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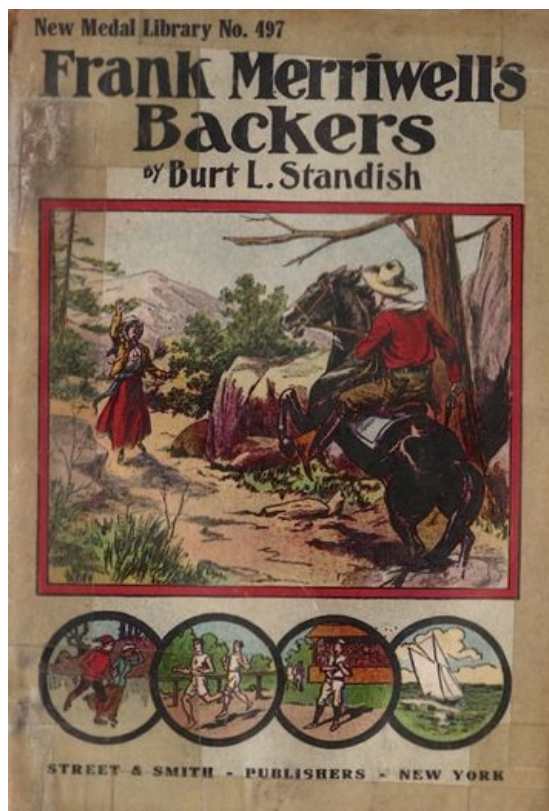
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OR

THE PRIDE OF HIS FRIENDS

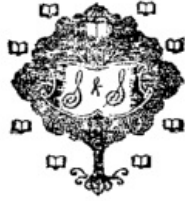
BY

BURT L. STANDISH

AUTHOR OF

The Celebrated "Merriwell Stories"

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Frank Merriwell's Backers

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FRANK MERRIWELL'S BACKERS.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TRAP.

Millions of bright stars shone serenely through the clear Arizona night, shedding their soft white light on the great arid plains and the mysterious mesas and mighty mountains.

Throughout the night Frank Merriwell lay ensconced behind some sheltering rocks in a deep ravine, where he had been trapped by the ruffians in the employ of the mining trust, who were determined to wrest from him the precious papers they believed to be in his possession.

Old Joe Crowfoot, the aged Indian friend of Merriwell, who had been snared with him, had, shortly after nightfall, taken the precious oilskin package, containing the papers, and crept forth on his stomach, like a snake, from amid the rocks.

Joe had promised to take the papers to the nearest registry post-office, in case he escaped, and send them, according to directions, to Richard Merriwell, Frank's brother, at Fardale.

Frank had written a letter to Dick, and had securely tied up and directed the package. He trusted the aged redskin, who declared that he might find a method of escaping from the trap, yet could not take the white youth with him. He had made certain that Joe understood the matter of registering the package, in case he should reach the post-office with it in his possession.

Merriwell had become satisfied that this was the best course to pursue. It was plain that he was in a very bad trap, and he knew those ruffians could soon starve him out. There was no water or food for himself or his horse. A day of thirst behind those rocks must surely do for him.

If Joe carried out the plan successfully, the papers would be placed beyond the reach of the ruffians, even though Frank fell into their hands. And it was the papers they had been engaged to secure. Were they to kill him, Dick would have the precious papers and be able to continue the battle for his rights.

Merry watched old Joe wiggle silently away, wondering that the Indian could slip along in that manner with so very little effort. The old redskin lay flat on the ground and took advantage of every little cover he could find, and soon he vanished amid the rocks and passed into the shadows, after which Merry saw him no more.

Down the ravine a great mass of rocks and earth had been blown down by a mighty blast and blocked the passage.

Up the ravine armed and murderous men were waiting and watching, ready to shoot down the youth they had trapped.

There were also armed ruffians on the barrier to the southeast. They had trailed Merry with the persistence of bloodhounds.

A full hour passed. The men above were making merry in a boisterous way. One of them began to sing. He had a musical voice, which rang out clearly on the soft night air. Strangely enough he sang "Nearer My God to Thee."

Could they be watching closely? It did not seem so.

Frank rigged his coat on the barrel of his rifle. On the muzzle of the weapon he placed his hat. Then, he lifted coat and hat above the rocks.

Crack! Ping!

The ringing report of a rifle and the singing of a bullet. The hat and coat dropped. In the coat Merriwell found a bullet-hole. That settled it. There was no longer a doubt but that the desperadoes were watching like wolves.

Yet old Joe had been able to slip forth from the protection of those rocks and creep away.

More than ever Merriwell admired the skill of the Indian. Thinking that the old fellow had

instructed Dick in the craft which he knew so well, Frank believed such knowledge had not been acquired in vain. Some time Dick might find it very valuable to him.

There was a hoarse burst of laughter from the watching ruffians.

"Oh, Merriwell!" called a voice.

"Well," sang back Frank, "what do you want?"

"Stick that thing up again. We'd like a leetle target practise."

"You'll have to provide your own target," Merry retorted.

"Oh, we reckons not! We'll stand you up fer one sooner or later," was the assurance.

Still they had not discovered old Joe. It seemed marvelous.

The night passed on. Another hour was gone when there came a sudden commotion far up the ravine, as if on the further outskirts of the ruffians. There were hoarse shouts, angry oaths, the rattle of shots, and then the clatter of iron-shod hoofs.

The ring and echo of those clattering hoofs receded into the night, coming back clear and distinct at first, but growing fainter and fainter.

Frank Merriwell laughed and lay still until the sound of the galloping horse had died out in the distance.

"Old Joe is on his way to the post-office," muttered Merry. "He took a fancy to acquire one of their horses in order to make better time."

The ruffians were filled with more or less consternation. They continued to wrangle angrily. At last, one cried:

"Oh, Merriwell!"

Frank lay perfectly still and made no answer.

"Oh, Merriwell!"

Peering forth from amid his rocky barrier, yet crouching where the shadows hid him, Frank cocked his rifle and pushed it forward for use.

There was a time of silence, during which he fancied the men were consulting in whispers. Finally his keen eyes saw something move into the dim white light above some boulders. He laughed a little in a suppressed way and sent a bullet through the moving object.

"Put it up again!" he called cheerfully. "I don't mind a little target practise myself."

He knew the thing had been thrust up there to draw his fire and settle the question if he still remained in the trap. But he had shown those ruffians that he could shoot as accurately as the best of them.

After this he heard the men talking. He knew they were bewildered by what had happened. They could not believe it possible that a human being had crept forth from the snare. It seemed to them that the person who had seized their horse and ridden away had come upon them from the rear and was in no way connected with Merriwell.

After a time they were silent.

They were satisfied that the trap held fast.

Then Frank found a comfortable place where he was perfectly hidden and coolly went to sleep, with his hand on his cocked rifle.

Merriwell needed sleep, and he did not hesitate to take it. It spoke well for his nerves that he could sleep under such circumstances. It may seem that it did not speak so well for his judgment. Still he knew that he would awaken at any sound of an alarming nature, and he believed those men would rest content, satisfied that they had him caged where there was no possibility that he could give them the slip.

After an hour or more, he awoke and demonstrated the fact that he was still behind the rocks by exchanging a challenge with the watching ruffians.

Then he slept again.

And so the night passed on.

Frank was wide-awake with the coming of dawn. He saw the stars pale and die in the sky. He saw the gentle gray of morning and the flush of sunrise. Far up the ravine rose the smoke of a camp-fire, telling where the ruffians were preparing breakfast.

"Oh, Merriwell!"

"Hello, yourself!"

"Are you hungry?"

"No, thank you. I have plenty to eat."

"Are you thirsty?"

"Not in the least. I have my canteen."

"That'll be empty right soon. How would you like some steamin' hot coffee?"

"It wouldn't go bad. Send some in."

"We'll exchange a pot of coffee for sartin papers you has with yer."

"You're very kind!" laughed Merry derisively.

"It's a right good offer. We're goin' to have them papers anyhow, an' you may not even git coffee fer them."

"You're due for the greatest disappointment of your lives, gentlemen," declared Frank. "If you're looking this way for papers, you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Oh, you can't fool us!" was the answer. "We know you've got 'em, and we'll have 'em."

"Ever gamble?" asked Frank.

"Oh, we sometimes take a chance."

"I'll go you my horse and outfit against that of any one in your party that you don't get the papers."

"Done! It's a sure thing as far as we're consarned. We has yer foul, an' we'll stay right yere till we starves ye out."

"Too bad to waste your valuable time so foolishly. But, say!"

"Say it."

"I see no particular reason why my horse here should go hungry and thirsty."

"Not the least. Bring the pore critter right out."

"Beg pardon if I seem a trifle lazy, but it's too much bother. However, I'll send him out, and I'll look to you to see that he's properly cared for."

Without exposing himself, Frank managed to get the horse out from the niche in the wall where he had been placed, headed the animal through a break in the rocky barrier and sent him off, with a sharp crack of the hand.

The horse galloped up the ravine, finally saw human beings, stopped, snorted, seemed about to turn back, but finally kept on and disappeared.

Then Frank settled down to wait, being resolved to give old Joe plenty of time.

The day grew hot in the ravine, where there was little air. The sun beat down with great fierceness from the unclouded sky. Those mountains seemed bare and baked. Little wonder that their repelling fastnesses had presented little attraction for the prospector. Little wonder it had often been reported that they contained no gold.

But Frank Merriwell's "Queen Mystery" Mine lay in that range, and it had developed so richly that the great Consolidated Mining Association of America was straining every nerve to get possession of it—to wrest it from its rightful owner.

So Frank baked in the sun, taking care to keep well hidden, for he knew those men would gladly end the affair by filling him full of lead, if they were given the opportunity.

Once or twice he caught glimpses of them. Several times they challenged him. He was prompt to answer every challenge, and he did not wish to shoot any of them.

He had fully decided on the course he would pursue; but he was determined to give Joe Crowfoot plenty of time to perform his part of the program.

Frank smiled in grim irony over his position. He took it philosophically, satisfied that that was the best he could do. He did not worry, for worry would do him no good.

He was given plenty of time to reflect on the course pursued by the syndicate, and it made him wonder that such high-handed things could take place in the United States.

It seemed rather remarkable that the head of the mighty syndicate, D. Roscoe Arlington, was the father of Chester Arlington, Dick Merriwell's bitterest enemy at Fardale.

Frank had encountered Mr. Arlington. He had found him blunt, grim, obstinate, somewhat coarse, yet apparently not brutal. Being a clever reader of human nature, which many are not who pride themselves that they are, Frank had become satisfied that there were many men in the world who were far worse than D. Roscoe Arlington, yet were considered models of virtue and justice. Arlington was not a hypocrite. He was bluntly and openly himself. He had set out as a poor boy to make a fortune, and now it seemed possible that he might become the richest man in America. Comfortable riches had first been the object for which he strived; but when his

scheming poured wealth upon him, he set the mark higher. He determined to be one of the very rich men of the United States. That goal he had now arrived at; but the mark had been lifted again, and now he was determined to become the richest.

Arlington had not ordered those ruffians to take the papers from Frank. Still he was back of it all. He had turned the matter over into the hands of unscrupulous lieutenants, instructing them to employ any means within their power to obtain possession of the Queen Mystery and San Pablo Mines. Those lieutenants were directing the operations of the ruffians.

It is quite probable that Arlington did not wish to know the method employed by his lieutenants. All he desired was the result.

Frank had also met Mrs. Arlington, and he had seen in her a haughty, domineering, icy woman, ready to do anything to gain her ends. She was proud and high-headed, although she had once been a poor girl. She looked down in scorn and contempt on all poor people.

But Merry had not forgotten June Arlington, who had a truly high-bred face of great attractiveness, and who was vivacious yet reserved, proud yet considerate, high-spirited yet kind. He had not forgotten the girl, and ever he thought of her with feelings of kindness, for with her own hands she had restored to him the precious papers when they had been stolen from him, by agents of the trust, assisted by her mother.

He knew Dick admired June, and he did not wonder at it, for about June Arlington there was such fascination as few girls possess.

Still Merry could not help wondering if June would one day develop into a woman like her mother. Such a result did not seem possible.

Midday passed, and the afternoon waned, yet without any diminishing of the scorching heat in the ravine.

Frank's water was gone, and he began to feel the torments of thirst.

He had counted the time as it passed. Finally he was satisfied that Crowfoot had accomplished the task he had set out to perform. The papers were mailed. Probably they were already on their way to Dick Merriwell at Fardale.

"Well," muttered Frank, "I think I'll go out and look these ruffians over now."

CHAPTER II.

IN THE HANDS OF CIMARRON BILL.

A shout quickly brought an answer.

"Gentlemen," said Frank, "I'm for a parley. What say you?"

"We're willing. Parley away."

"If you were to get those papers I suppose you would feel yourselves perfectly well satisfied?"

"I reckon you've hit it good an' fair."

"Such being the case, if I come forth with hands up and empty, I take it you won't take the trouble to shoot me up any?"

"None at all," was the assurance promptly given. "If you comes out like that, you has our promise not to do any shooting whatever."

"And how about the gentlemen below?"

"They'll do no shootin' unless you goes that way."

"Is this all on the square?"

"You bet! Bring out that old redskin with ye, an' let him keep his hands up, too."

"I think you've made a mistake, gentlemen; there is no redskin with me. I am quite alone."

"We knows better! Ye can't play any tricks on us!"

"I am willing to convince you. Just keep your fingers off your triggers. Watch me as close as you like. I'm coming!"

Having said this, he left his rifle lying on the ground and rose to his feet with his hands held open above his head.

It must be confessed that he did not do this without some doubt concerning the result, for he knew those ruffians were very treacherous; but somehow he was satisfied that they had been instructed to obtain the papers, if possible, without killing him, and that belief led him to run the risk that he now faced.

He was ready to drop instantly if they fired as he arose into view. A moment he stood quite still, and then, as no shot rang out, he stepped through amid the boulders and walked boldly up the ravine.

In this manner, Frank walked straight into the midst of a party of nine thoroughbred frontier desperadoes, who were waiting for him, with their weapons in their hands.

The leader was a thin, dark-faced, fierce-looking man, who covered Merry with a revolver.

"I rather 'lowed you'd come to it," he said, in satisfaction. "But I told ye to bring that old Injun along."

"And I told you there was no Indian with me. I spoke the truth."

"Say, youngster, did you ever hear of Cimarron Bill?"

Frank looked the fellow over with his calm eyes. He saw a cruel, straight slit of a mouth, a thin black mustache, with traces of gray, and sharp, cruel eyes, set altogether too near together. He had heard of Cimarron Bill as the most dangerous "man-killer" in all the Southwest.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I have heard of him."

"Well, you're lookin' at him. I'm Cimarron Bill. The butts of my guns have seventeen notches in 'em. You may make the eighteenth."

Merriwell knew what the ruffian meant, yet he showed no signs of fear.

"I have heard," he said, "that Cimarron Bill has never yet shot a man in cold blood or one who was unarmed."

"I opine that's right, young man; but this case is a leetle different. It's not healthy to irk me up under any conditions, and so I advise you to go slow."

Frank smiled.

"I have no desire or intention of irking you up, sir," he said. "I am giving you straight goods. There is no Indian with me."

"There was last night."

"Yes."

"Well, I don't opine he's melted into the air or sunk into the ground, an' tharfore he has to be yander behind them rocks."

"I give you my word, sir, that he is not there, and has not been there since last night."

The ruffians had gathered about and were listening to this talk. Picturesque scoundrels they were, armed to the teeth and looking fit for any job of bloodshed or murder. They glared at the cool youth standing so quietly in their midst; but he seemed perfectly at his ease.

"Sam," said the leader, turning to one of them, "go out yander to them thar rocks an' look round for that redskin."

Sam, a squat, red-headed desperado, seemed to hesitate.

"What ef the Injun is waitin' thar to shoot me up some as I comes amblin' along?" he asked.

"Go!" said Cimarron Bill, in a tone cold as ice. "If the Injun shoots you, we'll riddle this here young gent with bullets."

"Which won't do me good none whatever," muttered Sam; but he knew better than to disobey or hesitate longer, and so, dropping his rifle into the hollow of his left arm, he stepped out and advanced toward the spot where Merriwell had been ensconced behind the boulders.

The brutal band watched and waited. Cimarron Bill surveyed the face of Frank Merriwell, more than half-expecting the youth would call for Sam to come back, knowing the fate that would befall him in case the Indian began to shoot.

