you now?" he asked.

Frank consulted his timepiece.

"Just forty-one minutes," he said.

"Will you kindly tell me what occurred on the street?" invited the sergeant. "But wait—first I wish to know who witnessed this assault."

There was some hesitation as the official behind the desk looked the assembled crowd over.

"Come," he cried, sharply. "Who knows anything about this affair?"

"I do," asserted the man with the cock-eye, summoning courage to step forward a bit. "And here are others."

"Which ones?"

"Him, and him, and him," answered the crooked-eyed man, jabbing a pudgy and none too clean forefinger at the gallant man, the little man, and the bobbing man, although he seemed to look at three entirely different persons from those he named.

The gallant man was perspiring, and looked as if he longed to escape. He also seemed anxious over the non-appearance of the veiled lady.

The bobbing man took a step backward, but somebody pushed him from behind, and he bobbed himself nearly double.

The little man tugged at his fluttering whiskers, looking to the right and left, as if thinking of dodging and attempting to escape in a hurry.

"And these are the witnesses?" said the sergeant, his eyes seeming to pierce them through and through. "Their testimony against you shall be carefully heard, Mr. Merriwell, and it will be well for them to be careful about giving it."

"If I understand what is proper," said the cock-eyed man, who seemed the only one who dared speak outright, "this is not the court, and you are not the judge."

But he subsided before the piercing eyes of the sergeant, so that his final words were scarcely more than a gurgle in his throat.

"Now, Mr. Merriwell," said the sergeant, "I will listen to your story. Officer at the door, take care that none of the witnesses depart until they are given permission."

Frank told his story briefly, concisely, and convincingly. Barely had he finished when the officer who made the arrest came in, looking crestfallen and disgusted.

"Where is the lady, Brandon?" asked the sergeant.

"I can't find her, sir," confessed the policeman. "She is nowhere in the vicinity."

"Then it seems you have been very careless in permitting her to slip away. Now there is no one to make a charge against the prisoner."

"The witnesses—perhaps some of them will do so."

The sergeant turned sharply on the little man, to whom he fired the question:

"Did you witness this assault on the unknown lady, sir?"

The little man jumped.

"No, sus-sus-sir," he stammered; "but I——"

"That will do!" came sternly from the man behind the desk. "Step aside."

The little man did so with alacrity, plainly relieved.

Then the sergeant came at the gallant man with the same question:

"Did you witness the assault on the lady, sir?"

"I was not present when it took place, but I——"

"That will do! Step aside."

The gallant man closed up and stepped.

Next the bobbing man was questioned:

"Did you witness the assault on the lady, sir?"

"I arrived just after it was committed, but I can tell you——"

"Nothing! That will do! Step aside."

The cock-eyed man folded his arms across his breast and glared fiercely at the window, which seemed to offend him.

"You are next." said the sergeant. "What did you see?"

"I saw quite enough to convince me that the assault had been committed before I reached the spot, but——"

"Another 'but.' 'But me no buts.' There seems to be no one present who witnessed the assault, and so no one can prefer a charge against Mr. Merriwell. Mr. Merriwell, you have now exactly thirty minutes in which to catch your train. Don't

stop to say a word, but git up and git. You are at liberty."

And Frank took the sergeant's advice, followed closely by Ephraim.

CHAPTER XVIII.—AT THE LAST MOMENT.

Frank Merriwell's company had gathered at the railway station to take the train for Puelbo. All but Merriwell and Gallup were on hand. Havener had purchased the tickets.

Hodge restlessly paced up and down the platform, his face dark and disturbed.

There were inquiries for Frank. Stella Stanley came to Havener and asked:

"Where is Mr. Merriwell?"

"I do not know," confessed the stage manager, who had been deputized for the occasion by Frank to look out for tickets, and make necessary arrangements.

"He hasn't come?"

"No; but he'll be here before the train pulls out. You know he has a way of always appearing on time."

Hodge stopped in his walk, and stared at Havener.

"I'd like to know when he left the hotel," said Bart. "I called for him several times before coming here, but each time I found he was not in his room, and no one knew anything about him. His bill was not settled, either."

"But his baggage came down with the others," said Havener.

"Because the hotel people permitted it, as he was vouched for by Mr. Carson, who seems to be well known to everybody in this city."

"You don't suppose anything has happened to detain him, do you?" anxiously asked the actress. "I do hope we shall not make another bad start, same as we did before. Agnes Kirk says she knows something will happen, for Mr. Merriwell gave away the cat Mascot."

"Agnes Kirk is forever prophesying something dismal," said Hodge. "She's a regular croaker. If she didn't have something to croak about, she wouldn't know what to do. She declared the cat a hoodoo in the first place, but now she says we'll have bad luck because Frank let it go. She makes me a trifle weary!"

Hodge was not in a pleasant humor.

Granville Garland and Lester Vance came up.

"It's almost train time," said Garland. "Where is our energetic young manager?"

"He will be along," Havener again asserted.

"I hope so," said Vance. "I sincerely hope this second venture will not prove such a miserable fizzle as the first one. Everything depends on Frank Merriwell."

"Something depends on you!" flashed Hodge, who seemed easily nettled. "Frank Merriwell's company did all it could to make the first venture a fizzle. Now they should do all they can to make this one a success."

"Hello, Thundercloud is lowering!" exclaimed Garland.

"Save your epithets!" exclaimed Bart. "My name is Hodge."

"My dear Hodge," said Garland, with mock politeness, "you must know it is but natural that we should feel a bit anxious."

"I may feel as anxious as any of you, but I do not go round croaking about it."

"But our first failure——"

"There it is again! I'm tired of hearing about that! You and Vance are dead lucky to be in this second company, for you both joined in the attempted assault on Merriwell when Folansbee skipped, and the company seemed to be stranded in Puelbo. If I'd been Frank Merriwell I'd sent you flying, and you can bet I would not have taken you back."

"Then it's fortunate for us that you were not Frank Merriwell," Garland sneered.

"It is," agreed Hodge. "Some people do not know when they are treated well."

"That will do!" came sharply from Havener. "This is no time to quarrel. By Jove! it's time for that train, and Merriwell's not here."

"Perhaps he's backed out at the last minute and decided not to take the play out," said Vance. "It may be that his courage has failed him."

"Now that kind of talk makes me sick!" exploded Hodge. "If you had any sense you wouldn't make it!"

"I like that!" snapped Vance, his face flushing.

"I'm glad you do!" flung back Bart. "Didn't think you would. Hoped you wouldn't. Only a fool would suppose that, after all this trouble and expense, any man with an ounce of brains in his head would back out without giving a single performance of the play."

"Well, where is Merriwell?"

Again Havener declared:

"He'll be here."

"But here comes the train!"

The train was coming. There was activity and bustle at the station. The platform was alive with moving human beings. Agnes Kirk and Cassie Lee came out of the ladies' waiting room. The male members of the company got together quickly.

"He has not come!" exclaimed Agnes Kirk, her keen eyes failing to discover Frank. "I feared it! I knew it!"

Hodge half turned away, grumbling something deep in his throat.

The actors looked at each other in doubt and dismay.

With a rush and a roar the train came in, and drew up at the station. Passengers began to get off.

A heavily veiled woman in black came out of the ladies' room, and started for the train. As she passed the group of actors some of their conversation seemed to attract her notice. She paused an instant and looked them over, and then she turned toward the steps of a car.

"Excuse me, madam," said Hodge, quickly. "You have dropped your handkerchief."

He picked it up and passed it to her. As he did so, he noticed the letters "L. F." on one corner.