But Sam walked straight up to the boulders, clambered onto them, and looked over into the hiding-place that had served Frank so well.

"Derned ef thar's ary livin' critter hyer!" he shouted back.

"Make sure," called the leader, in that metallic voice of his, which was so hard on the nerves. "Don't make no mistake."

Sam sprang down behind the boulders. They saw his head moving about, but, very soon, he clambered back over them and came walking rapidly away.

"The varmint is sartin gone," he averred.

Immediately Cimarron Bill thrust his cocked revolver against Frank Merriwell's temple.

"Tell us where the Injun is!" he commanded. "Speak quick and straight, or I'll blow the top of your head off!"

"I am unable to tell you just where he is at present," said Frank, with that perfect coolness that so astonished the desperadoes. "He left me last night."

"Left you?"

"Yes."

"How? We had this side guarded, an' ther boys below kept close watch."

"All the same, I think Joe Crowfoot passed you. How he did it I do not know. He told me he could."

The leader of the ruffians looked as if he was not yet willing to believe such a thing had happened; but there no longer seemed much chance for doubt.

"Then it must have been that red whelp who stole one of our hosses!" he said.

"I think it was," nodded Merry. "Something like two hours after he left me I heard a commotion this way, followed by some shooting and the sound of a galloping horse, which died out in the distance."

Some of the men began to swear, but Bill silenced them with one swift look from his evil eyes.

"Well, that sure is the limit!" he observed, trying to hide some of his disgust. "We didn't opine a kitten could sneak past us without being seen an' shot up."

"A kitten might not," said Frank. "But old Joe Crowfoot should be compared with a serpent. He has all the wisdom and craft of one. I depended on him, and he did not fail me."

"Where has he gone? State it—state it almighty sudden!"

"If he followed instructions, he has gone to Holbrook."

"For what?"

"To send a message for me to my brother."

"A message? What sort of a message?"

"A letter and some papers."

"Papers?" said Cimarron Bill, in a low, threatening tone. "What papers?"

"Certain papers referring to the Queen Mystery and San Pablo Mines, which I own."

A look of disappointed rage contorted the cruel face of the murderous ruffian. The lips were pressed together until they appeared to make one straight line no wider than the thin blade of a knife. The eyelids closed to narrow slits, while that dark face turned to a bluish tinge.

Many times had Frank Merriwell stood in deadly peril of his life; but, looking at that man then, he well knew that never had his danger been greater. Still, if he regretted his act in walking forth and surrendering himself into the hands of such a creature he effectually concealed it. He betrayed not a whit of trepidation or alarm, which was a masterly display of nerve.

The ruffians began to murmur fiercely, like the growling of so many wolves. Perhaps it was to this outbreak that Merry owed his life, for the leader suddenly bade them be silent, and the sounds ceased.

"So you sent those papers off by that old redskin, did you?" asked Bill.

"I did."

"And you have the nerve to come out here and tell me that! If you had known me better, you would have stayed, and choked and starved, or even shot yourself behind those rocks, before doing such a thing!"

Merriwell made no retort, for he felt that too many words would be indiscreet. This man was capable of any atrocity, and another straw might break the camel's back.

"Mr. Merriwell," said the ruffian, "I came here for them papers, and I'm goin' to have them!"

"You may take my life," said Merry; "but that will not give you the papers. In fact, it will utterly defeat the object of those men who have employed you to obtain them."

"How do you figger that out? With you out of the way, they'll have less trouble in takin' your mines."

"On the contrary, if I am murdered, the fact will react against them. I have written a full account of the facts concerning my position and fight with the syndicate to my brother, to be used in case anything serious happens to me. With that, and with the papers I have sent him, I fancy he can so arouse public indignation against the syndicate that the men who are pushing this thing will be glad enough to pull in their horns and quit the battle. So you can see that by killing me you will defeat the object of the syndicate and disgust it with your method of procedure."

Frank spoke those words convincingly, and certain it is that he made an impression on Cimarron Bill. The other ruffians, however, who failed to reason clearly, were fierce enough to shoot the

captive where he stood.

Bill stood still and looked the young man over, beginning to realize that he was dealing with a youth of more than ordinary courage, resource and sagacity. His respect for Merriwell was beginning to develop amazingly.

Frank could read the man well enough to feel that the danger-point had been successfully passed, and he breathed more freely, although there was no outward change in his manner.

"I'm not yet satisfied that you're not lying to me," said the chief of the ruffians; whereupon he ordered his satellites to search the captive.

The closest search, which was supervised by Bill, failed to bring to light the package of coveted papers.

Bill seemed to pass a few moments in thought. Then he said:

"We'll all go over yander and have a look round among the boulders."

With Frank in their midst, they proceeded to the spot where he had successfully held them off. As they went forward, they called to the men down the ravine, and soon those ruffians came hastening to join them.

"Have ye got the papers?" demanded one called Big Monte, a strapping ruffian, who was the leader of the party.

When he learned what had happened the giant swore in angry disappointment.

"However did you all happen to let the Injun slip ye that way?" he demanded scornfully.

Bill looked him over.

"I opines you're not castin' reflections any whatever?" he said, in a deadly manner.

Big Monte looked large enough to eat the thin, dark-faced chap, but he hastened to disclaim any intention of "casting reflections," whereupon Bill gave him no further heed.

The chief set them to searching amid the boulders, overseeing it all and taking care that no possible place of concealment was neglected. But all this search came to nothing, and the baffled wretches were finally forced to confess that they were outwitted.

But Merriwell was a captive in their hands, and in their disappointment they might be led to revenging themselves upon him.

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE NIGHT.

Cimarron Bill was a man who disliked being outwitted and outdone, especially by a youth of Frank Merriwell's years, and he was one who was not at all likely to let such a thing pass without seeking to recover and accomplish his object by some method, failing in which, he was almost certain to take summary and tragic vengeance on the one who had baffled him.

Merriwell knew well enough in what peril he stood, and yet he maintained his manner of composure.

Bill spoke to two of the ruffians, of whom Big Monte was one, and Sam, the red-headed rascal, the other.

"You two take charge of this here altogether too smarty young gent," said the leader of the desperadoes, "and look out for him a heap close. Don't let him come none of his slick tricks on you, for you will be held responsible for him, and I opines you know what that means."

"Oh, we'll take care of him!" said Sam significantly, as he fingered the butt of a pistol. "All I wants is a right good chance to do that!"

Bill fixed the red-head with a look of his narrow black eyes.

"At the same time," said he, "permit me to suggest that you lets no special harm come to him, as I reckons him valuable property just about now, and I may need him a whole lot later. If anything unnecessary happens to the young gent, you'll deal with me for it!"

It must be confessed that Merry felt somewhat safer in the hands of those ruffians after that, for he began to perceive that, for some reason, Bill wished to preserve him for the time being without harm.

Apparently the captive gave little heed to these words, but in truth he missed nothing.

As the others drew aside with Bill, Big Monte took a picket rope, observing:

"I allows, Sam, that we'd better be keerful, jest as the boss suggests, fer it ain't a whole lot

healthy to have anything happen contrarywise to his wishes. Such bein' the case, I propose we tie up this here young gent some, so he'll not bring trouble on hisself an' us by tryin' to lope out."

Sam looked disappointed.

"I was a-thinkin'," he said, "that I'd like to see him try to lope; but sense the boss has put it so plain, I kind of changes my mind, an' I thinks your probersition is kirect. Go ahead, Monte, while I keeps him kivered with my shootin'-iron."

Frank made no objection as Big Monte tied his hands behind him. He knew it was quite useless, and so he submitted with a meekness that was rather deceptive, for it seemed to indicate that he was quite awed by his situation and the men who had taken him captive.

"I judges that will do," said the big man, having bound the rope about Merry's wrists until it was uncomfortable in its tightness. "He's good an' fast now."

Merriwell sat down on a rock, while the two ruffians flung themselves on the ground in the shadow of the wall and waited the end of the consultation between the chief and the remainder of the band.

Bill was talking to his ruffians in his low, quiet way, and they were listening. Frank wondered what was passing, but they were too far away for him to hear.

At last, one of the men, who had but one arm, started off from the others, hurrying toward the horses. Bill had thrust something into this man's hand, seeming to give him a final admonition. Five minutes later the one-armed man, mounted on the very best horse he could find, rode away at good speed.

Even then Merry did not conceive that it was the desperate purpose of One-hand Hank to follow those papers all the way to Fardale, if necessary, in the attempt to gain possession of them. He fancied that Hank meant to try to find the Indian, with the hope that the papers still remained in old Joe's possession.

Bill came back and stood looking Merriwell over. Several of the men had departed toward the spot where the horses were kept.

"I reckons you thinks yerself some slick, kid!" he said, with cold contempt. "You'll git all over that before you're through dealin' with Cimarron Bill. I'm sartin to take the conceit out of ye a whole lot."

To which Merry vouchsafed no retort.

"Bring him along," said the chief, to Sam and Monte. "We're goin' to pull up stakes and hike."

So Frank was marched up to the horses, among which was his own animal, which had been captured by the ruffians.

"If you don't mind, gentlemen," said Merry, "it would give me considerable satisfaction to imbibe a little water."

"You'll choke plumb to death afore ye ever gits a drap from me," averred Sam.

Whereupon Bill looked at the red-head sharply, saying:

"Sam, give him a drink from your canteen."

And Sam did so.

"Thanks," said Merry easily. "It was the desire for water that led me to saunter out from my place among the rocks earlier than I intended. I feel much better now."

His saddle had been brought along, and, when it was strapped upon his horse, he was tossed into it by Big Monte and another. The rest of the band had prepared to move, with the exception of those who had come from down the ravine and one fellow who seemed to have taken the place of the departed fellow with one arm. These men had horses beyond the rocky barrier that had been blown down to prevent Merriwell from escaping in that direction, and it was necessary for them to return and pursue another course, as the horses could not be brought over that barrier.

There was little delay when everything was ready. Bill took the lead, and those who were to follow did so, the captive in their midst; his horse led by one of them.

The others had turned back.

The sun was descending peacefully behind the barren mountains, and night was spreading her sable pinions over the land. There was gold in the western sky. The heat yet seemed unabated, save in the valleys and gorges; but later it would become unpleasantly cool.

In silence those men rode onward, with their dark, cruel-faced leader at their head. The hoofs of the horses clinked and rang, bestirring the echoes; and, when the gloom of night had stolen upward from the gulches, there came an occasional spark like a firefly when the iron of a hoof struck a flinty rock.

So night came on, and still they went forward. Frank wondered what their destination could be; but he saw they were taking a course that must bring them nearer the Queen Mystery Mine.

He wasted no words in seeking to engage any of them in conversation. All the while, however, his thoughts were busy. He wondered much if he could come safely through this perilous mischance and how it was to be accomplished. For Frank had not given up, and he had confidence that somehow he would find a way, or one would be opened to him.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE OLD HUT.

In a valley amid the hills that lay at the base of the barren mountains stood an old hut. Who had built it there? It seemed that it had, beyond doubt, been erected by some prospector. What fate had befallen the builder no man knew. The hut remained, weather-worn and falling to pieces.

The coming of another day found Frank Merriwell a captive in that hut, closely guarded. The ruffians had stopped there, for in the vicinity could be found wood and water, and feed for the horses.

Some time during the night they had been joined by Big Monte and the others who had turned back to secure the horses beyond the barrier in the ravine.

In the morning the men lay about in the vicinity of the hut. Two fires had been built, and breakfast was preparing.

Inside the hut an armed man kept guard over the captive. At intervals the guard was changed, but always a man was near with a pistol ready to shoot Merry down if he offered to make a break for freedom.

But Frank seemed strangely contented. After the ride through the night, he asked for a blanket to make himself comfortable, suggested in a pleasant way that it would be agreeable to have the cords about his wrists loosened a little, as they were chafing him and his wrists were swollen, and, when the ropes were entirely removed, then lay down on the blanket and went calmly to sleep.

Merry slept until one of the men brought him some breakfast. This fellow kicked him to awaken him, whereupon Frank looked up and observed:

"Gently, partner—gently! You don't have to kick in a rib in order to get my eyes open."

"Ef it wasn't fer ther boss," said the fellow, "I'd take a heap o' satisfaction in kickin' ev'ry dern rib outer ye!"

"Then I am thankful for the boss."

"Hush! Mebbe ye thinks so now; but wait till he gits round ter deal with ye. I opines he'll disterb ye some."

"Well, don't lead me into worriment before it is necessary," entreated Frank, with a smile. "As long as I'm comfortable, I see no reason to disturb myself over what may happen—for there is always a chance that it may not happen."

"Waal, not in this case. Ye've robbed us outer a clean two hundred dollars apiece by sendin' off them papers."

"Only that? Why, you seem to be cheap men! I should fancy it would take at least five hundred each to hire men to go out to commit robbery and murder."

"Thar ain't no robbery about it."

"Now, you don't tell me? Perhaps you are right, but the object was robbery, all right enough."

"Nary robbery! Ther papers belongs to ther gents what wants to git 'em an' what engaged Bill to do the job."

"Possibly I might convince you to the contrary if I had time; but just now I will admit that I'm remarkably hungry. Put down the feed right here on the floor, and I'll turn to directly."

As the man stooped to put down the stuff, as directed, he brought his head quite close to Frank's lips. In the fellow's ear Merry whispered:

"I'll make it one thousand dollars in your fist if you find a way to help me out of this scrape."

The man started a little, gave Frank a look, then glanced toward the armed guard, who had heard nothing.

Merry touched a finger to his lips, thus enjoining silence.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Thank Bill for me! This coffee smells most satisfactory. It will serve finely to wash down the hard bread and beef. To a healthy appetite, like mine, this will be a feast fit for an epicurean."

The ruffian looked at him in apparent wonderment.

"Fer a cool galoot, you sure are the limit!" he exclaimed.

Then he went out.

Frank wondered if his proposal to the fellow would bear fruit. He knew well enough that these men stood in great awe of Cimarron Bill; but would the greed of this one overcome his fears of the chief and lead him to attempt to set Frank at liberty?

That was a serious question.

Having eaten heartily, Merry once more made himself comfortable and slept.

When next he was awakened, Cimarron Bill himself was sitting near, smoking a Spanish cigarette.

"Good morning," said Frank.

"It's a long distance past morning," said the leader of the ruffians. "You've slept away the whole morning. You seem to be takin' it a heap easy and comfortable like."

"Just bottling up a little sleep in case of need," said Merry, sitting up and placing his back against the wall. "There's no telling when I may have to keep awake a whole lot, you know."

"Instead of keeping awake," said Bill, in a sinister manner, "you're a heap more likely to fall asleep some of these yere times an' never wake up."

"In that case, it will be of no consequence, so I am not losing anything by sleeping while I may."

The man surveyed Merry long and intently, as if trying to probe the nature of this cool youth. At last, he turned to the sentinel and dismissed him.

The sentinel went out, closing the door.

Bill lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Young man," he said, "I want to inform you right yere and now that it will do you no good whatever to try to bribe any of my men."

"Possibly not," said Frank noncommittally.

"You bet your life it won't!" said Bill emphatically. "Thar ain't one of them but what knows me, an', knowin' me, thar ain't one what would dare play me crooked. Savvy?"

"It's quite plain."

"It's straight goods, Merriwell. A while ago you offered one of 'em a thousan' dollars if he would find a way to get you out of this."

"Correct," admitted Merry immediately. "And had he accepted the offer and accomplished the job, I should have congratulated myself on getting off very cheap."

He had seen at once that it was useless to try deception or denial with Bill, and so he spoke frankly.

"That's right," nodded Bill. "A thousan' would be small money fer such a job; but it ain't no use, for none of them will take the job at that or five times as much. 'Cause why? 'Cause they knows me, Cimarron Bill, right well. They know I'd sure settle up with 'em if they done any crooked work. They have seen the notches in my guns. Some of 'em has seen me shoot."

"Well, my dear sir," smiled Merry, "I don't presume you fancied I would remain here like a man in a trance without trying to get away in some fashion?"

"I hardly opined that would be your style. But I has to warn ye that you has about one chance in fourteen million of gettin' off with a hull hide. I keep a guard inside and outside, besides another over the hosses. I don't want to shoot ye—now—but it sure will be done if you breaks an' runs fer it."

"Of course I'd have to take chances on that."