"Thank you," she said, in a low voice.

At that moment, for the last time, Havener was reiterating:

"I believe Frank Merriwell will be here. All get onto the train. He never gets left."

Then the woman tossed her head a bit and laughed. It was a scornful laugh, and it attracted the attention of several of the group. She turned quickly, and stepped into the nearest car.

"Something tells me he will not arrive," declared Agnes Kirk. "The hoodoo is still on. This company will meet the same fate the other did."

"Don't talk so much about it," advised Havener, rather rudely. "Get onto the train—everybody!"

Hodge was staring after the veiled woman.

"Wonder what made her laugh like that?" he muttered. "Seems to me I've heard that laugh before. It seemed full of scornful triumph. I wonder——"

He did not express his second wonder.

"Come, Hodge," said Havener, "get aboard. Follow the others."

"I'll be the last one," said Hodge. "I'm waiting for Frank."

"I'm afraid," confessed Havener, beginning to weaken.

"Afraid of what?" Hodge almost hissed.

"It begins to look bad," admitted the stage manager. "I'm afraid something has happened to Frank. If he doesn't come——"

"I don't go," declared Bart. "I shall stay and find out what has happened to him. You must go. You must sit on those croakers. Your place is with the company; mine is with Frank Merriwell."

"All aboard!"

The conductor gave the warning.

"What's this?"

Rattle-te-bang, on the dead jump, a cab was coming along the street. The cabman was putting the whip to his foaming horses.

"He's coming," said Hodge, with cool triumph, putting his hands into his trousers pockets, and waiting the approach of the cab.

Something made him feel certain of it. Up to the platform dashed the cab, the driver flinging the horses back, and flinging himself to the platform to fling open the door.

Dong dong!

The train was starting.

Out of the cab leaped Frank Merriwell, grip in hand. At his heels Ephraim Gallup came sprawling.

Bart was satisfied, Havener was delighted. Both of them sprang on board the train. Across the platform dashed Frank and the Vermont youth, and they also boarded the moving cars.

"Well," laughed Merry, easily, "that was what I call a close call. Ten dollars to the cabby did it, and he earned his sawbuck."

"I congratulate you!" cried Havener. "I confess I had given you up. But what happened to detain you?"

"Nothing but a little adventure," answered Merry, coolly. "I'll tell you about it."

They followed him into the car.

Several members of the company had been looking from the car window, and the arrival of Frank had been witnessed. They gave a shout as he entered the car, and all were on their feet.

"Welcome!" cried Douglas Dunton, dramatically—"welcome, most noble one! Methinks thou couldst not do it better in a play. It was great stuff—flying cab, foaming horses, moving train, and all that. Make a note of it."

"I believe he did it on purpose," declared Agnes Kirk, speaking to Vance, with whom she had taken a seat.

"Very likely," admitted Lester. "Wanted to do something to attract attention."

"I think it was mean! He fooled us."

But several members of the company shook hands with Frank, and congratulated him.

"I told you he would not get left," said Havener, with triumph.

At the rear end of the car was a veiled woman, who seemed to sink down behind those in front of her, as if she sought to avoid detection. Somehow, although her face could not be seen, there was in her appearance something that betokened disappointment and chagrin.

Of course Frank was pressed for explanations, but he told them that business had detained him. He did not say what kind of business.

At length, however, with Hodge, Havener and Gallup for listeners, all seated on two facing seats, he told the story of his adventure with the veiled woman, and his arrest, which ended in a discharge that barely permitted him to leap into a cab, race to the hotel, get his grip, pay his bill, and dash to the station in time to catch the train.

As the story progressed Hodge showed signs of increasing excitement. When Merry finished, Bart exclaimed:

"How did the woman look?"

"I did not see her face."

"How was she dressed? Describe her."

"Don't know as I can."

"Do the best you can."

Frank did so, and Bart cried:

"I've seen her!"

"What?"

Merry was astonished.

"I am sure of it," asserted Bart. "I have seen that very same woman!"

"When?"

"To-day."

"How long ago?"

"A very short time."

"Where?"

"At the station while we were waiting for you to appear."

"Is it possible. How do you know it was her?"

Then Bart told of the strange woman who had dropped her handkerchief, of the initials he had seen when he picked it up, and of her singularly scornful laugh when she heard Havener declare that Merriwell never got left.

All this interested Frank very much. Bart concluded by saying:

"That woman is on this very train!"

"Waal, may I be tickled to death by grasshoppers!" ejaculated the youth from Vermont. "Whut in thunder do yeou s'pose she's up to?"

"It may be the same one," said Frank. "It would be remarkable if it should prove to be the same one. Two women might look so much alike that the description of one would exactly fit the other—especially if both were heavily veiled."

Bart shook his head.

"Something tells me it is the same woman," he persisted.

"But why should she be on this train?"

"Who can answer that? Why did she try such a trick on the street?"

"Don't know," admitted Merry. "Once I thought it might be that she was mashed on me, but it didn't prove that way."

"Oh, I dunno," drawled Gallup, with a queer grin. "Yeou turned her daown, an' that made her sore. Ef she'd bin mashed on ye, perhaps she'd done jest as she did to git revenge fer bein' turned daown."

"No, something tells me this was more than a simple case of mash," said Frank.

"What do you make of it?" asked Havener.

"An attempt to bother me."

"For what?"

"Who knows? Haven't I had enough troubles?"

"I should say so! But I thought your troubles of this sort were over when you got rid of Lawrence. You left two of the assistants who saw him try to fire the theater to appear as witnesses against him."

"Oh, I hardly think Lawrence was in this affair in any way or manner. I confess I do not know just what to make of it. Heretofore my enemies have been men, but now there seems to be a woman in the case."

"If this woman follows you, what will you do?"

"I shall endeavor to find out who she is, and bring her to time, so she will drop the game."

"See that you do," advised Hodge. "And don't be soft with her because she is a woman."

"Go look through the train and see if you can find the woman you saw," directed Frank. "If you find her, come back here and tell me where she is."

"I'll do it!" exclaimed Bart, getting up at once.

"That fellow is faithful to you," said Havener, when Bart had walked down the aisle; "but he is awfully disagreeable at times. It's nothing but his loyalty that makes me take any stock in him."

"His heart is in the right place," asserted Merry.

"Nothing makes him doubt you. Why, I believe he wanted to fight the whole company when you failed to appear."

"An' he's a fighter, b'gosh! when he gits started," declared Gallup. "I've seen him plunk some critters an' he plunked them in great style."

Hodge was gone some little time, but there was a grim look of triumph when he returned.

"Find her?" asked Merry.

"Sure," nodded Bart.

"Where?"

"Last car. She did not get onto this one, but I rather think she moved after you came on board. That makes me all the more certain that it is the woman. She's near the rear end of the car, on the left side, as you go down the aisle."

"Well," said Frank, rising, "I think I'll go take a look at her. Is she alone?"

"Yes."

"That's good. And she cannot escape from the train till it stops, if it should happen to be the right woman, which I hope it is."

Bart wished to accompany Frank to point the woman out, but Merry objected.

"No," he said, "let me go alone."

"I can show her to you."

"If the woman I am looking for is in the car I'll find her."

Merry passed slowly through the train, scanning each passenger as he went along. He entered the last car. In a few moments he would know if the mysterious veiled woman really were on that train. If he found her, he would be certain the strange encounter on the street had a meaning that had not appeared on the surface.

The train was flying along swiftly, taking curves without seeming to slacken speed in the least. Frank's progress through the car was rather slow, as the swaying motion made it difficult for him to get along.