"Don't! But your offer to Jake has set me thinkin'. Somehow I kinder take to your style."

"Thanks!" laughed Merriwell.

"You has a heap of nerve for a youngster."

"Thanks again!"

"And I opine we'd make a pretty strong team together. Such bein' the case, I has a propersition to make to ye, whereby, in case you accepts, you gits outer this scrape in a hurry an' none the worse for wear."

"Let it drive," said Frank. "I'm listening."

"Like 'most ev'rybody," said Bill, "I'm out fer the dust. That's what brought me up against you. I

opined you'd be easy meat. I've sorter changed my mind. You look an' talk like a tenderfoot, but I take it that you has your eye-teeth cut, an' this yere ain't the first time you've seen Arizona."

"I have been in Arizona before. I have likewise been in various parts of the West."

"I knowed it," nodded Bill. "I likewise opine you has a whole lot of fight in ye."

"Well, I rather enjoy the strenuous life."

"But you're certain up against a right powerful combination in this yere gang what means to have your mines."

"Without doubt."

"You needs assistance to hold them there mines. Such bein' the case, suppose we strikes a partnership, you an' I, an' stan's by each other. You'll find me a right handy partner when it comes to fightin', an' I kin back ye up with a gang what will wade through gore fer me. Under them circumstances, I reckons we kin give this yere minin' trust a run fer its money."

"Your offer is very interesting, not to say fascinating," confessed Frank. "But there is something behind it. Come out with the whole matter."

"There's nothing to come out with, save that I'm to be taken in a half-partner in your mines."

"Only that?" smiled Merry scornfully.

Bill did not like the manner in which the youth spoke those two words.

"I 'lows," he said, "that you'll be gettin' off a heap cheap at that. If you fails to accept, it's almost certain your friends never hears of you no more. You'll be planted somewhere yereabouts. Arter that, the minin' trust will have easy goin'."

"Well," said Merry, "I presume you will give me time to think this matter over?"

"Certainly. I gives ye till to-morrer mornin'."

"All right."

Again Bill lighted a fresh cigarette.

"But, without 'pearin' to press ye too hard, which might cause ye onpleasant rememberances in the futer, I hints that I'll be a heap riled up if you fails to accept my offer."

Then Bill called the guard and sauntered out.

Frank had no thought of permitting the desperado to force him into such a partnership, but he believed that it would be well to appear to take time to consider it.

That afternoon, toward nightfall, he was permitted to go outside in the open air, with two armed guards watching over him.

Frank inhaled the open air with a sense of gratitude, for the hut had become stuffy and oppressive. He looked around, noting the surroundings, without betraying any great interest in the location. He saw that all about the hills rose to enclose the valley, but conjectured that the party had entered from the south or southeast.

By this time the men were interested in him, and they looked him over curiously. Four of them were playing cards, and Merry sat down on the ground where he could watch the game.

"You don't want to be makin' no remarks about what keerds ye sees in anybody's hand, young man," growled one of them, whose cards Merry could see.

Frank smiled.

"I'm not quite that fresh," he said. "I have played the game occasionally myself. If I had a chance to sit in, I might give you some points."

They laughed derisively at that, for the idea that this smooth-faced youth could give them points at poker seemed preposterous.

"Why, ef you got inter this game we'd skin the eye-teeth outer ye!" declared one.

"You'd be easy pluckin'," said another.

"It would be a shame to rob ye," sneered a third. "But seein's you ain't got no dust we won't have that pleasure."

"If it's dust that bars me," said Merry, "I might have enough to last a hand or two. I see you're playing five dollars limit, with a two bits edge."

"Why, you're plumb skinned dry!" said Big Monte. "You ain't got no stuff."

Whereupon Frank displayed a little thin wad of bank-bills, amounting to about twenty-five dollars in all.

They were astounded, for no money had been found on him when he was searched for the papers.

"How is this?" growled Monte. "Whar did ye keep it hid?"

"That's my business," said Merry. "If you're anxious to teach me this game let me in."

They made a place for him, assuring him that he would "last quick."

Now Merry was a most adept poker-player, although he let the game entirely alone, not believing in gambling. He was also a clever magician, and he could do tricks with cards to astonish far more astute men than these ruffians.

It was Pinto Pede's deal, and the Mexican handled the cards in a slick manner. Without pretending to watch him, Merry really kept a close eye on the fellow's movements.

Pede looked his cards over carelessly. Big Monte chipped a dollar, the next man raised him a dollar, and it was up to Frank, who immediately raised five.

Monte laughed hoarsely.

"Throwin' yer money away right off, eh?" he said.

The man after Frank dropped out.

Pinto Pede raised five dollars.

The fellow whose edge it was dropped his cards, but Monte came in, as did the next man and Frank.

"How men' card?" asked the Mexican.

"I'll take two," said Monte.

"Better draw to the strength o' yer hand," advised the next man. "Gimme three."

Pede looked inquiringly at Merry.

"One card," said Frank.

Pede frowned and looked annoyed. He had stacked the cards, and everything had worked perfectly up to Merriwell, who had been given three jacks on the deal, and whom the Mexican had expected would draw two.

"You take da two card!" exclaimed Pede. "Yo' no fool anybod' with da side card."

"I'll take one!" said Frank grimly. "If I choose to hold a side card to threes that is my business. Perhaps I have two pairs."

The Mexican had betrayed his trick by his anger at Merry's style of drawing. Writhing with anger, he tossed Frank one card.

"I tak' two," he said.

Merry leaned forward and watched the Mexican's fingers so closely that Pede was given no chance to perform any crooked work, if he had contemplated it.

"Now we're off," said Frank. "Go ahead and do your betting."

Then he glanced at his cards. He had held up a five spot with his three jacks. To his satisfaction, he found Pede had given him another five spot.

Merry had conceived that it was the Mexican's plan to give him threes and then to fill his hand with a small pair, but to take a pair himself, having on the deal secured threes of a higher denomination than those in Merry's hand. For that very reason, Frank had decided to draw one card, instead of two, thinking to defeat Pede's object in securing a full.

By a strange chance, Frank had held up a five spot, while all the time Pede had been intending to give him a pair of fives. This being the case, the youth secured his full hand just the same, but without the knowledge of the dealer. At the same time, he spoiled Pede's draw, for the pair the Mexican had counted on getting had been divided, he getting instead one of the fives intended for Merriwell. This left Pede with three queens, a five, and a nine.

But the Mexican believed that Merriwell had secured only threes, as he did not dream for an instant that the side card held up with the three jacks could be a five spot.

In case Frank had three jacks only, Pede's three queens were "good."

The betting began.

Monte started it with a dollar.

The next man had failed to improve his hand, and he fell out.

Frank raised five.

Pede shoved in six dollars, and added another five.

"I tak' dis pot," he said.

Monte looked his cards over. Then he looked at Pede. He knew the Mexican.

"You oughter be shot!" he said. And he threw his cards down, turning to Frank.

"You ain't got a ghost of a show agin' that greaser, youngster," he averred.

"Well, as long as my money lasts I'll stay with him," smiled Merry.

He did. Having thrust the last of his money into the pot, he finally called.

Pede spread out his three queens, smiling with crafty triumph.

"You no fool me," he said. "My t'ree bigger dan your t'ree. I tak' da mon'."

"Wait a minute," said Merry. "I happen to have more than threes here."

And he displayed his full hand, coolly raking the money over to his side of the blanket.

CHAPTER V.

PINTO PEDE RECEIVES HIS LESSON.

Pinto Pede was the most disgusted Mexican in all Arizona. At the same time he was thoroughly thunderstruck. That Merriwell had secured the pair of fives with his three jacks for all of his style of drawing seemed like legerdemain.

Big Monte gave a shout of surprise, that was not entirely unmingled with delight.

"Waal, say!" he roared; "that's the furst time I ever seen Pede done up on his own deal by a tenderfoot! Haw! haw! haw!"

As the game continued Frank soon demonstrated that he was quite capable of holding his own with those men. On his deal he simply played "hob" with them. In less than thirty minutes he had won over a hundred and fifty dollars.

Cimarron Bill had sauntered up and was standing near, his arms folded, silently watching the progress of the game.

"Gentlemen," said Frank finally, "you're too easy for me. Just to show you how easy you are, I'll deal a hand around and then tell you what you have."

"Not if you lets me cut," declared Monte.

Merry had gathered the cards and was shuffling them.

"You may cut," he said.

He put the cards down on the blanket, and Monte divided them into two parts, after which he watched Frank to see that he picked them up right.

Merry picked them up with one hand, doing so swiftly. He picked them up all right, but he cleverly made the pass, which restored the cards to their original positions, as they were before Monte had cut.

Then he dealt.

When they picked up their cards, he began at the left and called off the cards each man held, going around the entire circle.

Monte threw his down, with a cry of amazement.

"An' this yere is what we takes for an easy mark!" he exclaimed.

"He cheat!" grated Pinto Pede. "Dat how he win all da mon'."

"I don't want your money," said Merry. "I find it too easy to make money off such chaps as you. You talk about tenderfeet, but the East is full of tenderfeet who could skin you fellows to death. If you ran into a New York bunco man he'd have your boots off your feet in less than thirty minutes. In fact, gentlemen, you need to get your eye-teeth filed."

He was laughing at them, as they plainly saw. This made Pinto Pede furious, and, with a cry of rage, the Mexican snatched out a knife, flung himself forward on his knees, clutched the captive's throat and seemed about to finish him.

Quick as a flash, Merriwell had seized Pede's wrist, which he gave a twist that made the bones crack and brought a yell from the yellow-faced fellow's lips. The knife dropped. Merry tossed it over his shoulder, and then flung Pede backward, groaning over his wrenched arm.

"The only safe way to play such tricks on me," said the undisturbed captive, "is to catch me when I'm asleep."

Then Cimarron Bill spoke, and they saw he had a pistol in his hand.

"It sure is a good thing for Pede that the gent stopped his play just as he did, for if Pede had done any cuttin' I'd sartin shot him up a whole lot. I has told you boys that Mr. Merriwell is to be kept safe an' unharmed until I gits ready to finish with him, an' when I says a thing like that, I generally has a way o' meanin' it. If Pede had used his knife, I'd a-let daylight through him instanter."

Now they all knew Bill spoke the truth, and so Pede was doubly humiliated.

"He was a trifle hasty," said Merriwell coolly. "I was about to explain that I never keep money won at cards, as I do not believe in gambling. I sat in this game to illustrate to you fellows that it doesn't always pay to get puffed up and look contemptuously on a tenderfoot. Having made the lesson plain, I will withdraw my own money, which will leave the amount I have won. You may divide it equally among you and go on with your game."

This Frank did exactly as he said, taking himself out of the game.

There would have been a quarrel over the division of the money had not Bill interfered.

Possibly Frank was counting on that quarrel, for a fight among the men might have given him an opportunity to escape. However, if such was his plan, it miscarried, for Bill acted as judge and saw that the matter was settled without further dispute or bloodshed.

Merry turned away, his hands in his pockets, seeming to take no further interest in the gambling ruffians. They looked after his fine, supple, manly figure, and Big Monte said:

"Gents, he shore is a hummer! I admits it now. He's put up a heap different from any tenderfoot I ever struck afore. We knows he kin shoot, fer didn't he perforate Sam's coat back yander in the raveen when Sam h'isted it on his rifle. We know he kin play keerds, fer didn't he jest demonstrate it to our complete satisfaction. We know he has a heap of nerve, fer he sure has showed it all the way through. An' I'm bettin' he's goin' ter make it a right hot fight afore the galoots what are arter his mines gits what they wants."

"You forgits he's dealin' with Bill," said one of the others; "an' Bill shore has the keerds stacked on him."

"That's all right," said Monte; "but you got ter do somethin' more than stack the keerds on that young chap. Didn't Pede do that, an' didn't he beat Pede a-plenty at his own game? That showed me that you never kin tell when you has Frank Merriwell beat fer fair."

Frank had known all the time that Bill was watching. He had played the game more for the benefit of the chief of the rascals than any one else. At the same time, it had served to pass away a little time and had been a diversion for the moment.

The guards also were near, watching every move closely.

Frank had satisfied himself that there was no chance of making a break to escape without throwing his life away, and so he seemed to return to the hut with perfect content. Indeed, his nonchalance and apparent lack of fretfulness and dissatisfaction over his misfortune was most amazing to the rough men.

Merry ate supper heartily.

There was a clay fireplace in the hut, and, the night coming on cool, a fire was built there. Merry lolled before the fire on the hard-packed earth, which served as a floor to the hut. Bill came in, sat down on the ground, and rolled a cigarette.

"Well," he finally said, "how do you find yourself to-night?"

"Oh, comfortable," carelessly answered Frank.

"Smoke?"

"Never do."

"Drink?"

"Out of my line."

"Still you can shoot and play poker! I certain admits you're a queer one!"

After a little silence, Bill again dismissed the guard. Then he said:

"I'm in a leetle hurry to know what your answer is to that there propersition I made ye. I sw'ar, partner, I sure reckons we'd make a hot pair. I takes to you!"

"You're very complimentary!"

"I'm givin' it to ye straight. You're my style. Now, I wants ye ter know that I kin be of great service to ye, so I reckons it was well enough to tell ye what has been done. You sent them papers to your brother in the East. Well, I has sent one of my best men a-chasin' the papers, an' he'll be sure to get 'em if it kin be did. If he succeeds, you'll be plumb out in the cold. Howsomever, in case we rigs up a partnership, it won't be nohow so bad, fer my man he brings me the papers, an' that fixes it all right. Savvy?"

"That is the way you look at it."

"Sure. You may have thought you was a-givin' me too much to let me have a half-share in your mines; but when you reckons that you gits your liberty, my friendship, and you has your papers saved, which same otherwise would go to the minin' trust, I opine you'll come to see that you're not makin' such a powerful bad trade after all."

"But it is not at all certain that you'll get possession of those papers. In fact, everything is against such a thing happening."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"How do ye make it out?"

"My brother knows his business, and he will take care of the papers."

"How did you send them?"

"Registered mail."

"So I opined. Now you knows it takes things registered a heap sight longer to travel than it takes other mail."

"Well?"

"Such bein' the case, One-hand Hank is powerful sartin to git thar ahead o' the letter."

"He may."

"In which case he watches the post-office close. When he sees your kid brother take out the package, he follers the boy, taps him on the kebeza, knocks him stiff, takes the papers and ambles. See how easy it is to be did?"

"It is easy enough to talk about it; but my brother is pretty shrewd, and One-hand Hank will have the time of his life getting those papers."

"You don't know Hank. He's perfectly familiar with the East, an' that was why he was sent. One time he escaped from Sing Sing. That was when he had two good arms. He's a mighty bad man, an' he'll eat up that brother of yours but he'll have the papers."

"I give you my assurance that Dick will sit hard on Hank's stomach. I am not greatly worried, for all of what you have told me."

Bill frowned.

"All right," he said. "I did have some intentions of usin' persuasive measures on ye, such as puttin' your feet to the fire, or things like that; but I holds them things off to the last finish, as I opine a partnership brought about that there way would be onpleasant to us both."

"Rather," laughed Frank.

"Still," said Bill; "I may have to be rather harsh, which certain would grieve me up a lot with such a fine young fellow as you are. I hopes you don't bring me none to that. Thar's no chance fer you to give me the slip. I've taken mighty good keer of that p'int. It will save ye a great amount of trouble if you decides to-night that we becomes pards. I'll jest walk out with ye an' interduce ye to ther boys as equal with me, an' ev'rything will be lovely. I don't reckon you'd be fool enough to go back on any sech arrangement you made, fer Cimarron Bill ain't the man to be throwed down in such a way."

"There is no need of even suggesting a threat," said Merry. "If I enter into such a partnership with you, you can be sure I'll stand by it."

Bill urged him to make the agreement at once, but still Merry declined.

"Time is right precious," said the leader of the ruffians.

"Perhaps I'll give you an answer to-morrow."

And that was all Bill could get out of him then. So the chief fell to talking of other things, and they chatted agreeably for some time.

When the ruffian was ready to retire, he called the guard. Then he bade Frank good night and went out.

Merry slept with the same amazing peacefulness. But some time in the night he started wide-awake, seeming to feel near him the presence of some one.

The fire had died out, save for a few glowing coals on the hearth. The sentinel sat rigid in his corner. Merry could not tell if he slept or not.

Outside the cabin something seemed to brush lightly against the wall.

This gentle sound was not repeated. After listening a long time, Frank fell asleep once more.

In the morning he found a black feather where it had fallen to the ground after being thrust through a crack in the wall.

At sight of the feather he started. Then he hastened to pick it up and conceal it.

For that feather told him that old Joe Crowfoot was near. It promised escape from the hands of the ruffians, and caused Merry to suddenly cease planning himself and trust things wholly to Crowfoot. He knew old Joe would find an opportunity to try to aid him to escape.

That morning Frank was asked by Bill to come out and take breakfast with the rest of the men, an invitation which he willingly accepted, as he was beginning to thirst for the open air.

It was a glorious morning, just as all mornings in that land of eternal sunshine seem to be glorious. The elevation was sufficient to give the air a pleasant coolness. The sun shone down brightly. The horses fed in the valley. The men were lazing about, as usual. Never had Merry seemed so perfectly at his ease as he was on this morning. He was in a jovial mood. Some of the men attempted to chaff him.

"You're right peert fer a tenderfoot," said Red Sam. "But the effect East is ruther slow as compared with the West, you knows."

"I'm sure I don't know," smiled Frank, sipping his coffee. "In what way is the East behind the West?"

"Waal, when it comes to fast trains, we lays away over the East out yere."

"I have my doubts."

"Waal, you see it's this a-way," said Sam, winking at some of his companions, "the trains out yere don't hev to stop ev'ry few miles, an' so, havin' once got started, they kin keep increasin' an' a-pilin' on speed till they literally tears along. Now, thar's the Overland Express. Why, I was a-ridin' on that train oncet when she was jest running at comfortable speed, and the telygraft-poles beside the track seemed as nigh together as teeth in a fine-tooth comb."

"That's speedy," confessed Frank.

"You bate. But it warn't northin' to what she did later. A hot box, or somethin', kind o' delayed us, an' we hed to make up lost time. Sir, it's a fact that arter she got on full head the telygraft-poles looked presactly like a solid fence along beside the track!"

"But you see," said Frank, "you confess that your trains out here have to take time to get up such high speed. That is where they are behind the trains in the East."

"How?" demanded Sam contemptuously.

"Why, having to stop often, the Eastern trains make it a practise to start quick and at high speed. They don't have to pump away for fifteen or twenty miles in order to get to going at a comfortable rate of speed. Instead of that they start right off at full speed. Now there is a train runs between New York and Washington. I got aboard at the station in Jersey City. My girl had come along to see me off. I opened the car window and leaned out to kiss her good-by, and, so help me, I kissed a colored woman in Philadelphia!"

There was a moment of silence, and then Big Monte gave a roar of delighted laughter. This was the kind of humor he could appreciate, and the fact that Red Sam had been doubly outdone by the tenderfoot gave him great joy.

The others laughed, also, and their respect for their captive rose several notches.

Cimarron Bill thoroughly appreciated Merry's cleverness in getting ahead of Red Sam.

"That youngster'd make the greatest pard a man could tie to!" thought Bill.

After breakfast Merry coolly sauntered about the hut. He was followed everywhere by the two guards, but he gave them no heed whatever. He looked for some further sign of old Joe, but saw nothing.

Merry wondered how the redskin would go to work to accomplish what he meant to attempt.

Bill let Frank alone until after dinner. Then he sat down with Merry, they being by themselves, and again broached the subject that seemed uppermost in his mind.

"See here," said Frank, "I offered one of your men a thousand dollars to get me out of this. The same offer stands good with you."

The dark face of Cimarron Bill flushed and he looked deadly.

"Mebbe you don't know you're insultin' me a heap!" he said. "Such bein' the probable case, I resents it none. The minin' trust has promised me five thousan' when I turns them papers over."

"Which you will never do."

"Which I'll sure do if you gits foolish an' refuses to tie up with me."

"Well," said Frank, "I'm not bidding against the mining trust. I have refused to recognize that organization."

"Then you refuses my proposal?" said Bill, in that cold, dangerous voice of his.

"Not that. I want until to-morrow morning to think it over. Just till to-morrow."

"You'll give me my answer to-morrer mornin'?"

"Yes."

"Then it's settled that you has that much more time. I won't ask ye no more about it until to-morrer morning; an' then you must sure give an answer. I knows what that answer will certain be if you has the level head I thinks."

CHAPTER VI.

INJUN JOE TO THE RESCUE.

Along in the middle of the night Frank awoke. Again he was overcome by that strange feeling that some person was near him. Then he felt a touch, light as a feather, and saw at his side a dark figure.

The starlight came in at the small, square window.

A hand grasped Frank's wrist and gave it a gentle pull. There was not even a whisper. Merry knew what was wanted.

Without making a sound, he crept across the ground to the wall, where a timber had been removed from the lower portion, making an opening large enough for a man to slip through.

Some one passed noiselessly through this opening ahead of him. Frank followed as silently as he could.

Outside he found at his side the one who had entered the cabin in that manner. This person lay flat on the ground and moved away with amazing deftness and silence.

Frank could not follow as easily, but he wormed along as best he could. In that manner they finally passed to the shelter of some scrubby bushes.

There Frank found a dark form sitting on the ground.

"Heap all right," whispered a voice. "You no make a row when Joe him come. Joe he know you be ready if you find feather."

It was Crowfoot, the faithful old redskin.

"All right now. Make um no noise. Foller Joe," continued the Indian.

The old fellow did not hurry. He took his time to crawl along on hands and knees until they were far from the hut. At last he arose, and Frank followed his example. They bent low and went on like two dark shadows.

"Can we get out of the valley all right?" asked Merry.

"One man him guard this way to go out," said Joe.

"How do we pass him?"

"Joe know. Leave it to him."

The valley narrowed at last. They slipped along between rocky walls. Joe's feet made absolutely no sound.

"Stop here," advised the redskin. "Joe him come back in minute."

So Frank stopped and waited. The minute was long. Indeed, it became ten minutes at least. But the old fellow returned, saying:

"All right. Coast clear."

"What's that?" exclaimed Frank, as they nearly stumbled over a dark figure, as they were hurrying on again.

"Him guard," said Joe.

"Guard? What's the matter with him?"

"Him sleep."

Merry shuddered a bit, for he fancied he knew the sort of sleep meant by the old fellow.

Cimarron Bill would receive his answer in the morning. It would be a great surprise to him, and would please him not at all.

More than two miles had been traversed when they came, in a deep gully, upon old Joe's horse.

"No keep him so near," said the Indian. "Bring him here to have him ready to-night. You ride."

Frank did not fancy the idea of riding, but the old fellow insisted, and Merry finally mounted. So they passed through the silent night, Joe leading for a time.

"Did you get the package off all right?" Merry asked.

"Him go," said Joe. "No worry."

"Joe, I don't know how I can repay you; but anything I have in this world is yours. You want to remember that. Take what you want that belongs to me."

"Joe him not need much. He soon go off to the long hunt."

Frank thought of the time when this old redskin had been his bitter enemy, when Joe had seemed treacherous and deadly as a rattlesnake, and smiled somewhat over the transformation. He had won the confidence of the Indian, who was now as faithful as he had once been dangerous.

"Did you see anything of the one-armed man who was with my pursuers?" asked Merry.

"No see him after leave you."

"He was sent away to follow you."

"No see him. He no bother me."

Frank was thoroughly well satisfied with the work of the faithful redskin.

They took turns at riding throughout the night. Three hours after dawn they came into a large, wooded valley amid the mountains. As they approached this valley they heard afar a rumbling, jarring sound that brought a smile to the face of Frank Merriwell.

"The stamps are in operation," he said.

Riding up the valley, through which flowed a stream of water, they saw reared against the bold face of a high mountain, looking like ant-mounds, some buildings, four or five in number. In the side of the mountain opened the black mouth of a shaft.

"Hurrah!" Merry cried, waving his hat over his head. "There, Joe, is the Queen Mystery, and it is in full blast!"

The Queen Mystery mine was located a long distance from the nearest railroad, but Merriwell had been to the expense and trouble of having the very latest machinery brought there and set up. He had in his employ Jim Tracy, as a foreman, said to be thoroughly capable and reliable. Only about fifty men were employed in the mine at that time; but Merry contemplated increasing the force extensively.

There was talk of a branch railroad being constructed to pass within ten or fifteen miles of the Queen Mystery.

Were the mine to fall into the hands of the mining trust, without doubt that railroad would be constructed, and it would run direct to Camp Mystery and onward. The influence of the great railroad magnate would easily bring about the running of the railroad to suit his fancy.

The mining trust had been completely baffled in its first efforts to get the best of Merriwell.

Frank was welcomed at the mine, where he made himself comfortable.

Old Joe disappeared within six hours after arriving there. He vanished without saying a word to Merry about his intentions.

Two days later he reappeared, Frank finding him sitting, in the morning, with his back against one of the buildings, his red blanket pulled about him, serenely smoking.

"Hello, Joe!" cried Merry. "So you're back?"

"Ugh!" grunted Joe, as he continued to smoke.

"What's your report, Joe?"

"Bad men heap gone."

"Cimarron Bill and his gang?"

"Joe mean um."

"They have gone?"

"Git out. They go heap quick after Strong Heart he git away."

"Well, that looks as if Bill had given up the fight, but it seems hardly possible."

"No can tell," said the old fellow. "May come 'gain with great lot many more bad men."

Frank sat down and talked with the old redskin for some time. Then Joe was given a square meal,

and he ate heartily.

Merry had some business to look after in the mine, and he departed, at last, with the idea that he would find Joe and have another talk with him after the business was done.

But when Merry came to look again for the Indian, Joe had disappeared once more in his usual mysterious fashion.

Merry was not at all satisfied that Cimarron Bill had given up the struggle. In any event, he was confident that the syndicate had not given up, and experience had taught him that the organization would resort to any desperate means to accomplish its purpose.

So Merriwell, having seen that all things were going well at the mine, set out the following day for Holbrook, in which place he mailed a letter to Dick, informing him of his fortune in escaping from the ruffians.

In Holbrook Merry purchased a supply of rifles and cartridges, also small arms. This stock he had boxed and contracted with a man to deliver everything with the least possible delay at the Queen Mystery mine.

Having attended to this matter, Merry rested over night and set out with the first hint of coming day for the mine.

Through the hottest part of the day he rested in a ravine where there was some shade. Then he traveled again until after nightfall.

The following forenoon found him in a part of the mountains that seemed familiar. He had diverged somewhat from the regular trail between Holbrook and the mine.

Riding through a narrow pass, he came into a valley that was somewhat wooded and had a decidedly familiar aspect. Five minutes later he drew rein, uttering an exclamation of surprise.

Before him, at a distance, stood an old hut.

It required no second glance to show Merriwell that it was the very hut where he had been held a captive by Cimarron Bill and his gang.

Frank looked around keenly, but the valley seemed desolate, and apparently he and his horse were the only living creatures within its confines.

"The very place!" said Merry. "I wonder how Bill liked my answer to his proposition. He must have been decidedly surprised when he found me missing in the morning."

He rode forward toward the hut, having a fancy to look around the place.

As he drew nearer, suddenly his horse plunged forward and fell, while a shot rang out.

Merry had seen a puff of smoke come from the window of the hut. He managed to jerk his feet from the stirrups and drop to the ground behind the body of the horse, where he lay quite still.

The animal had been shot through the brain, and it did not even kick after falling.

CHAPTER VII.

MERRIWELL AND BIG MONTE.

As he lay behind his stricken horse, Merriwell pulled his rifle around and got it ready for use. Peering over the body of the animal, he watched the hut.

The sun, which was dropping toward the west, was still decidedly uncomfortable. It blazed upon him with a feeling like the heat from a bake-oven.

Frank knew his peril. He knew better than to lift his head high and give his hidden foe another chance at him. He could not jump up and rush for cover, as cover lay too far away. Only one thing could he do, and that was to remain quietly there and watch and wait.

After a time it is likely the man who had fired the shot began to believe Merriwell seriously hurt. Frank caught a glimpse of him within the hut.

"He's coming out!" Merry decided.

He was mistaken. Time dragged on and the sun dipped lower toward the mountain-peaks; but still no person issued from the old hut. The situation was anything but comfortable.

"Confound him!" muttered Frank. "Who is he, and what does he mean?"

Even as he asked the question, he again saw the man moving beyond the window.

Frank thrust the rifle across the horse, resting it on the animal's body. Then he got into a position where he could take good aim, and then waited again.

The sun was touching the mountain-tops when beyond the window Merry saw the head of a man.

Then the clear report of his rifle rang through the valley. The puff of smoke from the muzzle blotted out the window for a moment. When it floated away the window was empty.

"Did I reach him?" thought Frank anxiously.

He felt that he had not missed, and still he could not be sure. He did not venture to rise from behind the horse. In case he had missed, he might fall before a second bullet from the hut.

The sun went down behind the mountains, flinging a hundred golden and crimson banners into the sky. Finally these began to fade, and a few stars peeped forth palely.

"If somebody's watching for me there," thought Merry, "it's going to be dangerous to move, at best."

But something told him his lead had not gone astray.

As the light faded still more he arose quickly, rifle in hand, and started on a run for the hut. As he ran he felt that it was far from impossible that another shot might bring sudden death to him. Still he did not hesitate, and, running steadily, he came up to the hut.

The door swung open before his hand. He looked in. It was not so dark as to hide a black figure that lay sprawled on the dirt floor.

Frank shuddered a little, and felt like turning away at once.

"He brought it on himself!" he whispered. "It was my life or his. But I'm sorry I had to do it."

Then he entered the hut. Striking a match, he bent over the prostrate figure. The reflected light, coming from his hollowed hands, showed him a familiar face.

"Big Monte!" he cried, starting back and dropping the match.

It was in truth the big man who had been one of Cimarron Bill's paid satellites.

He found the man's wrist and felt for his pulse.

"Good Lord!" Merry cried.

Big Monte's pulse flickered beneath his fingers. The ruffian still lived.

Frank knew where there was some wood, and this he soon had piled in a little heap in the open fireplace. He applied a match, and soon a blaze sprang up.

By the growing light of the fire he examined Monte's wound.

"Creased him as fine as can be!" he muttered. "Maybe there is a chance for him, after all."

It may be explained that by "creased" Frank meant that the bullet had passed along the man's skull, cutting his scalp, yet had not penetrated the bone. This had rendered Big Monte unconscious.

Merry removed the fellow's revolvers and knife and stood his rifle in a far corner. Then he brought some water in his drinking-cup and set about the effort of restoring the wretch to consciousness, which did not prove such a hard task as he had anticipated.

After a little Monte's eyes opened and he lay staring at the youth. He seemed bewildered, and it was plain he could not readily collect his scattered wits.

"Well, Monte," said Frank coolly, "that was a pretty close call for you. I came near shooting off the top of your head, which I would have been justified in doing. All the same, I'm glad I failed."

The big man continued to stare at Frank. Already Merry had bound up the ruffian's wound.

"Ho!" came hoarsely from Monte's lips. "Back! Back to the depths! You are dead!"

"If I am dead," said Frank, "I'm just about the liveliest dead man you ever saw."

A strange smile came to the lips of the wounded man.

"If you are not yet dead," he said, "I opines you soon will be a heap."

"Never count chickens before they are hatched, Monte."

"When you come back you'll find your mine in the hands of the syndicate. Bill will have it."

"That's interesting! How will Bill get it?"

"He will take it while you are away. He has gathered a right good gang, and he's a-goin' to jump the mine to-night."

"Monte," said Frank, "you interest me extensively. How does it happen you are not with the gang?"

"I am one of the watchers. I watch to see that you do not get back. I reckons I have done my part o' the job, for I shot you dead a while ago."

The big ruffian was not in his right mind, but already he had said enough to stir Frank Merriwell's blood. So Cimarron Bill had been watching his movements from some place of cover, and had hastened to gather his ruffians the moment Frank left the mine. Without doubt Bill had counted on Frank remaining away longer. However, this night he was to strike, with his gang. The mine was to be seized.

"I must be there!" muttered Merriwell.

Fortunately Big Monte had a horse hidden not far from the cabin, and Frank was able to find the animal.

The wounded ruffian was raving at intervals. He seemed quite deranged.

"I can't leave him like this," thought Merry. "He might wander off into the mountains and perish."

Still he disliked to be encumbered with the wretch. Some would have deserted the wounded man without delay and ridden with all haste to reach the mine.

It must be confessed that such a thought passed through the head of Frank Merriwell.