But when he had reached the rear of the car he was filled with disappointment.

Not a sign of a veiled woman had he seen in the car.

More than that, there was no woman in black who resembled the woman who had stopped him on the street in Denver.

Could it be Hodge had been mistaken?

No! Something told him Bart had made no mistake in the matter of seeing a woman who answered the description given by Frank. He had said she was in the last car. She was not there when Frank passed through the car. Then she had moved.

Why?

Was the woman aware that she was being watched? Had she moved to escape observation?

Frank stopped by the door at the rear end of the car. He looked out through the glass in the door.

Some one was on the platform at one side of the door. Frank opened the door and looked out.

The person on the platform was a woman in black, and she wore a veil!

CHAPTER XIX.—ON THE REAR PLATFORM.

A feeling of exultant satisfaction flashed over Merriwell, and he quickly stepped out onto the platform, closing the door behind him.

The woman turned and looked toward him.

The train was racing along, the track seeming to fly away from beneath the last car.

It was a strange place for a woman to be, out there on the rear platform, and Merry's first thought had been that it must be the woman he sought, for had she not come out there to escape him? She had fancied he would look through the car, fail to find her, and decide that she was not on the train. It must be that she had seen Hodge come in, and had realized at once why he had entered the car. When he departed to carry the information to Frank, the desperate woman had fled to the rear platform.

Immediately on stepping out onto the platform, however, Frank decided that his reasoning was at fault.

It was a veiled woman, and she was in black, but it was not the woman he sought. It was not the woman who had caused his arrest in Denver!

Merry was disappointed.

The unknown looked at him, and said nothing. He looked at her and wondered. The veil was thick and baffling.

"Madam," he said, "this is a dangerous place."

She said nothing.

"You are liable to become dizzy out here and meet with an accident," he pursued. "If you should fall—well, you know what that would mean. It is remarkable that you should come out here."

"The air," she murmured, in a hoarse, husky voice. "The car was stifling, and I needed the air. I felt ill in there."

"All the more reason why you should not come out here," declared Frank, solicitously. "You could have had a window

opened, and that would have given you air.”

“The window stuck.”

“It must be some of them would open. If you will return, I’ll endeavor to find you a seat by an open window.”

“Very kind of you,” she said, in the same peculiar, husky voice. “Think I’ll stay out here. Don’t mind me.”

“Then I trust you will permit me to remain, and see that you do not meet with any misfortune?”

“No. Go! Leave me! I had rather remain alone.”

She seemed like a middle-aged lady. He observed that her clothes fitted her ill, and her hands were large and awkward. She attempted to hide them.

All at once, with a suddenness that staggered him, the truth burst on Frank.

The woman was no woman at all! It was a man in disguise!

Merry literally gasped for a single instant, but he recovered at once.

Through his head flashed a thought:

“This must be some criminal who is seeking to escape justice!”

Immediately Frank resolved to remain on the platform at any hazard. He would talk to the disguised unknown.

“The motion of the train is rather trying to one who is not accustomed to it,” he said. “Some people feel it quite as much as if they were on a vessel. Car sickness and seasickness are practically the same thing.”

She looked at him through the concealing veil, but did not speak.

“I have traveled considerable,” he pursued, “but, fortunately, I have been troubled very little with sickness, either on sea or land.”

“Will you be kind enough to leave me!” came from behind the veil, in accents of mingled imploration and anger.

“I could not think of such a thing, madam!” he bowed, as gallantly as possible. “It is my duty to remain and see that you come to no harm.”

“I shall come to no harm. You are altogether too kind! Your kindness is offensive!”

“I am very sorry you regard it thus, but I know my duty.”

“If you knew half as much as you think, you would go.”

“I beg your pardon; it is because I do know as much as I think that I do not go.”

The unknown was losing patience.

“Go!” he commanded, and now his voice was masculine enough to betray him, if Frank had not dropped to the trick before.

“No,” smiled Merry, really beginning to enjoy it, “not till you go in yourself, madam.”

The train lurched round a curve, causing the disguised unknown to swing against the iron gate. Frank sprang forward, as if to catch and save the person from going over, but his real object was to apparently make a mistake and snatch off the veil.

The man seemed to understand all this, for he warded off Frank’s clutch, crying:

“I shall call for aid! I shall seek protection!”

“It would not be the first time to-day that a veiled woman has done such a thing,” laughed Frank.

The disguised man stared at him again. Merry fairly itched to snatch away the veil.

“If you are seeking air, madam,” he suggested, “you had better remove your veil. It must be very smothering, for it seems to be quite thick.”

“You are far too anxious about me!” snapped the disguised man. “I would advise you to mind your own business!”

This amused Merry still more. The situation was remarkably agreeable to him.

“In some instances,” he said, politely, “your advice would be worth taking, but an insane person should be carefully watched, and that is why I am minding your business just now.”

“An insane person?”

“Exactly.”

"Do you mean that I am insane?"

"Well, I trust you will excuse me, but from your appearance and your remarkable behavior, it seems to me that you should be closely guarded."

That seemed to make the unknown still more angry, but it was plain he found difficulty in commanding words to express himself.

"You're a fool!" he finally snapped.

"Thank you!" smiled Frank.

"You're an idiot!"

"Thank you again."

"You are the one who is crazy!"

"Still more thanks."

"How have I acted to make you fancy me demented?"

"You are out here, and you may be contemplating self-destruction by throwing yourself from this train."

"Don't worry about that. I am contemplating nothing of the sort."

"But there are other evidences of your insanity."

"Oh, there are?"

"Yes."

As the disguised unknown did not speak, Merry went on:

"The strongest evidence of your unbalanced state of mind is the ill-chosen attire you are wearing."

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you not dressed in the garments of your sex?"

"Sir?"

"You are not a woman," declared Frank, coolly; "but a man in the garments of a woman. Your disguise is altogether too thin. It would not deceive anybody who looked you over closely. You are——"

Frank got no further. With a cry of anger, the disguised unknown sprang at him, grappled with him, panted in his ear:

"You are altogether too sharp, Frank Merriwell! This time you have overshot yourself! This ends you!"

Then he tried to fling Merry from the swiftly moving train.

Frank instantly realized that it was to be a struggle for life, and he met the assault as quickly and stiffly as he could; but the disguised man seemed, of a truth, to have the strength of an insane person. In his quick move, the fellow had forced Frank back against the gate, and over this, he tried to lift and hurl him.

"No you don't!" came from Merry's lips.

"Curse you!" panted the fellow. "I will do it!"

"Yes, you will—I don't think!"

In the desperate struggle, both seemed to hang over the gate for a moment. Then Frank slid back, securing a firm grip, and felt safe.

Just then, however, the door of the car flew open, and out sprang Hodge. Bart saw what was happening in a moment, and he leaped to Merry's aid.

Out on a high trestle that spanned a roaring, torrent-like river rumbled the train.

Bart clutched Frank, gave the disguised man a shove, and——

Just how it happened, neither of them could tell afterward, but over the gate whirled the man, and down toward the seething torrent he shot!

Up from that falling figure came a wild cry of horror that was heard above the fumbling roar of the train on the trestle bridge.

Over and over the figure turned, the skirts fluttering, and then headlong it plunged into the white foam of the torrent, disappearing from view.

On the rear platform of the last car two white-faced, horrified young men had watched the terrible fall. They stared down at the swirling river, looking for the unfortunate wretch to reappear. Off the bridge flew the train, and no longer were they able to see the river.