"No!" murmured Frank. "He's a human being. It is my duty to do what I can to save him."

So it came about that two men rode Monte's big horse away from that valley. One of them muttered, and laughed, and talked wildly.

"Riding with the dead!" he said. "We're on the road to Purgatory! Ha! Ha! Ha! Whip up the horse! Gallop on!"

It was a strange ride through the starlight night. The clicking clatter of the horse's hoofs aroused the big man at intervals, and he laughed and shouted.

"I'm dead!" he finally declared. "I am a dead man! Two dead men are riding together! And we're on the road to the burnin' pit! But it's getting a heap cold! I'm beginnin' to freeze. The fire will be good an' hot!"

"Shut up!" said Merry. "We're getting near the Queen Mystery. You may get shot up some more if you keep your jaw wagging."

As they came nearer to the valley, Merry slackened the pace of the foam-flecked horse. Fortunately the animal had been big and strong, for once Frank had seemed to have little mercy on the beast he bestrode.

Monte continued to talk. He had grown so weak that Merry was compelled to partly support him.

"Look here," Frank said, in a commanding way, "you are not to say another word until I give you permission. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Then close up. Not another word from you."

Monte closed up, obeying like a child.

They were entering the valley. Suddenly there came a challenge.

"Hold up, thar! Who goes yander?"

Not a word from Merriwell's lips, but he drove the spurs to the horse, clutched Big Monte tighter, and they shot forward into the valley.

Instantly sounded a shot, followed by several more. Bullets whistled past them. Frank felt Monte give a great start and lurch sideways, but he held the man steady.

There were cries of rage from the men who had fired the shots.

Not a word did Frank speak, but he held straight on toward the head of the valley and Camp Mystery.

As he approached he saw lights gleaming ahead, seeming to indicate that the sound of shooting had come up the valley and aroused the miners.

He was challenged, but gave an answer that caused the men to welcome him with a shout. It was Crowfoot who seized the lather-white horse by the bit, but it was another who caught Big Monte as the ruffian plunged from the saddle on being released from Frank's arms.

"I 'lows he'd got it good an' plenty," said the man who caught Monte. "Ef he ain't dead a'ready, he'll be so right soon."

"Take him inside somewhere," directed Frank. "Every man who can find a weapon wants to get ready to fight. We're going to have a gang of ruffians down on us here, and we'll have to fight to hold this mine."

"We're all ready, Mr. Merriwell," said Jim Tracy, the foreman. "Joe Crowfoot came and warned us what was doin'. I opine them galoots must 'a' bin shootin' at you some down yander?"

"That's right," said Frank. "I had to ride through them, and they banged away at me to their

satisfaction. I was lucky to come out with a whole skin."

"Which the other gent didn't. Who is he?"

"Big Monte."

"What? Not that galoot? Why, he's one o' the wust devils unhung in Arizona!"

The men began to murmur.

"Big Monte!" cried another. "Why I has a score to settle with that thar varmint! He shot my partner, Luke Brandt."

"An' I has a score to settle with him, too!" declared another. "He stole a hoss off me!"

Many others claimed grievances against Monte, and suddenly there was a rush toward the room into which the wounded man had been conveyed.

Somehow Frank Merriwell was ahead of them all.

As they came crowding in at the door, Merry stood beside the blanket on which the wounded ruffian was stretched.

"Hold on, men!" he called quietly. "Monte is dying!"

"What do we keer fer that!" cried one. "All the more reason fer us to hurry an' swing the varmint afore he crokes!"

"Let him die in peace."

"That's escapin' what's his due."

Frank lifted one hand.

"There is One above who will judge him," he said. "It is not for us to do that."

But those men did not fancy the idea of being robbed of their vengeance. Big Monte was helpless in their hands, and they were for swinging him before he could escape them by giving up the ghost.

"Mr. Merriwell, sir," said one, "we respects you all right, an' we don't like to run contrarywise to anything you says here; but in this yere case we has to, most unfortunate. It is our sollum duty to hang this onery hoss-thief, an' that is what we proposes to do. Arter that we'll be ready ter fight fer you an' your mine as long as it's necessary."

"That's right!" shouted others, as they again crowded forward. "Let us have him! We'll make it right short work! Then we'll be ready fer his pards!"

Some of them flourished weapons. They were an ugly-looking crew.

Quick as a flash Frank Merriwell whipped out a pair of revolvers and leveled them at the crowd.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have just one thing to observe: If you don't, one and all, get out of here instanter and leave Monte to shuffle off in peace I shall open on you! If I open on you, I shall reduce you so that Cimarron Bill and his crowd will have no trouble whatever in taking this mine."

They did not doubt but he meant it, remarkable though it seemed. If they attempted to seize Monte, Merriwell would begin shooting. It was astonishing that he should choose to defend this ruffian that had been one of his worst enemies.

As the men were hesitating, old Joe Crowfoot suddenly appeared.

"Com'ron Bill he come!" said the Indian. "There be a heap fight in a minute! Come quick!"

"Come on!" cried Jim Tracy.

And the men rushed forth to meet and repulse Cimarron Bill and his gang.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEATH-SHOT.

Frank was about to follow, when Big Monte clutched weakly at his foot.

"Pard," said the ruffian, "I may never git another chanct to say it. You're the white stuff! They'd shore hanged me a whole lot but for you. Now I has a chanct to die comfortable an' respectable like. Thankee, Frank Merriwell."

"Don't mention it!" said Frank. "Die as comfortably as you can. I have to go out to help the boys shoot a few of your pards."

"I ain't got northin' agin' them," said Monte; "but I wishes ye luck. They're in the wrong, an' you're right."

At this moment the sound of shooting outside startled Merry, and, without another word, he rushed forth, leaving Monte lying there.

Cimarron Bill had counted on capturing the mine by strategy and meeting with very little resistance. When Frank had returned and ridden into the valley Bill knew that it would not do to delay longer, and he had led his men in swift pursuit.

But old Joe Crowfoot, faithful as ever, had prepared the miners for the attack; so it came about that the ruffians were met with a volley of lead that dismayed and demoralized them. This was not the kind of work they relished.

Thus it happened that Frank Merriwell came hurrying forth, only to find the enemy already repulsed and retreating in disorder.

The starlight showed two men and a horse stretched on the ground, while another horse was hobbling about. At a distance down the valley the mine-seizers were fleeing.

"They git heap hot time!" said old Joe, in Frank's ear.

"What?" cried Merry. "Have they quit it as quick as this?"

"It looks that way, sir," said Jim Tracy.

"And I didn't get into the game."

"You was too busy defending Big Monte. I hopes you pardons me, sir, but I thinks that was a mistake."

"You have a right to think whatever you like, but I object to your freedom in expressing yourself."

This was plain enough, and it told Tracy that Frank would not tolerate any criticism from him.

"It's your own game," muttered Tracy, turning away.

"I see you have dropped two of those chaps."

"Yes."

Revolver in hand, Frank walked out toward the spot where the two figures lay. He was followed by Crowfoot and several others.

The first man was stone-dead.

The next proved to be the Mexican, Pinto Pede, who was sorely wounded.

"That cursed greaser!" growled one of the men. "Give me lief to finish him, Mr. Merriwell!"

He placed the muzzle of a pistol against Pede's head.

Frank knew that a word from him would send the Mexican into eternity.

"None of that!" he said sternly and commandingly. "Pick the fellow up and take him in yonder. He may not be shot up too bad to recover."

But they drew back.

"Sir," said Tracy, "I don't opine thar is a man here but what thinks hisself too good to be after handlin' the onery greaser."

"And you would let him remain here to die?"

"I reckons that's correct."

In another moment Merry had stooped and lifted the slender body of Pinto Pede in his arms. With long strides, he bore the Mexican toward the building in which Big Monte lay.

The miners looked on in amazement.

"Waal, he's the limit!" said Jim Tracy, in disgust.

Crowfoot followed Frank, who took Pede into the room and placed him beside Big Monte. The redskin stopped at the door, where he stood on guard.

"Well, Pede," said Frank, "we'll examine and see just how hard you're hit."

The Mexican was shot in the side. At first it seemed that the wound might be fatal, but, examining with the skill of an amateur surgeon, Frank made a discovery.

"She struck a rib, Pede," he said. "She followed around and came out here. Why, you're not in such a bad way! You may pull through this thing all right. You'd be almost sure to if you had the right sort of treatment."

The Mexican said nothing, but certain it is that he was bewildered when he found Merry dressing the wound. This Frank did with such skill as he possessed, making the fellow comfortable.

Big Monte had watched all this, and he spoke for the first time when the job was done.

"I reckon," he said, "that they don't raise galoots like you ev'rywhere. Why, it shore was up to you to finish the two o' us! Why you didn't do it is something I don't understand none at all. An' you keeps them gents from takin' me out an' swingin' me. You shore air plenty diffrunt from any one I ever meets up with afore!"

Old Joe Crowfoot had been watching everything. The Indian understood Frank not at all, but whatever "Strong Heart" did Joe was ready to stand by.

"Don't worry over it," laughed Merry. "I owe you something, Monte."

"I fail to see what."

"Why, you warned me that Bill and the others meant to jump the mine to-night."

"Did I?"

"Sure thing."

"I don't remember. But I tried ter shoot ye. Bill said you was ter be shot ef you comes a-hustlin' back afore he gits around to doin' his part o' the job."

"You got the worst of it in that little piece of shooting, so we'll call that even."

"If you says even, I'm more'n willin'."

"Now," said Frank, "I'm going out with the men to watch for a second attack from Bill. I have to leave you, and some of the boys may take a fancy to hang you, after all. That bein' the case, I don't want to leave you so you won't have a show. Here, take this gun. With it you may be able to defend yourself until I can reach you. But don't shoot any one if you can help it, for after that I don't believe even I could save you."

So he placed a revolver in the hand of Big Monte and went out, leaving the wounded ruffians together.

When Frank was gone the two wounded wretches lay quite still for some time. Finally Pinto Pede stirred and looked at Big Monte.

"How you get shot?" he asked.

"The gent who jest went out done a part o' the job," said Monte, in reply.

"Heem—he shoot you?"

"Yes."

"Ha! You lik' da chance to shoot heem?"

"Waal, I had it, but I missed him. He fooled me a whole lot, fer he jest kept still behind his hoss, what I had salted, an' then he got in at me with his own bit o' lead."

"That mak' you hate heem! Now you want to keel heem?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't opine I'm so mighty eager."

"Beel says he gif one thousan' dol' to man who shoot Frank Mer'well."

"That's a good lot."

"Beel he do it."

"No doubt o' that, I reckons."

"Mebbe you an' I haf the chance."

"Waal, not fer me! I quits! When a chap keeps my neck from bein' stretched arter all I has done ter him—waal, that settles it! I opines I has a leetle humanity left in me. An' he thought I was dyin', too. I kinder thought so then, but I'm managin' ter pull along. Mebbe I'll come through."

The face of Pinto Pede showed that he was thinking black thoughts.

"Gif me da chance!" he finally said. "You no haf to do eet. Gif me da chance. I do eet, an' we divvy da mon'. Ha?"

"Don't count me into your deviltry."

"No count you?"

"No."

"What matter? You no too good. I see you shoot man in back."

"Mebbe you did; but he hadn't kept me from bein' lynched."

"Bah! Why he do eet? You fool! He want to turn you ofer to law."

"Mebbe you're right; I don't know."

"You safe yourself if you help keel him."

"Looker hyer, Pede, I'm a low-down onery skunk; but I reckon thar's a limit even fer me. I've struck it. This hyer Frank Merriwell made me ashamed a' myself fer the fust time in a right long time. I know I'm too onery to reform an' ever be anything decent, even if I don't shuffle off with these two wounds. All the same, I ain't the snake ter turn an' soak pisen inter Merriwell, an' you hear me. Others may do it, but not Big Monte."

"Bah! All right! You not get half! Yes; you keep steel, you get eet."

"What are you driving at?"

"Wait. Mebbe you see. All you haf to do is keep steel."

"Waal, I'm great at keepin' still," said Monte.

It was not far from morning when Merriwell re-entered that room.

Pinto Pede seemed to be sleeping, but Big Monte was wide-awake.

"Hello!" exclaimed Frank. "So you're still on these shores. I didn't know but you had sailed out."

"Pard, I opine mebbe I may git well enough to be hanged, after all," grinned the big ruffian.

"Possibly you may," said Frank. "And the chances are you would be if I were to leave you alone long enough. I heard some of the boys talking. They contemplate taking you out and doing things to you after I'm asleep. But they did not reckon that I would come here to sleep, where they cannot get their hands on you without disturbing me."

"That was right kind of you," said Monte. "How's Bill?"

"I think that Bill has had his fill for the present. Indications are that he has left the valley with his whole force, and we are not looking for further trouble from him in some time to come."

"Bill shore found hisself up against the real thing," said Monte.

Frank placed a blanket near the door, wrapped himself in it, and was soon sleeping soundly.

Big Monte seemed to fall asleep after a time.

Finally the Mexican lifted his head and listened. He looked at Monte, and then at Frank. Seeming to satisfy himself, he gently dropped aside his blanket and began creeping across the floor, making his way toward Merriwell. He moved with the silence of a serpent.

Now, it happened that Big Monte was not asleep, although he had seemed to be. The Mexican had not crept half the distance to Frank when the big man turned slightly, lifted his head, and watched. As the creeping wretch drew nearer to the sleeping youth the hand of Big Monte was gently thrust out from the folds of his blanket.

Pede reached Frank, and then arose to his knees. Suddenly he lifted above his head a deadly knife, which he meant to plunge into the breast of the unconscious sleeper.

At that instant a spout of fire leaped from something in the hand which Big Monte had thrust from beneath the blanket, and with the crashing report of the revolver Pede fell forward across the body of his intended victim, shot through the brain!

Frank was on his feet in an instant.

"What does this mean?" he cried, astounded, stirring the body of the Mexican with his foot.

"You gave me a gun," said Big Monte, "so that I might defend myself. It came in handy when I saw Pede gittin' keerless with his knife an' goin' fer to cut you up."

"Was that it?" exclaimed Frank. "Why, he was going to stab me! And you saved my life by shooting him!"

"Which mebbe makes us some nearer square than we was," said Monte, "as you saved my life a leetle time ago."

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK MAKES A DECISION.

Frank leaned against the door-jamb of his cabin and looked out into the sunny valley. To his ears came the roar of the stamp-mills of the mine, which was in full blast. Before him lay the mine-buildings about the mouth of the tunnel, from which rich ore was being brought to be fed to the greedy stamps.

It was now something like ten days since the ruffians under Cimarron Bill tried to carry the mine by assault.

Frank had remained watchful and alert, well knowing the nature of Cimarron Bill and believing he would not be content to abandon the effort thus easily. Still the second attack, which he had so fully expected, had not come.

He was wondering now if the ruffians had given it up. Or had they been instructed by the trust to turn their attention to the San Pablo Mine?

If the latter was the case, Frank felt that they would find the San Pablo prepared. He had taken pains before hastening to the Queen Mystery to fortify his mine in Mexico, leaving it in charge of a man whom he fully trusted.

Nevertheless, Frank felt that it would be far better were he able to personally watch both mines at the same time. Just now he was meditating on the advisability of leaving the Queen Mystery and journeying southward to the San Pablo.

As he thought this matter over, something seemed to whisper in his ear that such an action on his part was anticipated by the enemy, who were waiting for him to make the move. Then, while he was away, they would again descend on the Queen Mystery.

Again the old Indian, Crowfoot, had disappeared, after his usual manner, without telling Frank whither he was going. Merry knew he might be in the vicinity, or he might be hundreds of miles away. Still, Joe had a remarkable faculty of turning up just when he was most needed.

Merry turned back into the little cabin, leaving the door open. He had been feeling of his chin as he stood in the doorway, and now he thought:

"A shave will clean me up. Great Scott! but I'm getting a beard! This shaving is becoming a regular nuisance."

Indeed, Frank was getting a beard. Every day it seemed to grow heavier and thicker, and he found it necessary to shave frequently to maintain that clean appearance in which he so greatly delighted.

Frank could wear old clothes, he could rough it with joy, he minded neither wind nor weather, but personal cleanliness he always maintained when such a thing was in any manner possible. To him a slovenly person was offensive. He pitied the man or boy who did not know the pleasure of being clean, and he knew it was possible for any one to be clean, no matter what his occupation, provided he could obtain a cake of soap and sufficient water.

So Frank was shaving every day when possible. He now turned back into the cabin and brought out his shaving-set. On the wall directly opposite the open door hung a small square mirror, with a narrow shelf below it.

Here Merry made preparations for his shaving. Over a heater-lamp he prepared his water, whistling the air of the Boola Song. This tune made him think of his old friends of Yale, some of whom he had not heard from for some time.

A year had not yet passed since he had gathered them and taken his baseball-team into the Mad River region to play baseball. In that brief space of time many things had occurred which made it evident that never again could they all be together for sport. The days of mere sport were past and over; the days of serious business had come.

Frank thought, with a sense of sadness, of Old Eli. Before him rose a vision of the campus buildings, in his ears sounded the laughter and songs, and he saw the line of fellows hanging on the fence, smoking their pipes and chaffing good-naturedly.

With some men it is a sad thing that they cannot look back with any great degree of pleasure on their boyhood and youth. They remember that other boys seemed to have fine times, while they did not. Later, other youths chummed together and were hail-fellow-well-met, while they seemed set aloof from these jolly associates. With Frank this was not so. He remembered his boyhood with emotions of the greatest pleasure, from the time of his early home life to his bidding farewell to Fardale. Beyond that even unto this day the joy of life made him feel that it was a million fold worth living.

There are thousands who confess that they would not be willing to go back and live their lives over. Had the question been put to Frank Merriwell he would have said that nothing could give him greater pleasure.

When the water was hot, Frank carefully applied his razor to the strop and made it sharp enough for his purpose. Then he arranged everything needed on the little shelf beneath the mirror.

Now, it is impossible to say what thing it was that led him to remove his revolver from the holster and place it on the shelf with the other things, but something caused him to do so.

Then he applied the lather to his face, and was about to use the razor, when he suddenly saw something in the mirror that led him to move with amazing quickness.

Behind him, at the open door, was a man with a rifle. This man, a bearded ruffian, had crept up to the door with the weapon held ready for use.

But for the fact that the interior of the cabin seemed somewhat gloomy to the eyes of the man, accustomed as they were to the bright glare of the sun outside, he might have been too swift for

Frank.

Another thing added to Frank's fortune, and it was that he had drawn his revolver and placed the weapon on the little shelf in front of him. For this reason it was not necessary for him to reach toward the holster at his hip, an action which must have hurried the ruffian to the attempted accomplishment of his murderous design. For Merriwell had no doubt of the fellow's intention. He saw murder in the man's eyes and pose.

The rifle was half-lifted. In another moment Frank Merriwell would have been shot in the back in a most dastardly manner.

He snatched the revolver from the little shelf and fired over his shoulder without turning his head, securing such aim as was possible by the aid of the mirror into which he was looking. Frank had learned to shoot in this manner, and he could do so as skilfully as many of the expert marksmen who gave exhibitions of fancy shooting throughout the country.

His bullet struck the hand of the man, smashing some of the ruffian's fingers and causing him to drop the rifle.

Merry wheeled and strode to the door, his smoking revolver in his hand, a terrible look in his eyes.

The wretch was astounded by what had happened. Blood was streaming from his wounded hand. He saw Merriwell confront him with the ready pistol.

"You treacherous cur!" said Frank indignantly. "I think I'll finish you!"

He seemed about to shoot the man down, whereupon the ruffian dropped on his knees, begging for mercy.

"Don't—don't shoot!" he gasped, holding up his bleeding hand, "Don't kill me!"

"Why shouldn't I? You meant to kill me."

"No, no—I swear——"

"Don't lie! Your soul may start on its long trail in a moment! Don't lie when you may be on the brink of eternity!"

These stern words frightened the fellow more than ever.

"Oh, I'm telling you the truth—I sw'ar I am!" he hastened to say.

"You crept up to this door all ready to fill me full of lead."

"No, no! Nothing of the sort! I was not looking for you! It—it was some one else! I swear it by my honor!"

A bitter smile curled the lips of the young man.

"Honor!" he said—"your honor! Never mind. How much were you to receive for killing me?"

"It was not you; it was another man."

"What other?"

"Tracy."

"My foreman?"

"Yes."

"You were looking for him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Him and me have had a fallin' out, and he cussed me. He threatened to shoot me, too."

"What was the matter?"

"Oh, he didn't like the way I done my work. It's true; ask him. I swore I'd fix him."

"Well, what brought you here to my cabin to shoot the foreman?"

"I thought I saw him coming this way."

Frank pressed his lips together and looked the man over. Somehow he believed the ruffian was lying, in spite of all these protests.

"See here, Anson," he said, "you were hired by the mining trust, or by some of its tools, to shoot me, and you tried to earn your money. Don't deny it, for you can't fool me. Just own up to the truth and it will be better for you. Tell me who made the deal with you and how much you were to receive. If you come out honestly and confess all, I'll spare you. Your hand is bleeding pretty bad, and it should be attended to at once. I'll see to that, but upon condition that you confess."

Still the ruffian continued to protest, insisting that it was Tracy he was looking for. In the midst of this he suddenly stopped, seeming to be badly frightened.

"Oh, Lord!" he choked. "Here comes Tracy! Don't tell him! I can't defend myself! Don't tell him, or he'll sure shoot me up and finish me!"

Jim Tracy was coming with long strides. He saw Frank and the wretch with the bleeding hand.

"Whatever is this?" he demanded. "I heard the shooting. What has this yaller dog been up to?"

"I shot him," said Frank quietly. "He came walking into my door in a careless manner with his rifle in his hand, and I shot him in a hurry. He was foolish; he should have been more careful. It's dangerous to walk in on me that way, even with the most peaceable intentions."

There was a strange look on Tracy's face.

"So that's how it happened?" he exclaimed, in a harsh voice. "Well, it's pretty certain that Hop Anson needs to have his worthless neck stretched, and all I ask is permission to attend to the job. I'll dispose of him very quickly."

"I told you, Mr. Merriwell!" muttered the wounded man.

"You have had some trouble with him, have you, Tracy?" asked Frank.

"Confound his hide! yes, I have. He has no business here at this time. His place is discharging the rock as it comes out. The fact that he's here counts against him. Turn him over to me."

"Instead of that," said Frank, thrusting his revolver into his holster, "I think I'll take care of him. Come in here, Anson."

Tracy seemed astonished and disgusted.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to see if I can't dress that hand and keep him from bleeding to death," was Merriwell's answer.

"Well, by thunder!" muttered the foreman.

CHAPTER X.

MERRIWELL'S METHOD.

It was not easy for such men to understand Frank Merriwell. Hop Anson was as much astonished as was Jim Tracy. He entered the cabin at Frank's command, and Merriwell proceeded to wash and examine the wound.

"You'll have to lose two fingers and part of another one," said Merriwell. "I can do the job for you right here, if you say so. Or I'll patch them up, stop the bleeding, and let you get to a regular saw-bones."

"You go ahead," said Anson.

So Frank opened a trunk which sat behind a curtain in one corner of the room, bringing out a case, which, on being opened, revealed a complete set of surgical instruments. These he spread out on the rough table, and soon he was ready to operate on Hop Anson's mangled hand.

Jim Tracy, his hands on his hips and his feet rather wide apart, stood looking on in silence.

Frank spent the greater part of an hour about his task, impressing Tracy as an assistant, and when he had finished two of the ruffian's fingers and a part of the third were gone, but the amputation and dressing had been done in a manner that was anything but bungling. Frank had been as careful as possible to preserve cleanliness about his work.

"Well, you're certain a wonder!" exclaimed Tracy admiringly. "But you makes a big mistake in wastin' so much trouble on a dog like this."

Anson did not retort, save with a sullen flash of his treacherous eyes in the direction of the foreman.

"Permit me to know my business, Tracy," said Merry shortly. "You may go now, Anson."

"What? You're not going to let him go where he likes?"

"Yes."

So Hop Anson walked out of the cabin, picked up his rifle, and disappeared.

"I don't want to criticise you, Mr. Merriwell," said the foreman. "You know I am devoted to your interests. But I feel confident that you will be very sorry you treated that man in such a decent way and then let him off. He's a snake. I still believe he crept up to the door to shoot you in the

back."

"Perhaps he did," nodded Frank, cleansing his instruments with the utmost coolness. "If so, he got the worst of it."

"But would you let him off like that if you knew it was so?"

"No. He swore it was not. I had no proof, so I let him go."

"You're altogether too easy with your enemies," asserted Tracy. "Just you turn them over to me. I'll take care of them, and they'll never bother you again, be right sure of that."

"I'll think about it," smiled Frank, returning the instruments to the case.

"You came mighty near being killed by that greaser because you were easy with him."

"And my life was saved by Big Monte because I had been easy with him. That balances things, I fancy. In fact, for me, it more than balances things. I'd rather let a dozen bad men escape punishment than strike one who is innocent."

"But neither Big Monte nor Pinto Pede was innocent."

"And Pinto Pede provided a subject with which to start a graveyard here. Big Monte seemed repentant. Pede would have knifed me, but Monte shot him just as he was ready to strike."

"Well, where's Big Monte now?"

"I don't know," confessed Frank.

"He skipped out."

"Sure thing. He took a walk the first chance he got."

"And it's certain he's gone back to his pals. When they strike at you ag'in, if they do, Monte will be with 'em."

"All right. Perhaps he has an idea he'll be fighting fair that way."

"And he may kill you yet."

"Possibly."

"Well," said Tracy, "I must admit that I don't understand you none whatever! Hop Anson left his work, got a rifle and came sneakin' up to your door. You shoots him in the hand, then doctors him and lets him go. That's right peculiar. But I have him to deal with somewhat, and I propose to deal. If you hear before night that Hop has hopped the divide don't be any surprised."

Tracy seemed about to depart.

"Look here," said Frank, "before you go, I have some things to say. Unless Hop Anson gives you good and sufficient cause, you are not to lift your hand against him. I don't want any shooting to get started here at the mine. I want these men to dwell together peaceably. The first shooting is likely to lead to other work in the same line."

"You're too much against such things," said Tracy; "and still I notice you don't hesitate any whatever to use a gun at times."

"When forced to it; never at any other time. I am decidedly against it. It would be dead easy to start an affair here that would lead to disturbances that might get the men to quarreling. That would put the men in condition to revolt, and an assault upon the mine would find us weakened. I trust you, Tracy, to be careful about this matter. Much depends on you. You have proved satisfactory in every way."

"Thankee," said the foreman, somewhat awkwardly. "I've tried to do my best, sir."

"That is all I ask of any man. That is all any man can do. You should understand why I wish no disturbance. But, at the same time, let me warn you to watch Hop Anson closely—for your own benefit. If you have to do any shooting, well and good."

"I think I understand," said Tracy, as he walked out. At the door he paused and half-turned, as if to say something more. Already Frank was facing the little mirror on the wall, ready to resume his shaving. He stood exactly as he had stood when he shot at Anson, and his revolver lay on the shelf beneath the mirror.

Tracy went on.

CHAPTER XI.

SMOKE SIGNALS AND A DECOY.

Frank grew restless. On the day following the shooting of Anson he called Tracy and said:

"Tracy, I want you to keep your eyes open and be on your guard while I am away."

"Are you going away, sir?" asked the foreman.

"Yes."

"For a long time?"

"That is uncertain. I may return by night, and I may not be back for several days."

The foreman looked as if he wished to ask where Frank thought of going, but held himself in check.

"I wish to satisfy myself if any of my enemies are in this vicinity," said Merriwell. "I leave things in your hands here, and I believe I can trust you."

"You can, sir, fully."

Merry attended to the saddling of his horse. When he rode forth from the mine he was well armed and prepared for almost anything. Behind him the roar of the ore-crushers died out, and he passed into the silence of the mountains.

Not an hour had passed when he was somewhat surprised to see before him from an elevated point a big, ball-like cloud of dark smoke rising into the sky.

"That's odd," was his immediate decision.

He stopped his horse and watched the smoke as it ascended and grew thinner. It was followed by another ball of smoke as he watched, and after this came still another.

Then Frank turned in the saddle, looking in various directions. Some miles behind him three distinct and separate clouds of smoke seemed to be mounting into the sky from another high elevation.

"If those are not smoke signals," said Frank, "I'm a chump! In that case, it's likely I'll have Indians to deal with if I keep on. Perhaps I'd better turn back."

For something told him that he was the object of those signals, and this was an Indian method of communication. He sat still for some time, watching the smoke fade in the upper air, which it did slowly. At last, however, it was gone, and the clear atmosphere held no black signal of danger.

Frank's curiosity was aroused. He longed to know the meaning of those signals. Having looked to his weapons, he rode on slowly, keenly on the alert.

Coming through a narrow gorge into a valley that looked barren enough, he suddenly snatched forth a revolver and cried:

"Halt, there! Stop, or—Why, it's a woman!"

For he had seen a figure hastily seeking concealment amid some boulders. At sound of his voice the figure straightened up and turned toward him.

Then he was more amazed than ever, for he saw a dark-faced Mexican girl, wearing a short skirt and having about her neck a scarlet handkerchief. Her head was bare, and her dark hair fell over her shoulders. She looked like a frightened fawn.

No wonder he was astonished to behold such a vision in that desolate part of the mountains. She seemed trembling, yet eager, and she started to advance toward him.

"Oh, señor!" she said, in a voice that was full of soft music, "eet mus' be you are good man! Eet mus' be you are not bad an' weeked. You would not hurt Gonchita?"

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Merry, at once putting up his revolver.

At which she came running and panting up to him, all in a flutter of excitement.

"Oh, *Madre de Dios!* I am so much happeeness! I have de great fear when you I do see. Oh, you weel come to heem? You weel do for heem de saveeng?"

The girl was rather pretty, and she was not more than eighteen or nineteen years of age. She was tanned to a dark brown, but had white teeth, which were strangely pointed and sharp.

"Who do you mean?"

"My fadare. *Ay-de mi!* he ees hurt! De bad men shoot heem. They rob heem! He find de gold. He breeng me with heem here to de mountain, all alone. He theenk some time he be vera reech. He have de reech mine. Then de bad men come. They shoot heem. They take hees gold. He come creep back to me. What can I to do? *Ay-de mi!*"

"Your father—some bad men have shot him?" said Merry.

"*Si, si, señor!*"

"It must have been Cimarron Bill's gang," thought Merry.

The girl was greatly excited, but he continued to question her, until he understood her quite well.

"Is he far from here?" he asked.

"No, not de very far. You come to heem? Mebbe you do for heem some good. Weel you come?"

She had her brown hands clasped and was looking most beseechingly into Frank's face.

"Of course I'll come," he said. "You shall show me the way. My horse will carry us both."

He assisted her to mount behind him, and told her to cling about his waist.

Frank continued to question Gonchita, who sometimes became almost unintelligible in her excitement and distress. They passed through the valley and turned into a rocky gorge. Frank asked if it was much farther.

"We be almost to heem now," assured Gonchita.

Almost as the words left her lips the heads of four or five men appeared above some boulders just ahead, and as many rifles were leveled straight at Frank's heart, while a well-known, triumphant voice shouted:

"I've got you dead to rights, Merriwell! If you tries tricks you gits soaked good and plenty!"

At the same moment the girl threw her arms about Frank's body, pinning his arms to his sides, so that he could make no move to draw a weapon.

Merry knew on the instant that he had been trapped. He realized that he had been decoyed into the snare by the Mexican girl. He might have struggled and broken her hold, but he realized the folly of such an attempt.

"Be vera steel, señor!" hissed the voice of Gonchita in his ear. "Eet be bet-are."

"You have betrayed me," said Frank reproachfully. "I did not think it of you. And I was ready to do you a service."

He said no more to her.

Out from the rocks stepped Cimarron Bill.

"So we meet again, my gay young galoot," said the chief of the ruffians. "An' I reckon you'll not slip me so easy this time. That old Injun o' yours is food fer buzzards, an' so he won't give ye no assistance whatever."

"Old Joe——" muttered Merry, in dismay.

"Oh, we finished him!" declared Bill. "That's why you ain't seen him fer some time. Set stiddy, now, an' don't make no ruction."

"Gonchita, toss down his guns."

The Mexican girl obeyed, slipping to the ground with a laugh when she had disarmed Frank.

The ruffians now came out from the shelter of the rocks and gathered about the youth, grinning at him in a most provoking manner. He recognized several of the same fellows who had once before acted as guard over him. Red Sam was there, and nodded to him.