"He's gone!" came hoarsely from Bart.

"Then you saw—you knew it was a man?" cried Frank.

"Yes, I saw his trousers beneath the skirts as I came out the door."

"This is terrible!" muttered Frank.

"He was trying to throw you over?"

"Yes; attempted to take me off my guard and hurl me from the train."

"Then the wretch has met a just fate," declared Bart.

But now it seemed that the struggle on the platform had been noticed by some one within the car. There were excited faces at the glass in the door, and a trainman came out, demanding:

"What is all this? Why are you out here? They tell me a woman came out. Where is she?"

With unusual readiness, Bart quickly answered:

"She's gone—jumped from the train."

"Jumped?"

"Yes. We both tried to save her. Just as I reached the door I saw my friend struggling to hold her, but she was determined to fling herself over."

"Well, this is a fine piece of business!" came angrily from the trainman. "What ailed her?"

"She must have been insane," asserted Bart. "She attacked my friend here, and then tried to jump off. He could not hold her. I did not get hold of her in time."

"What was he doing out here?"

"Watching her. You will admit it was rather queer for a woman to come out here on the platform and stand. He thought so, and so he came out to watch her."

"Well, you can both come in off this platform!" growled the trainman, in anything but a civil manner.

They did so. The passengers swarmed round them when they entered the car, literally flinging questions at them.

"Who was the woman?"

"What ailed her?"

"Why did she go out there?"

"What did she do?"

"Tell us about it!"

Again Bart made the explanation, and then there arose a babel.

"I noticed her," declared one. "I saw she looked queer."

"I noticed her," asserted another. "I saw she acted queer."

"I saw her when she went out," put in a third, "and I thought it was a crazy thing to do."

"Without doubt the woman was insane," declared a pompous fat man.

"She must have been instantly killed."

"She jumped into the river."

"Then, she was drowned."

"Who knows her?"

"She was all alone."

Frank had been thinking swiftly all the while. He regretted that Bart had been so hasty in making his explanation, and now he resolved to tell as near the truth as possible without contradicting Hodge.

"Gentlemen and ladies," he said, "I have every reason for believing that the person was a man."

Then there were cries of astonishment and incredulity.

"A man?"

"Impossible!"

"Never!"

"Ridiculous!"

But an elderly lady, who wore gold-bowed spectacles, calmly said:

"The young gentleman is correct, I am quite sure. The person in question sat directly in front of me, and I discovered there was something wrong. I felt almost certain it was a man before he got up and went out on the platform."

Then there was excitement in the car. A perfect torrent of questions was poured on Frank.

Merry explained that he had thought it rather remarkable that a woman should be standing all alone on the rear platform, and, after going out and speaking to the person, he became convinced that it was a man in disguise. Then he told how the man, on being accused, had attacked him furiously, and finally had seemed to fling himself over the iron gate.

It was a great sensation, but no one accused either Merry or Bart of throwing the unknown over, not a little to Frank's relief.

At last, they got away and went forward into the car where the company was gathered. Havener and Gallup had been holding the double seat, and Frank and Bart sat down there.

"Well, I fancy you failed to find the lady you were looking for," said Havener. "But what's the matter? You look as if something has happened."

"Something has," said Frank, grimly.

"Gol-darned ef I don't b'lieve it!" exclaimed Ephraim. "Both yeou an' Hodge show it. Tell us about it."

Frank did so in a very few words, astonishing both Ephraim and the stage manager.

"Waal," said the Vermonter, "the gal who tackled yeou in Denver warn't no man."

"Not much," said Frank, "and it is remarkable that Hodge should have mistaken a man for such a woman as I described."

"Didn't," said Bart.

"But you have acknowledged that you believed this was a man."

"Yes, but this man was not the veiled woman I saw."

"Wasn't?"

"Not much!"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank. "The mystery deepens!"

"Did you mistake this person for the veiled woman I meant?"

"Sure thing."

"And did not find another?"

"Not a sign of one. I do not believe there is another on the train."

"Well, this is a mystery!" confessed Hodge. "I saw nothing of the one I meant when I went to look for you."

"It must be you saw no one but that man in the first place."

Bart shook his head, flushing somewhat.

"Do you think I would take that man for a woman with a perfect figure, such as you described? What in the world do you fancy is the matter with my eyes?"

"By gum!" drawled Gallup. "This air business is gittin' too thick fer me. I don't like so much mystery a bit."

"If that man was not the one you meant, Hodge," said Merry, "then the mysterious woman is still on this train."

"That's so," nodded Bart.

"Find her," urged Frank. "I want to get my eyes on her more than ever. Surely you should be able to find her."

"I'll do it!" cried Bart, jumping up.

Away he went.

Frank remained with Havener and Gallup, talking over the exciting and thrilling adventure and the mystery of it all till Hodge returned. At a glance Merry saw that his college friend had not been successful.

"Well," he said, "did you find her?"

"No," confessed Bart, looking crestfallen. "I went through the entire train, and I looked every passenger over. The woman I meant is not on this train."

"Then, it must be that your woman was the man who met his death in the river. There is no other explanation of her disappearance. You must give up now, Hodge."

But Hodge would not give up, although he could offer no explanation, and the mystery remained unsolved.

There were numerous stops between Denver and Puelbo, and it was nightfall before the train brought them to their destination. The sun had dropped behind the distant Rockies, and the soft shades of a perfect spring evening were gathering when they drew up at the station in Puelbo.

Lights were beginning to twinkle in windows, and the streets were lighted. "Props" had gone to look after the baggage, and the company was gathered on the platform. Cabmen were seeking to attract fares.

Of a sudden, a cry broke from the lips of Bart Hodge:

"There she is!"

All were startled by his sudden cry. They saw him start from the others, pointing toward a woman who was speaking to a cabman. That woman had left the train and crossed the platform, and she was dressed in black and heavily veiled.

Frank saw her—recognized her.

"By heavens! it is the woman," he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XX.—MAN OR WOMAN.

Into the cab sprang the woman. Slam! the door closed behind her. Crack!—the whip of the driver fell on the horses, and away went the cab.

"Stop!" shouted Hodge.

Cabby did not heed the command.

Frank made a rush for another cab.

"Follow!" he cried, pointing toward the disappearing vehicle. "I will give you five dollars—ten dollars—if you do not lose sight of that cab!"

"In!" shouted the driver. "I'll earn that ten!"

In Frank plunged, jerking the door to behind him. The cab whirled from the platform with a jerk. Away it flew.

"It will be worth twenty dollars to get a peep beneath that veil!" muttered Frank Merriwell.

The windows were open. He looked out on one side. He could see nothing of the cab they were pursuing. Back he dodged, and out he popped his head on the other side.

"There it is!"

He felt that he was not mistaken. The fugitive cab was turning a corner at that moment. They were after it closely.

Frank wondered where the woman could have been hidden on the train so that she had escaped observation. He decided that she must have been in one of the toilet rooms.

But what about the veiled man who was disguised as a woman? That man had known Frank—had spoken his name.

It was a double mystery.

The pursuit of the cab continued some distance. At last the cab in advance drew up in front of a hotel, and a man got out!

Merriwell had leaped to the ground, and cabby was down quite as swiftly, saying:

"There, sir, I followed 'em. Ten plunks, please."

The door of the other cab had been closed, and the man was paying the driver. He wore no overcoat, and carried no baggage.

"Fooled!" exclaimed Frank, in disappointment. "You have followed the wrong cab, driver!"

"I followed the one you told me to follow," declared the driver.