"You're a right slick poker-player," said the sandy rascal; "but we 'lowed a girl'd fool ye easy. Goncheeter done it, too."

Frank nodded.

"She did," he confessed. "I was taken off my guard. But you want to look out for Indians."

"Why for?"

Merry then told them of the smoke signals, whereupon they grinned at one another knowingly.

"That'll be all right," said Bill. "Them signals told us when you was comin', an' which way."

"Then you were doing the signaling?"

"Some o' the boys."

Frank was then ordered down and searched. He appeared utterly fearless. He observed that Gonchita was watching him closely, a strange look in her eyes, her lips slightly parted, showing her milky, pointed teeth.

When the men were satisfied that no weapon remained in the possession of their captive, two or three of them drew aside to consult, while the others guarded Frank.

Cimarron Bill patted Gonchita's cheek with his hand.

"Well done, leetle gal!" he said. "You fooled him powerful slick."

She smiled into Bill's eyes, but in another moment, the chief, having turned away, she was watching Frank again.

The result of the consultation led to the placing of Merry on his own horse, and he was guarded

by the armed men who escorted him along the gorge until they came to a place where two men were watching a number of waiting horses.

Then there was mounting and riding away, with Frank in the midst of his triumphant enemies. Gonchita rode with them, having a wiry little pony that seemed able to cope with any of the other horses.

Frank was not a little disgusted because he had been decoyed into the trap, but he did his best to hide his feelings.

It was some hours later that they halted to rest until the heat of the day should pass. A fire was built, and a meal prepared, Gonchita taking active part in this work.

Frank sat near and watched all that was passing. He had not been bound, and his manner was that of one free amid the scoundrels by whom he was surrounded. It was Gonchita who found an opportunity to whisper in his ear:

"Be vera careful! Dey mean to shoot you eef you try de escape."

He did not start or betray any emotion whatever. It hardly seemed that he had heard her whispered words. Later, however, he gave her a look which conveyed to her the assurance that he had not failed to understand.

As she worked about the fire she called upon him to replenish it with more fuel, which he did. He was putting wood on the fire when she again whispered to him:

"I weel drop by you a peestol. Tak' eet; you may need eet."

He made no retort, but watched for her to keep her promise, which she afterward found opportunity to do.

Merry was lying carelessly on the ground when the weapon, a tiny revolver, was dropped at his side. Immediately he rolled over upon his stomach, in a lazy fashion, hiding the weapon, and shortly after he succeeded in slipping it into his pocket.

Frank wondered how this strange girl happened to be with those ruffians. It seemed a most remarkable and mysterious thing. He also wondered why she had been led to give him the pistol. Having led him into the trap, she had suddenly changed so that she now seemed to wish him to escape without harm.

The truth was that his coolness and nerve, together with his handsome, manly appearance, had quite won Gonchita's heart. She was a changeable creature, and had quickly come to regret leading this handsome youth into such a snare.

When the food was prepared all partook heartily. Two of the men, a big fellow with an evil face, called Brazos Tom, and a thick-shouldered brute hailed as Mike Redeye, had been drinking freely from a flask. Brazos Tom was given to chaffing the others in a manner that some of them did not appreciate, and this inclination grew upon him with the working of the liquor. Redeye was a sullen, silent fellow, and Frank regarded him as a very dangerous man.

Once or twice Cimarron Bill gave Tom a look, and, at last, the big fellow seemed to quiet down.

After the meal, while the men were yet resting, Bill had his horse saddled for some reason, and rode away, having left the men in charge of Red Sam.

As soon as the chief was gone, Brazos Tom brought forth his flask, which was now nearly emptied.

"Gents," he said, "while we is waitin' we'll finish this an' try a hand at poker. Wot d'yer say?"

"Oh, blazes!" growled one. "You an' Mike has purt' near finished that. Thar ain't enough left fer a drap apiece if we pass it around."

"Drink up your stuff," said Red Sam. "It's poor firewater, anyhow. I'm fer the poker. Does you come inter this yere game, young gent, same as ye did oncet before?"

This question was addressed to Frank, but Merry already "smelled a mouse," and so it did not need the warning look from Gonchita and the slight shake of her head to deter him.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have no money."

"Waal, fish some out o' the linin' o' your clothes, same as you did afore," advised Sam.

"But I have none in the lining of my clothes."

"I begs yer pardon, but we knows a heap sight better. Don't try no monkey business with us, younker! You was good enough ter git inter a game oncet before an' try ter show us up, so we gives ye another chanct, an' ye'd better accept it in a hurry."

"I hardly think I have a friend here who will be willing to lend me money," smiled Merry. "Unless somebody does so, I cannot play. That being the case, I reckon I'll keep out of it."

Sam laid a hand on the butt of his revolver.

"You can't play none of that with us!" he declared fiercely. "We knows how you found the money

afore, an' you'll find it ag'in. Come, be lively."

Frank looked the man over.

"You could get blood from a turnip easier than money from me," he declared.

Then, as Red Sam seemed about to draw his weapon, Gonchita chipped in, crying:

"Don't do it, Sam! I have you cover' weez my peestol! I weel shoot!"

The men were astonished, for Gonchita had drawn a pistol and had it pointed at the head of Red Sam, while in her dark eyes there was a deadly gleam.

"What in blazes is the matter with you?" snarled Red Sam, looking at her over his shoulder.

"You hear what Gonchita say," she purred, a flush in her brown cheeks. "She mena de busineeze."

Frank could not help admiring her then, for she presented a very pretty picture.

Reluctantly Sam thrust back his weapon into his holster.

"Oh, all right!" he laughed coarsely. "I see you're stuck up a heap on the feller."

"You not to shoot heem while I am around."

"Whoop!" roared Brazos Tom, in apparent delight. "Thar's a gal fer ye! I shore admires her style!"

Then, being in a position to do so, he sprang on Gonchita, caught her in his strong arms so she could not defend herself, and gave her a bearlike hug and a kiss.

The next instant something like a hard piece of iron struck Tom behind the ear and he measured his length on the ground. Frank Merriwell had reached his feet at a bound, and hit the giant a blow that knocked him down in a twinkling.

Through all this Gonchita had held fast to her drawn revolver, and now she had it ready for use, so that, when those ruffians placed hands on their weapons, she again warned them.

At the same time she flung herself between them and Frank, so that he was partly protected as he stood over Brazos Tom, who lay prone and dazed.

"Take hees peestols!" she palpitated.

And Frank followed this piece of advice, relieving the fallen ruffian of his revolvers, so that Tom's hand reached vainly for one of the weapons as he began to recover.

"Eef you make de fight," said the girl to the ruffians, "we now gif you eet all you want."

Never before had they seen her in such a mood, and they were astounded. But they knew she could shoot, for they had seen her display her marksmanship.

"You little fool!" grated Sam. "Are you goin' to help that galoot try to git erway?"

"No, I do not dat; but I see he ees not hurt till Beel he come back."

Then she commanded Frank to throw down the pistol he had taken from Tom, which Merry did, knowing there was no chance for him to escape then without a shooting affray, in which he was almost certain to be wounded.

Immediately on this act of Frank's the ruffians seemed to abandon any desire to draw and shoot at him.

But Brazos Tom rose in a great rage, almost frothing at the mouth.

"Ten thousan' tarantulas!" he howled. "Let me git my paws on him!"

He made a rush for Frank, who seemed to stand still to meet him, but stepped aside just as the ruffian tried to fold him in his arms.

Then the big wretch was somehow caught about the body, lifted into the air, and sent crashing to the ground, striking on his head and shoulders. The young athlete from Yale handled Brazos Tom with such ease that every witness was astounded.

The big fellow lay where he fell, stunned and finished.

Gonchita looked at Frank with a light of the most intense admiration in her dark eyes.

"How you do eet so easee?" she asked.

"That's nothing, with a bungler like him to meet," said Merry quietly.

The ruffians said nothing, but exchanged meaning glances. They had been foiled for the time being by the girl and by the cleverness of their captive.

LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS.

Four persons were lost in the mountains. Three of them were young men who were scarcely more than youths. All were mounted on broncos.

One was a bright-eyed, apple-cheeked chap, who had an odd manner of talking, and who emphasized his words with little gestures and flirts of his hand that were very peculiar. Another was dark and silent, with a face that was decidedly handsome, although it denoted a person given more or less to brooding and morbid thoughts. The third youth was long and lank and talked with a nasal drawl and a manner of speech that proclaimed him a down-easter.

These three were respectively Jack Ready, Bart Hodge, and Ephraim Gallup, all friends and former companions of Frank Merriwell.

The fourth one of the party was a red-nosed bummer, known as Whisky Jim, whom they had picked up to guide them from the little railroad-town to Frank Merriwell's mine. Jim had averred that he knew "every squar' foot o' Arizony frum the Grand Cañon to the Mexican line," and they had trusted in his promise to lead them, with the smallest possible delay, to the Queen Mystery Mine.

Jim would not acknowledge that he was lost. They had provided him with the bronco he bestrode and promised him good pay when they should come to the mine. He had collected enough in advance to "outfit" with a liberal supply of whisky, and had managed to keep beautifully loaded ever since they rode out to the Southwest.

Their horses were wearied and reluctant, while they were sun-scorched and covered with dust.

"By gum!" groaned Gallup. "I'm purty near pegged! This is too much fer me. I wish I was to hum on the farm!"

"Prithee say not so!" cried Ready. "You give unto me that feeling of sadness known to those who are homesick. Ah, me! to endure thus to have my beautiful complexion destroyed by this horrid sun! And behold my lily-white hands! Are they not spectacles to make the gods sigh with regret! Permit me to squeeze out a few salt teardrops."

Hodge was saying nothing.

"Sall ri', boysh," assured the useless guide thickly. "Jesht you wait an' shee. Whazzer mazzer with you? I know m' bushiness. Who shays I dunno m' bushiness?"

He was able to sit perfectly straight in the saddle, although he was disgustingly intoxicated.

"I say you don't know your business, you old fool!" said Hodge, breaking out at last. "It would serve you right if we were to leave you here in the mountains. A great guide you are! You'd die if we left you! You'd never find your way out."

Jim looked astonished. This was the first time Bart had broken forth thus plainly.

"You don't mean it?" he gurgled.

"You bet your life I meant it! I'm in for leaving you to get back to town the best way you can."

"Oh, don't do that!" exclaimed Jim, sobered somewhat by his alarm. "Someshin' might happen t' you, boysh."

"Let's leave him," nodded Jack Ready, amused by the consternation of the old fellow.

"Derned ef we don't!" cried Gallup.

Upon which the "guide" became greatly alarmed, begging them for the love of goodness not to leave him there in the mountains to die alone.

"But you're a guide," said Hodge. "You would be able to get out all right."

"Boysh," said the old toper, "I got a 'fession to make."

"What is it?"

"I ain't been in the guidin' bushiness for shome time. I'm a leetle rusty; jest a bit out o' practish. That's whazzer mazzer."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? What made you lie to us?"

"Boysh, I needed the moneysh. Hones' Injun, I needed the moneysh bad. Been a long time shince I've had all the whisky I could hold. Great treat f' me."

Bart was disgusted, but Jack Ready was inclined to look at the affair in a humorous light.

"I'd like to know the meaning of those smoke clouds we saw," said Hodge. "They looked mighty queer to me."

They consulted together, finally deciding to halt in a shadowy valley and wait for the declining of the sun, which would bring cooler air.

They confessed to one another that they were lost, and all felt that the situation was serious. It

was not at all strange that Hodge was very angry with the worthless old toper who had led them into this predicament.

"We may never get out of these mountains," he said. "Or, if we do, we may perish in the desert. I tell you, fellows, we're in a bad scrape!"

"Dear me!" sighed Ready. "And I anticipated great pleasure in surprising Merry to-day. Alas and alack! such is life. I know this dreadful sunshine will spoil my complexion!"

Gallup looked dolefully at the horses, which were feeding on the buffalo-grass of the valley.

"We're a pack of darn fools!" he observed. "We'd oughter sent word to Frankie that we was comin', an' then he'd bin on hand to meet us."

The "guide" had stretched himself in the shadow of some boulders and fallen fast asleep.

"I suppose I'm to blame for this thing, fellows," said Bart grimly. "It was my scheme to take Merry by surprise."

"Waal, I ruther guess all the rest of us was reddy enough ter agree to it," put in Gallup. "We're jest ez much to blame as you be."

They talked the situation over for a while. Finally Bart rose and strolled off by himself, Gallup calling after him to look out and not go so far that he could not find his way back.

Hodge was gone almost an hour. His friends were growing alarmed, when he came racing back to them, his face flushed with excitement and his eyes flashing.

"Come, fellows!" he cried, his voice thrilling them. "I've got something to show you! We're wanted mighty bad by a friend of ours who is in trouble!"

They were on their feet.

"Who in thutteration be you talkin' abaout?" asked Gallup.

"Perchance you mean Frank?" said Ready.

"You bet your life!" said Bart. "Make sure your rifles are in working order! Leave the horses right where they're picketed. Leave Jim with them. He'll look after them, if he awakes."

For Whisky Jim continued to sleep soundly through all this.

So they seized their weapons and prepared to follow Bart.

As they ran, Bart made a brief explanation. He had climbed to a point from whence he looked down into a grassy valley, and there he discovered some horses and men. The horses were feeding, and the men were reclining in the shade, with the exception of one or two. While Bart looked he recognized one of the men, and also saw a girl. At first he thought he must be deceived, but soon he was satisfied that the one he recognized was the comrade he had traveled thousands of miles to join, bringing with him Ready and Gallup.

As he watched, he saw the encounter between Merry and Brazos Tom, and that was enough to satisfy Hodge that his friend was in serious trouble. Then he hastened back to get Jack and Ephraim.

When Bart again reached the point where he could look into that valley he was astonished to discover that another struggle was taking place down there.

Frank was engaged in a knife-duel with Red Sam, having been forced into it. And Red Sam meant to kill him.

The watching ruffians were gathered around, while Gonchita, a pistol in her hand, was watching to see that the youth had fair play.

Without doubt, the sandy ruffian had expected to find Merriwell easy, and finish him quickly in an engagement of this sort. But Frank Merriwell had been instructed in knife-play by a clever expert, and he soon amazed Red Sam and the other ruffians by meeting the fellow's assault, catching his blade, parrying thrust after thrust, leaping, dodging, turning, charging, retreating, and making such a wonderful contest of it that the spectators were electrified.

It was Frank's knife that drew first blood. He slit the ruffian's sleeve at the shoulder and cut the man slightly.

Gonchita's dark eyes gleamed. More than ever she marveled at this wonderful youth, who seemed more than a match for any single ruffian of Bill's band.

"He is a wonder!" she told herself. "Oh, he is grand! They meant to kill him. If he beats Red Sam they shall not kill him."

Sam swore when he felt the knife clip his shoulder.

"I'll have your heart's blood!" he snarled.

Frank smiled into his face in a manner that enraptured the watching girl.

"You are welcome to it—if you can get it! But look out for yourself!"

Then he began a whirlwindlike assault upon Sam, whom he soon bewildered by his movements. He played about the man like a leaping panther. Once Sam struck hard at Frank's breast, and Merry leaped away barely in time, for the keen knife slit the front of his shirt, exposing the clean white skin beneath.

But again and again Frank cut the big ruffian slightly, so that soon Sam was bleeding from almost a dozen wounds and slowly growing weaker in spite of his efforts to brace up.

The knives sometimes flashed together. The men stood and stared into each other's eyes. Then they leaped and dodged and struck and struck again.

Little did Frank dream of the friends who were watching him from above.

Bart Hodge was thrilled into silence by the spectacle. He knelt, with his rifle ready for instant use, panting as the battle for life continued.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" gurgled Ephraim Gallup, his eyes bulging. "Did you ever see anything like that in all your natteral born days? Dern my squash ef I ever did!"

"It is beautiful!" said Jack Ready. "Frank is doing almost as well as I could do myself! I'll have to compliment him on his clever work."

Twice Bart Hodge had the butt of his rifle against his shoulder, but lowered it without firing.

"He's gittin' the best of the red-headed feller!" panted Gallup.

"Of course!" nodded Ready. "Did you look for anything else to happen?"

"Them men don't like it much of enny."

"They do not seem greatly pleased."

"I bet they all go fer him if he does the red-head up."

"In which case," chirped Jack, "it will be our duty to insert a few lead pills into them."