"No; you made a mistake."

"Now, don't try that game on me!" growled the man. "It's your way of attempting to get out of paying the tenner you promised."

"No; I shall pay you, for you did the best you could. It was not your fault that you made a mistake in the mass of carriages at the depot."

"Didn't make no mistake," asserted the cabby, sullenly.

"Well, it's useless to argue over it," said Merry, as he gave the man the promised ten dollars. "I am sure you made a mistake."

"Think I couldn't follow Bill Dover and his spotted nigh hawse?" exploded the driver. "I couldn't have missed that hawse if I'd tried."

Frank saw one of the horses attached to the other cab was spotted. He had noticed that peculiarity about one of the horses attached to the cab the mysterious woman had entered.

"It's the same horse!" exclaimed Merry.

"Course it is," nodded the driver.

The man had paid his fare and was carelessly sauntering into the hotel. As he disappeared through the door-way, Frank sprang to the door of the other cab, flung it wide open, and looked in, more than half expecting to discover the woman still inside.

No woman was there!

Frank caught his breath in astonishment, and stood there, staring into the empty cab.

"Hi, there! wot cher doin'?" called the man on the box.

Frank did not answer. He reached into the cab and felt on the floor. He found something, brought it forth, looked at it amazed.

It was a woman's dress!

But where was the woman?

Garment after garment Frank lifted, discovering that all a woman's outer wearing apparel lay on the floor of that cab.

"Vanished!" he muttered. "Disappeared—gone? What does it mean?"

Then he thought of the man who had left the cab and entered the hotel, and he almost reeled.

"That was the woman!"

He had seen one woman change into a man on the train, and here was another and no less startling metamorphosis.

"Driver," he cried, "didn't you take a person on in woman's clothes at the station and let one off in man's clothes just now?"

"None of yer business!" came the coarse reply. "I knows enough not ter answer questions when I'm paid ter keep still."

That was quite enough; the driver might as well have answered, for he had satisfied Merriwell.

Frank was astonished by the remarkable change that the woman had made while within the cab, but now he believed he understood why she had not been detected while on the train. She had been able to make a change of disguises in the toilet room, and had passed herself off as a man. Hodge had looked for a veiled woman, and he had looked for a veiled woman; it was not strange that both of them had failed to notice a person in masculine attire who must have looked like a woman.

Up the hotel steps Frank leaped. He entered the office, he searched and inquired. At last, he found out that a beardless man had entered by the front door, but had simply passed through and left by a side door.

"Given me the slip," decided Frank. He realized that he had encountered a remarkably clever woman.

And the mystery was deeper than ever.

Frank went to the hotel at which the company was to stop, and found all save Wynne had arrived. Hodge was on the watch for Merry, and eagerly inquired concerning his success in following the woman. Frank explained how he had been tricked.

"Well, it's plain this unknown female is mighty slippery," said Bart. "You have not seen the last of her."

"I am afraid there are some things about this double mystery which will never be solved," admitted Frank. "For

instance, the identity of the man who fell into the river.”

“We’ll be dead lucky if we do not have trouble over that affair,” said Hodge.

“How do you mean?”

“Some fool is liable to swear out a warrant charging us with throwing the unknown overboard.”

“I thought of that,” nodded Frank, “and that is why I took occasion on the train to straighten out your story somewhat. It is always best, Bart, to stick to the straight truth.”

Hodge flushed and looked resentful, but plainly sought to repress his feelings, as he said:

“I am not the only person in the world who believes the truth should not be spoken at all times.”

“If one cannot speak the truth,” said Merry, quietly, “he had better remain silent and say nothing at all, particularly in a case like this. There is an old saying that ‘the truth can afford to travel slowly, but a lie must be on the jump all the time, or it will get caught.’”

“Well, I don’t think this is any time to moralize,” came a bit sharply from Bart. “If we were to go into an argument, I rather think I could show logically that a white lie is sometimes more commendable than the truth.”

“In shielding another, possibly,” admitted Merry; “but never in shielding the one who tells it. The more a person lies, the more he has to lie, for it becomes necessary to tell one falsehood to cover up another, and, after a while, the unfortunate individual finds himself so ensnared in a network of fabrications that it is impossible for him to clear himself. Then disaster comes.”

“Oh, don’t preach!” snapped Bart. “Let’s go to your room and talk this matter of the veiled woman over. There is trouble brewing for you, and you must be prepared to meet it. Havener has registered for the company, and all you have to do is call for your key.”

So Frank and Bart went to the room of the former.

Puelbo had been well “papered.” The work was done thoroughly, and every board, every dead wall, and every available window flaunted the paper of “True Blue.”

The failure of “For Old Eli” was still fresh in the minds of the people of the city, but neither had they forgotten Frank Merriwell’s plucky promise to bring the play back to that place and perform it successfully there.

The newspapers of the place had given him their support, but Frank was determined that extracts from the notices in the Denver papers should reach the eyes of those who did not read the Puelbo papers closely. With this end in view, he had the extracts printed on flyers, as small bills are called, and the flyers were headed in startling type:

“Five Hundred Dollars Fine!”

To this he added:

“Each and every person who reads the following clippings from Denver newspapers will be fined Five Hundred Dollars!”

It is needless to say that nearly every one who could read was careful to read the clippings through to the end.

This manner of attracting attention was effective, even though it may seem rather boyish in its conception.

His printing was done on the very night that he arrived in Puelbo, and the flyers were scattered broadcast the following day.

He obtained the names of a large number of prominent citizens, to whom he sent complimentary tickets, good for the first night’s performance.

Frank was determined to have a house, even if it was made up principally of deadheads.

On the occasion of his former visit to Puelbo he had received some free advertising through Leslie Lawrence, who had circulated printed accusations against him. He scarcely expected anything of the sort on this occasion, and he was rather startled when, on the morning following his arrival, he discovered that a circular had been scattered broadcast, which seemed to be even more malicious than the former attempt upon him.

In this circular he was plainly charged with the murder of an unknown woman shortly after leaving Denver, and it was said he had been aided in the crime by Bartley Hodge.

Frank was calmly reading this bold accusation when Hodge came bursting into the room in a manner that reminded Merry of his entrance under similar circumstances on the former occasion.

Seeing the paper in Merry’s hand, Bart hoarsely cried:

“So you’ve got it! Then you know about it! Well, now, sir, what do you think of that?”

“Sit down, Hodge,” said Frank, calmly. “You seem all out of breath. You are excited.”

"Excited!" shouted the dark-faced youth. "Well, isn't that enough to excite a man of stone!"

"Do you mean this?"

"Yes, that! What in the name of creation do you suppose I meant?"

"I wasn't certain."

"Wasn't cert— Oh, say; that's too much! What do you think? What are you made of, anyway?"

"Now, my dear fellow, you must stop going on like this. You'll bring on heart disease if you keep it up."

Hodge dropped down on a chair and stared at Merry.

"Well—I'll—be—blowed!" he gasped.

"You are nearly blowed now," said Frank. "You seem quite out of breath."

"Is it possible you have read that paper you hold in your hand?" asked Bart, with forced calmness.

"Yes, I have read it."

"Well, I do not understand you yet! I thought I did, but I'm willing to confess that I don't."

Then he jumped up, almost shouting:

"Why, man alive, don't you understand that we are charged with murder—with murder?"

"Yes," said Frank, still unruffled, "it seems so by this."

"And you take it like that!"

"What is the use to take it differently?"

"Use? Use? Sometimes I think you haven't a drop of good, hot blood in your body."

"If a person has plenty of good, hot blood, it is a good thing for him to cool it off with good, cool brains. Hot blood is all right, but it should be controlled; it should not control the man."

"I don't see how you can talk that way, under such circumstances. Why, we may be arrested for murder any moment!"

"We shall not."

"Shall not?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because our unknown enemy does not dare come out into the open and make the charge against us."

"What makes you think so?"

"This."

Frank held up the accusing paper.

"That?"

"Yes."

"Why should that make you think so?"

"If our enemy had intended to come out and make the charge against us openly, this would not have appeared. It is simply an attempt to hurt us from under cover, or to arouse others against us—against me, in particular."

Bart could see there was logic in Merry's reasoning, but still he was fearful of what might happen.

"Well, even you must acknowledge that the unknown enemy may succeed in his purpose," said Hodge. "There were a number of persons who saw something of the struggle on the train. This may arouse some of them, or one of them, at least, to do something."

"It may."

"You confess that?"

"Yes."

"Didn't think you would."

"I don't believe it will. Hodge, I have a fancy that, in this case, same as in the other, my enemy will overshoot the mark."

"How?"

"Something tells me that this warning, intended to turn suspicion against me, will serve as an advertisement. Of course, it will be a most unpleasant notoriety to have, but it may serve to bring people out to see me."

Bart looked thoughtful.

"I never thought of that," he confessed, hesitatingly.

"I had far rather not had the notoriety," admitted Frank; "but that can't be helped now. Let the people turn out to see 'True Blue.' Perhaps I'll get a chance at my enemy later."

"The veiled woman——"

"Is in it, I fancy. I believe there was some connection between the veiled woman and the veiled man—the one who plunged from the train into the river."

"I have thought of that, but I've been unable to figure out what the connection could be. Why was the man veiled and disguised thus?"

"So that I would not recognize him."

"Then, it must be that you would know him if you saw him face to face."

"As he knew me. He called me by name as he sprang upon me."

"Well, he's done for, but I believe the woman will prove the most dangerous. Something tells me she was the real mover in this business."

"I fancy you are right, Hodge. At first, in Denver, I thought she had been piqued by the manner in which I replied to her, but since all these strange things have happened, I know it was more than a case of pique."

"When you make a woman your enemy, she is far more dangerous than a man, for women are more reckless—less fearful of consequences."

"That's right," nodded Frank. "Women know they will not be punished to the full extent of the law, no matter what they do. Juries are easily hypnotized by pretty women. Where a woman and a man are connected in committing a crime, and the woman is shown to be the prime mover, a jury will let the woman off as easily as possible. A jury always hesitates about condemning a woman to death, no matter if she has committed a most fiendish murder. In the East, women adventuresses ply their nefarious arts and work upon the sympathies of the juries so that, when called to the bar, they are almost always acquitted. It is remarkable that men should be so soft. It is not gallantry; it is softness. The very man who would cry the loudest if he had been hit by an adventuress is the most eager to acquit the woman in case he happens to be on the jury to pronounce the verdict in her case."

"Well," said Hodge, "you are sound and level in that statement, Frank. It's plain you do not think true chivalry consists of acquitting female blackmailers and assassins."

"Don't let this little attempt to injure us frighten you, Hodge," advised Frank, rising. "I think it will miscarry entirely. We've got plenty of work for to-day, and to-night I believe I shall be able to tell beyond a doubt whether 'True Blue' is a success or a failure. I think the test will come right here in Puelbo, where we met disaster before."

CHAPTER XXI.—GALLUP MEETS THE MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

The mechanical arrangements and special scenery had arrived and were moved into the theater. Supers had been engaged to attend rehearsal in the afternoon, so that they might know their business when evening came.

Frank attended to the details of much of the work of making ready, although he had full confidence in Havener and Hodge, who assisted him. He saw that the mechanical effect representing the boat race was put up and tested, making sure it worked perfectly. He was anxious about this, for any hitch in that scene was certain to ruin the whole play.

Gallup proved valuable. He worked about the stage, and he was of great assistance to Havener, who wished Merriwell to appoint him assistant stage manager.

Of course, everybody was anxious about the result, but the majority of the company had confidence in Merriwell and his play. Cassie Lee, perhaps, was the only one who was never assailed by a doubt concerning the outcome.

"I shall do my best to-night—at any cost," she told Frank.

At that moment he did not pause to consider the real meaning of her words. Afterward he knew what she meant. She still carried a tiny needle syringe and a phial that contained a certain dangerous drug that had so nearly wrought her ruin.

The various members of the company drifted into the theater by the stage entrance, looked over their dressing rooms and the stage and drifted out again. They had been engaged to act, and they did not propose to work when it was not necessary.

Gallup whistled as he hustled about the work Havener directed him to do. He made his long legs carry him about

swiftly, although he sometimes tripped over his own feet.

Ephraim was arranging a mass of scenery so that every piece would be handy for use that night when the time came to use it. While doing this, he was surprised to see one of the dressing-room doors cautiously open and a person peer out.

"Gosh!" exclaimed the Vermonter, stepping back out of sight. "Who's that?"

Again the person peered out of the dressing room, as if to make sure the coast was clear.

"I must be dreamin'!" thought the Vermont youth, rubbing his eyes. "I've got 'em jest from hearin' Frank and Hodge talk so much about her."

A moment later he changed his mind.

"No, by ginger!" he hissed, as the person slipped out of the dressing room. "It's her!"

It was "her," and that means that it was the mysterious veiled woman!

Recovering instantly from the shock of his surprise, Gallup sprang out from behind the scenery and made a rush for the unknown.

"Hold on!" he cried. "B'gosh! yeou've gotter give a 'count of yerself, an' don't yeou fergit it!"

She started, turned on him, dodged. He flung out his hand and clutched at her, catching hold of the chain that encircled her neck and suspended her purse.

"I want yeou!" palpitated the Yankee youth. "Yeou're jest the——"

Flirt!—the woman made a quick motion toward him. Something struck Ephraim in his eyes, burning like fire. He was nearly knocked down by the shock, and a yell of pain escaped his lips.

"I'm blinded!" he groaned.

It was true; he could not see.

With something like a scornful laugh, the woman flitted away and disappeared, leaving poor Ephraim bellowing with pain and clawing at his eyes, as if he would dig them out of his head.

"Murder!" he howled. "Oh, I'm dyin'! Somebody come quick! My eyes hev been put aout! Oh, wow-wow! Oh, I wisht I'd staid to hum on the farm!"

Down on the floor he fell, and over and over he rolled in the greatest agony.

Havener and some of the regular theater hands heard his wild cries and came rushing to the spot. They found him on the floor, kicking and thrashing about.

"What's the matter?" demanded the stage manager.

Gallup did not hear him.

"I'm dyin'!" he blubbered. "Oh, it's an awful way ter die! My eyes are gone! Ow-yow!"

"What is the matter?" Havener again cried, getting hold of the thrashing youth. "What has happened?"

"Stop her!" roared Ephraim, realizing that some person had come and thinking instantly that the woman must be detained. "Don't let her git erway!"

"Don't let who get away?"

"The woman! Ow-wow! Bring a pail of warter an' let me git my head inter it! I must do somethin' ter put aout the fire! Oh, my eyes! my eyes!"

"What is the matter with your eyes?"

"She threw somethin' inter 'em."

"She?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The woman."

"What woman?"

"The veiled woman—the one that has made all the trouble fer Merry! Oh, this is jest awful!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Havener, impatiently. "There is no veiled woman here! Have you lost your senses?"

Then, realizing that they were doing nothing to prevent her from making her escape, Gallup sat up and howled:

"She was here! I saw her comin' aout of a dressin' room. Oh, dear! Yow! I tried to ketch her! Oh, my eyes! She flung somethin' inter my face an' put both my eyes out!"

"Something has been thrown into his eyes!" exclaimed Havener. "It's red pepper! He is telling the truth! Somebody get some water! Somebody run to a drug store and get something for him to use on his eyes!"

"Darn it all!" shouted Gallup. "Let me die, ef I've gotter! but don't let that infarnal woman git erway!"

"I will try to see to that," said Havener, rushing away.

He dashed down to the stage door, but he was too late, for the doorkeeper told him the veiled woman had gone out.

"Why in the world did you let her in?" angrily demanded the irate stage manager.

"She said she belonged to the company."

"She lied! She has half killed one of the company!"

"I heard the shouts," said the doorkeeper, "and I thought somebody was hurt. But it wasn't my fault."

"If she tries to come in here again, seize and hold her. I'll give you five dollars if you hold her till I can reach her! She is a female tiger!"

Then Havener rushed back to see what could be done for Gallup.

Groaning and crying, Gallup was washing the pepper from his eyes, which were fearfully inflamed and swollen. He could not see Havener, but heard his voice, and eagerly asked:

"Did ye ketch the dratted critter?"

"No; she got out before I reached the door."

"Darn her!" grated Ephraim. "I say darn her! Never said ennything as bad as that about a female woman before, but I jest can't help it this time! I won't be able to see fer a week!"

"Oh, yes, you will," assured Havener. "But I rather think your eyes will look bad for some time to come."

"Here is something he had in his hand," said one of the supers. "It's her purse, I reckon; but there ain't no money in it."

Havener took it.

"Are you sure there wasn't any money in it when you examined it?" he asked, sharply.

The super seemed to feel insulted, and he angrily protested that he would not have touched a cent if there had been five hundred dollars in it.

"But I notice you had curiosity enough to examine the contents of it," came dryly from the stage manager. "I'll just keep this. It may prove to be a valuable clew to the woman's identity."

Everything possible was done for Ephraim's eyes, but it was a long time before he was much relieved from the agony he was suffering. Then he was taken to the hotel, with a bandage over his eyes, and a doctor came to attend him.

The physician said he would do everything possible to get Ephraim into shape to play that evening, but he did not give a positive assurance that he would be able to do so. As soon as Frank heard of the misfortune which had befallen the Vermont youth, he hastened to the hotel and to the room where Ephraim was lying on the bed.

Gallup heard his step and recognized it when he entered.

"I'm slappin' glad yeou've come, Frank!" he exclaimed.

"And I am terribly sorry you have met with such a misfortune, Ephraim," declared Merry.

"So be I, Frank—so be I! But I'm goin' ter play my part ter-night ur bu'st my galluses tryin'! I ain't goin' to knock aout the show ef I kin help it."

"That was not what I meant. I was sorry because of the pain you must have suffered."

"Waal, it was ruther tough," the faithful country lad confessed. "By gum! it was jest as ef somebody'd chucked a hull lot of coals right inter my lookers. It jest knocked me silly, same ez if I'd bin hit with a club."

"How did it happen? Tell me all about it."

Ephraim told the story of his adventure, finishing with:

"I kainder guess that red pepper warn't meant fer me, Frank. That was meant fer yeou. That woman was in there ter fix yeou so yeou couldn't play ter-night."

"It's quite likely you may be right, Ephraim; but she had to give it to you in order to escape. But where is this purse you

snatched from her?"

"On the stand, there. Havener tuck possession of it, but I got him to leave it here, so yeou might see it right away when yeou came."

Frank found the purse and opened it. From it he drew forth a crumpled and torn telegram. Smoothing this out, he saw it was dated at Castle Rock the previous day. It read as follows:

"MRS. HAYWARD GRACE, Puelbo, Colo.

"All right. Close call. Fell from train into river. Came near drowning, but managed to swim out. Will be along on first train to-morrow. Keep track of the game.

"P. F."

Frank jumped when he read that.

"By Jove!" he cried.

"Whut is it?" Ephraim eagerly asked.

"I believe I understand this."

"Do ye?"

"Sure! This was from the man who fell from the train into the river—the man disguised as a woman, who attacked me on the rear platform!"

"Looks zif yeou might be right."

"I am sure of it! The fellow escaped with his life! It is marvelous!"

"I sh'u'd say so!"

"He dispatched his accomplice, the woman, to let her know that he was living."

"Yeou've struck it, Frank!"

"And she was the one who got out the accusing flyers, charging me with the crime of murder!"

"I bet!"

"The man is in this city now, and they are working together again."

"I dunno'd I see whut they're goin' to make aout of it, but mebbe yeou do."

"Not yet. They must be enemies I have made."

"Who's Mrs. Hayward Grace?"

"Never heard the name before."

"Waal, he didn't sign his name Hayward Grace, so it seems he ain't her husband; don't it, Frank?"

"He signed 'P. F.' Now, I wonder what one of my enemies can be fitted to those initials?"

"I dunno."

"Nor do I. But this telegram has given me a feeling of relief, for I am glad to know the man was not drowned."

"Drownin's too good fer him! He oughter be hung!"

"Although my conscience was clear in the matter, I am glad to know that I was in no way connected with his death. Hodge will not be so pleased, for he will not stop to reason that the chances of a charge of murder being brought against us are about blotted out. Ephraim, I am very sorry you were hurt, but I'm extremely glad you snatched this purse and brought me this telegram. I shall take care of it. I shall use it to trace my enemies, if possible."

"Waal, I'm glad I done somethin', though I'd bin a 'tarnal sight gladder if I hed ketched that woman."

Frank carefully placed the purse and the telegram in his pocket, where he knew it would be safe.

Assuring Ephraim that everything possible should be done for him, he hastened out.

That afternoon the rehearsal took place, with another person reading Ephraim's part. It was feared that Gallup would not be able to see to play when it came night, but Frank hoped that he could, and the Vermont youth vowed he'd do it some way.

The rehearsal passed off fairly well, although there were some hitches. Havener looked satisfied.

"I'd rather it would go off this way than to have it go perfectly smooth," he declared. "I've noticed it almost always

happens that a good, smooth rehearsal just before a first performance means that the performance will go bad, and vice versa."

Frank had not been long in the business, but he, also, had observed that it often happened as Havener had said.

The theater orchestra rehearsed with them, getting all the "cue music" arranged, and having everything in readiness for the specialties.

The night came at last, and the company gathered at the theater, wondering what the outcome would be.

Gallup was on hand, but he still had the bandage over his eyes. He was wearing it up to the last minute, so that he would give them as much rest as possible.

"Somebody'll hev ter make me up ter-night," he said. "I don't believe I kin see well enough ter do that."

Havener agreed to look after that.

While the various members were putting the finishing touches on their toilet and make-up, word came that people were pouring into the theater in a most satisfactory manner. The orchestra tuned up for the overture.

Frank went round to see that everybody was prepared. He had fallen into that habit, not feeling like depending on some one else to do it.

Most of the men were entirely ready. A few were making the last touches. Stella Stanley and Agnes Kirk were all ready to go on.

"Where is Cassie?" asked Merry.

"In the dressing room," said Stella. "She told us not to wait for her. Said she would be right out."

Frank went to the dressing room. The door was slightly open, and, through the opening, he saw Cassie. She had thrust back the sleeve of her left arm, and he saw a tiny instrument in her right hand. He knew in a twinkling what she was about to do.

With a leap, Frank went into that room and caught her by the wrist.

"Cassie!" he cried, guardedly. "You told me you had given it up! You told me you'd never use morphine again!"

"Frank!" she whispered, looking abashed. "I know I told you so! I meant it, but I must use it just once more—just to-night. I am not feeling at my best. I'm dull and heavy. You know how much depends on me. If I don't do well I shall ruin everything. It won't hurt me to use it just this once. The success of 'True Blue' may depend on it!"

"If the success of 'True Blue' depended on it beyond the shadow of a doubt, I would not let you use it, Cassie! Great heavens! girl, you are mad! If you fall again into the clutches of that fiend nothing can save you!"

"But the play——"

"Do you think I would win success with my play at the price of your soul! No, Cassie Lee! If I knew it meant failure I would forbid you to use the stuff in that syringe. Here, give it to me!"

He took it from her and put it into his pocket.

"Now," he said, "it is out of your reach. You must play without it. There goes the overture. The curtain will go up in a few minutes. All I ask of you is to do your best, Cassie, let it mean success or failure."

CHAPTER XXII.—THE END OF THE ROPE.

The theater was packed. Under no circumstances had Frank anticipated such an audience on the opening night. He felt sure that the advertising given him through the effort of his enemies to injure him had done much to bring people out. Another thing had brought them there. Curiosity led many of them to the theater. They remembered Merriwell's first appearance in Puelbo and its outcome, and they had not forgotten how, in a speech from the stage, he had vowed that he would bring the play back there and give a successful performance. He had rewritten the piece, and it had been played in Denver to an invited audience, every member of which went away highly pleased. The Denver papers had pronounced in favor of it.

Puelbo people admired pluck and determination. They could not help feeling admiration for the dogged persistency of Frank Merriwell. And they really hoped he would make good his promise to give a successful performance.

Frank's first entrance was carefully worked up to in the play, and he was astounded when he came laughing and singing onto the stage, to be greeted by a perfect whirlwind of applause. Nor did the applause cease till he had recognized it by bowing.

Then, as everything quieted down and the play was about to move on again, there came a terrible cry that rang through the house:

"Fire!"

Frank understood in a twinkling that it was a false alarm, given for the purpose of producing a stampede and raising the performance.

After that cry for a moment everybody sat as if turned to stone. It was the calm before the panic.

Then Frank's voice rang out clear as a bell:

"There is no fire! Keep your seats!"

Some had sprung up, but his clear voice reached every part of the house, and it checked the movement.

"Fire! fire!"

Shrill and piercing was the cry, in the voice of a woman.

"Arrest that woman!" cried Frank. "She is trying to ruin this performance! She is the one who circulated a lying and malicious circular charging me with the crime of murder. It was a part of a plot to ruin me!"

Frank confessed afterward that he did not understand why the audience remained without stampeding after that second alarm. It must have been that there was a magic something in his voice and manner that convinced them and held them. At any rate, there was no rush for the doors.

All at once there was a commotion in the first balcony, from which the cries had come. Two policemen had seized a man and a woman, and the arrested pair were taken from the theater.

Quiet was restored, and Frank made a few soothing remarks to the audience, after which the play proceeded.

And now he had the sympathy of every person in the great audience. When an actor has once fairly won the sympathy of his audience, he is almost sure of success.

The first act went off beautifully. The storm and shipwreck at the close of the act took with the spectators. There was hearty applause when the curtain fell.

Frank had arranged that things should be rushed in making ready for the second act. He wanted no long waits between acts, for long waits weary the patience of the best audiences.

The second act seemed to go even better than the first, if such a thing were possible. The singing of the "Yale Quartet" proved a great hit, and they were obliged to respond to encore after encore. Cassie's dancing and singing were well appreciated, and Frank, who was watching her, decided that she could not have done better under any circumstances. He did not know how hard she was working for success. He did not know that she had actually prayed that she might do better than she had ever done before in all her life.

The discomfiture of *Spike Dubad* at the close of the second act was relished by all.

At last the curtain rose on the third act, round which the whole plot of the play revolved. Now, the interest of the audience was keyed up to the right pitch, and the anxiety of the actors was intense.

The first scene went off all right, and then came the change to the scene where the boat race was shown on the river. Everything worked perfectly, and there was a tumult in that theater when the stage suddenly grew dark, just as the Yale boat was seen to forge into the lead.

And then, in a few moments, the distant sounds of cheering and the screaming of steam whistles seemed to burst out close at hand, filling the theater with an uproar of sound. Then up flashed the lights, and the open boathouse was shown, with the river beyond. The boats flashed in at the finish, the Yale cheer drowned everything else, and Frank Merriwell was brought onto the stage in the arms of his college friends.

The curtain came down, but the audience was standing and cheering like mad, as if it had just witnessed the success of its favorite in a real college race. The curtain went up for the tableau again and again, but that audience would not be satisfied till Frank Merriwell came out and said something.

Frank came at last, and such an ovation as he received it brought a happy mist to his eyes.

"There he is!" somebody cried. "He said he would come back here with his play and do the trick!"

"Well, he has done it!" cried another. "And he is the real Frank Merriwell, who has shown us the kind of never-say-die pluck that has made Yale famous the world over. Three cheers for Frank Merriwell!"

They were given. Then all Frank could say was a few choking words:

"My friends, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! You cannot know how much was depending on the success or failure of this play. Perhaps all my future career depended on it. I vowed I would win——"

"And you have!" shouted a voice.

"It seems so. Again, I thank you. I am too happy to say more. Words are idle now."

He retired.

Frank Merriwell had won with his play; "True Blue" was a success. In his happiness he forgot his enemies, he forgot that two persons had been arrested in the balcony. It was not till the next morning when he was invited by a detective to come to the jail to see the prisoners that he thought of them.

The detective accompanied him.

"I have been on this fellow's track for a long time," he explained. "Spotted him in the theater last night, but was not going to arrest him till the show was over. The woman with him created the disturbance, and two policemen took them both in. I don't want her for anything, but I shall take the man back to Chicago, to answer to the charge of forgery. I shall hold him here for requisition papers."

The jail was reached, and first Frank took a look at the woman. He felt that she would prove to be the mysterious woman of the veil, and he was right. She looked up at him, and laughed.

"Good-morning, Mr. Merriwell," she said. "Pres and I have made things rather warm for you, you must confess. I reckon we made a mistake last night. We'd both been looking on the wine when it was red, or we'd not attempted to stamper the audience."

"Why, it is the woman who claimed to be Havener's wife!" cried Frank.

"Here is the man," said the detective.

Frank turned to another cell.

He was face to face with Philip Scudder, his old-time enemy, who had reached the end of his rope at last!

But, in the hour of victory, Frank gave little heed to those who had made his path to this present success a hard and stormy one.

He was successful!

As a playwright and as an actor he had won the palm of victory, the future seemed to promise all the rewards his energy and enterprise deserved.

He had started out from college with the determination to win wealth and fame. He had left the scenes of his early triumphs and first misfortunes, with the firm purpose to return honored and enriched by his own labors.

Now he was on the eve of accomplishing that purpose.

And as he looked into the future, the lines of will power and determination that had always marked his handsome countenance grew firmer, as he murmured:

"I will myself be 'True Blue!' Come what may, let my paths for the next few months be as untoward as they ever have been, difficulties shall but act as a spur to me in my purpose. For I shall be, soon, I hope, once more a son of 'Old Eli.'"

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