Bart was not talking. He believed Frank in constant danger of a most deadly sort, and he was watching every move of the ruffians, ready to balk any attempt at treachery.

As Sam weakened Frank pressed him harder. The fellow believed Merry meant to kill him, if possible.

At length Merriwell caught Sam's blade with his own, gave it a sudden twist, and the fellow's knife was sent spinning through the air, to fall to the ground at a distance.

At that moment one of the ruffians suddenly flung up a hand that held a revolver, meaning to shoot Frank through the head.

Before he could fire, however, he pitched forward on his face.

Down from the heights above came the clear report of the rifle in the hands of Bartley Hodge.

Bart had saved the life of his old friend.

CHAPTER XIII.

FRANK'S ESCAPE.

As the ruffian pitched forward on his face, Gonchita uttered a cry. The attention of the men was turned toward the point from which the unexpected shot had come. The Mexican girl caught hold of Merry, thrust a pistol into his hand, and hissed:

"Back—back there! Quick! It's your chance! You take eet!"

Frank did not hesitate. With the pistol in his hand, he went leaping toward the point of cover indicated. He was behind the rocks before the desperadoes realized what had taken place. They turned, uttering exclamations of anger and dismay.

"Steady, you chaps!" rang out Frank's clear voice. "Keep your distance! If you don't——"

But now the three young fellows above began shooting into the valley, and their whistling bullets sent the ruffians scudding to cover.

Gonchita disdained to fly. She walked deliberately to the shelter of the rocks near Frank.

"I geet horse for you," she said. "You take eet an' ride. Eet ees your chance. Mebbe them your friend?"

Frank had caught barely a glimpse of the three fellows, and he was not at all sure that his eyes had not deceived him.

"Perhaps they are my friends," he said. "They must be."

"You ready to go?"

"Yes."

She ran out and pulled the picket pin of one of the horses. This animal she brought up close to the point where Frank crouched.

"Take heem queek!" she panted. "You haf de chance! Down de vallee. Mebbe you git 'way."

Frank hesitated. He knew the danger of such an attempt. He no longer doubted the friendliness of Gonchita, although the remarkable change in her was most astonishing.

But the firing from above continued, and the ruffians were forced to again take to their heels and seek still safer shelter farther up the valley.

That was Merry's opportunity, and he seized it. In a twinkling, while the rascals were in confusion, he leaped upon the bare back of the horse, headed the animal down the valley, and was off.

A yell came down from above; but Frank, bending low, did not answer it.

Two or three bullets were sent after him. He was untouched, however.

Gonchita had armed him with two pistols, neither of which he had used. One he held gripped in his hand as the horse carried him tearing down the valley, and thus he came full upon Cimarron Bill, who was returning to his satellites.

Bill was astounded. He had drawn a pistol, and he fired at the rider who was stooping low along the neck of the horse. The animal tossed its head and took the bullet in his brain.

Even as the horse fell, Frank fired in return. He flung himself from the animal, striking on his feet.

Bill's horse reared high in the air, striking with its forward feet. The rider leaned forward and fired from beneath the creature's neck as it stood on its hind legs, but the movements of the animal prevented him from accuracy.

Merry's second shot struck the hind leg of Bill's horse, and the creature came down in such a manner that its rider was pitched off, striking upon his head and shoulders.

Frank did not fire again, for Bill lay in a heap on the ground. The horse struggled up, being caught by Merry. Frank looked to the beast's wound, fearing to find its leg broken. This, however, was not the case, although the bullet had made a rather ugly little wound.

In another moment Frank was in Bill's saddle, and away he went on the back of the chief's horse, leaving the stunned rascal where he had fallen.

"An exchange of horses," he half-laughed. "You may have my dead one in place of your wounded one. If you do not like the bargain, Captain Bill, blame yourself."

He was in no great fear of pursuit, but he longed to know just what friends had come to his rescue at such an opportune moment. How was he to reach them?

When he felt that he was safe, he drew up Bill's splendid horse, dismounted and examined the bleeding wound. It was far less serious than he had feared, and he proceeded to dress it, tearing his handkerchief into strips to tie about the creature's leg.

Having attended to his horse, Merry remounted and sought to find a means of approaching the spot from which his unknown friends had fired into the valley at such an opportune moment.

He was thus employed when he came upon a most disreputable-looking old bummer, who had in his possession four horses. This man was startled by the appearance of Merriwell and acted very strangely.

Frank rode slowly forward, ready for whatever might take place. However, he was recognized by the man, who uttered a shout of astonishment.

The man with the horses was Whisky Jim, who had awakened to find his companions gone.

He greeted Merriwell with protestations of delight.

"I knew I wash a guide!" he said. "Who shed I washn't guide? I shed I'd bring 'em to Frank Merriwell, an' I done it. But whazzer mazzet? Where zey gone? I dunno."

Barely had Merry started to question the old toper when Hodge, Ready, and Gallup appeared, hurrying forward. When they saw Merriwell they gave a cheer of delight, and, one minute later, they were shaking hands with him.

"What does this mean?" asked Frank, when he could recover enough to ask anything.

"It means," said Bart, "that we are here to back you up in your fight against the mining trust. You can depend on us to stand by you. After getting your letter, in which you wrote all about the hot time you were having fighting the trust, I hastened to get hold of Ready and Gallup and light out

for this part of our great and glorious country. Here we are, though we're dead in luck to find you, for this drunken duffer managed to lose us here in the mountains."

"And you were the ones who chipped in just at the right time after my little encounter with Red Sam? Fellows, you have given me the surprise of my life! It's great to see you again! I ran into those gents, or was led into a trap by a very singular girl, and it looked as if I was in a bad box. The girl, however, seemed to change her mind after getting me into the scrape, and she wanted to get me out. I owe her a lot. But there is no telling when Cimarron Bill and his gang may come hiking this way after me, so I propose that we light out for the Queen Mystery, where we can talk things over at our leisure."

They were ready enough to follow his lead.

Jim Tracy sat with his feet elevated upon Frank Merriwell's table, smoking his pipe and talking to Hop Anson, who was on the opposite side of the table when the door opened and Frank stepped in, followed by his friends, with Whisky Jim staggering along in the rear.

Tracy's boots came down from the table with a thud, and he jumped up, uttering an exclamation and looking astounded.

"Well, may I be derved!" he said, staring at Frank.

Now Merriwell was not at all pleased to find the foreman making free in his cabin in such a manner.

"What's the matter, Tracy?" he asked sharply, glancing from Jim's face to that of Anson, who seemed no less confounded. "You seem disturbed."

"I allow I didn't expect ye back so soon," mumbled the foreman, who could not recover his composure at once.

"But I told you I might be back in a few hours, or I might not return for many days."

"I know, but——"

"But what?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"It's plain you were making yourself quite at home here. What were you doing with Anson?"

"Jest givin' him a piece o' my mind," answered Tracy promptly. "I reckon he knows now purty well what I think of him."

Now to Merry, it had seemed on his appearance that these two men were engaged in a confidential chat.

"Well, couldn't you find some other place to talk to him?" Frank asked.

"I brought him here so the rest of the boys wouldn't hear us," explained Tracy. "I opined they might take a right strong dislike to him in case they found out what happened this mornin'."

"You have not told them?"

"No."

"Well, your consideration for Anson seems very strange, considering the talk you made to-day at an earlier hour."

"I'm jest follerin' your orders," protested the foreman, not at all pleased by Merry's manner.

"Very well. You may retire, Tracy. Boys, make yourselves at home."

As Tracy and Anson were going out, the eyes of the latter encountered those of Whisky Jim, who was surveying him closely in a drunken manner.

"Who are you lookin' at?" muttered Anson.

"Sheems to me," said Jim thickly, "I'm a-lookin' at a gent what had shome deeficulty down Tucson way 'bout takin' a hoss what b'longed to nozzer man."

"You're a liar, you drunken dog!" grated Anson, as he hastened from the cabin.

"Do you know that man?" asked Merry, of Jim.

"Sh!" hissed the toper, with a cautioning gesture. "I don't want 't gener'lly know I ever shaw him before. He'sh a hosh-thief. He'd shteat anything, he would. I never 'nowledge him ash 'quaintance of mine."

"Do you know the other man, my foreman?"

"Sheems to look ruzer nacheral," said Jim; "but can't 'zactly plashe him. All shame, if he keeps comp'ny wish that hosh-thief, you look out f' him."

Frank celebrated his safe return to the mine in company with his friends by preparing a rather elaborate spread, and all gathered about the table to enjoy it and chat about old times and the

present fight Merry was making against the mining trust.

"Waal, dinged if this ain't scrumpshus!" cried Ephraim Gallup. "I'm feelin' a hanged sight better than I was when we was lost out in the maountains this arternoon."

"Fellows," said Merry, "you have given me the surprise of my life. I never dreamed of seeing you at such a time. And Bart's shot saved my life. I know it! I owe him everything!"

There was a glow of satisfaction in the dark eyes of Hodge.

"You owe me nothing," he said earnestly. "Whatever I am I owe it to you. Do you think I am a fellow to forget? That is why I am here. I felt that this was the time for me to prove my loyalty. When I explained it to Ephraim and Jack they were eager to come with me to back you in your fight. If you need them, you can have any of the old gang. They'll come to a man."

"Thus far," said Merry, "I have been able to balk every move of the enemy. They have employed ruffians who hesitate at nothing. You saw the fellow with the bandaged hand who was here with my foreman? Well, it was this very morning, while I was shaving at that glass, that he crept up to that open door and tried to shoot me in the back. I fired first, and he has lost a few fingers."

"Dear me!" said Ready. "I'm so frightened! What if somebody should take a fancy to shoot me full of holes! It might damage me beyond repair!"

"Gol ding it!" chuckled Gallup. "You must be havin' enough to keep you al-fired busy around here. But what is that chap a-doin' of stayin' here?"

Frank explained fully about Hop Anson, adding that he had partly believed Anson's statement that it was the foreman for whom he was looking.

"But since coming back here unexpectedly," said Merry, "and finding them together in such a friendly fashion, I am inclined to think differently. Tracy pretended to have a powerful feeling against Anson. Something leads me to believe now that Tracy will bear watching."

They sat up until a late hour talking over old times and other matters that interested them all. When they slept they took pains to make sure that the door and windows were secured.

Whisky Jim slept outside in another building.

CHAPTER XIV.

MYSTERIOUS PABLO.

The following morning, while Frank and his friends were at breakfast, there came the sounds of a struggle outside the cabin, followed by a knock on the door.

Merry drew a revolver and laid it in his lap.

"Come in," he called.

The door was flung open, and Tracy entered, dragging by the collar a small Mexican lad, who held back and betrayed every evidence of terror.

"Found him skulking about, Mr. Merriwell," said the foreman. "Don't know whar he come from. Just brought him yere fer you to deal with."

The boy seemed badly frightened.

"Let him go, Tracy," said Frank.

The boy hesitated when released, seeming on the point of running, but pausing to look appealingly at Merry. He was not a bad-looking little chap, although he was rather dirty and unkempt. He had wondrous dark eyes, big and full of interrogation.

"Well, my boy, what do you want?" asked Merry, in a kindly way.

The boy shook his head.

"I want notheenk de señor can gif," he answered, in a low tone.

"How came you around here?"

"I hunt for my seestar."

"Your sister?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"Where is she?"

"That I cannot tell, señor. She be take away by de bad man. He haf fool her, I t'ink."

"What bad man do you mean?"

"Seester call heem Beel."

"Bill?"

"Dat ees hees name."

"Bill what?"

The boy shook his head once more.

"I know eet not," he said. "He half manee man like heem who do what he say. He get my seester to go wif heem."

"What is your sister's name?"

"Eet ees Gonchita."

Frank jumped.

"Gonchita?" he cried.

"Dat ees eet," nodded the boy. "Mebbe you do know her?"

"I think I have seen her," said Merry. "By Jove! So this fellow Bill led her to run away with him, did he, the scoundrel? And you are searching for him. What will you do if you find him?"

"I cannot tell, but I want my seestar to come 'way an' leaf heem. He ees bad man."

"That's right. What's your name?"

"Pablo."

"Well, Pablo, my boy, I hope you find your sister all right and get her away from Bill, but you have a big job on your hands. Come here and have some breakfast. Are you hungry?"

"Oh, vera hungree, señor!"

"You shall have all you can eat. It's all right, Tracy. You may go. I'll take care of the kid."

"I wish to report, sir," said Tracy, "that Hop Anson is missing."

"What's that? Anson—he's gone?"

"Skipped out last night, sir. He was not to be found this morning. I thought he'd do it, sir."

"Well, let him go. I don't think he'll do much harm."

"If you had listened to me, I'd fixed him so he'd never done any further harm."

"All right, Tracy—all right. I'll see you later."

Tracy left the room.

"Look out for that man, Frank," said Hodge, in an ominous manner. "He is not to be trusted at all."

"All right," said Merry. "We'll not discuss him—now." Which remark was made with a meaning look toward the Mexican lad.

Pablo was given a place at the table and a steaming cup of coffee placed before him. Corn bread and bacon, with some canned stuff, made up the breakfast, and the boy ate almost ravenously of everything given him. But he kept his hat pulled low over his eyes all the while.

After breakfast Frank sought to question Pablo further, succeeding in drawing from the boy that both his father and mother were dead, and that he had lived in Holbrook with his sister, where she had seen Bill, who seemed to fascinate her. At least she had run away with the man, and, arming himself with a knife and pistol, Pablo had followed to rescue or avenge her. Chance had led him to the valley in which the Queen Mystery Mine was located.

It was rather a pathetic little story, and Merry was somewhat stirred by it.

"What could you do if you should find Bill?" he asked.

A grim look came to Pablo's soiled yet attractive face.

"I haf my peestol," he said.

"But Bill is a very bad man, and he would have a pistol, too."

"I do my best. I am not skeert of Beel."

"Well, as I happen to know something of Bill, I tell you now, Pablo, that it will be better for you if you never meet him."

"But my seestar—my seestar! I mus' find her."

Frank was tempted to tell the boy what he knew about Gonchita, but decided not to do so, believing it would be to no purpose.

So Pablo remained in the valley for the time, seeming in no hurry to continue the search for his sister. He wandered about the mine and the buildings, peering curiously at everything with his big eyes, listening to the talk of the men, and seeming to have a great curiosity.

All this was observed by Bart Hodge, who watched the lad as closely as possible. That afternoon Bart said to Frank:

"Merry, that greaser boy acts queer. Have you noticed it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, he told a story about being in a dreadful hurry to find his sister, but he hangs around here."

"I suppose the little chap doesn't know where to look for the girl."

"But he's such an inquisitive little rascal. He goes slipping around everywhere, looking at everything, and listening to the talk of the men. He acts to me like a spy."

"It's his way. Mexicans have a sneaking way about them, you know."

"Well, it may be his way, but I wouldn't trust him."

"I don't propose to trust him," said Frank, with a laugh. "I am not given to trusting greasers. It is probable that he will go away to-morrow and we'll never see anything more of him."

"Perhaps so."

"I expect to find him gone in the morning," said Merry.

But in the morning Pablo was found sleeping just outside Frank's door when Merry opened it. He lay there, his old hat pulled down over his ears, curled up like a dog; but he started wide-awake and sat up, staring at Merriwell with his big black eyes.

"What the dickens you doing here?" asked Frank, annoyed.

"I tak' de sleep," grinned Pablo faintly.

"Well, couldn't you find any other place? Have you been there all night?"

"Oh, I haf no odar place. Thees good for Pablo."

"Well, it may be all right for you; but it seems deuced uncomfortable to me. When are you going to look for Bill and your sister?"

"*Manana.*"

"To-morrow?"

"*Si, señor.*"

Frank could not refrain from smiling at this characteristic answer. With the Spaniards everything is to be done to-morrow, and the lazy Mexican, having adopted the language of the Spaniard, has also adopted his motto.

When Frank turned back he found Hodge washing.

"I told you," said Bart. "The fellow acts to me like a spy. It wouldn't surprise me to find out that he had been sent here by Bill. This story about his sister may be faked up."

"But I know Gonchita is with the ruffians."

"That's all right. That makes it all the easier to deceive you. That made the boy's story seem all the more probable. Just you watch him close and see if he doesn't act the spy."

"All right," laughed Merry. "But let's have breakfast without worrying about him."

It was necessary to drag Ready out.

"Oh, me! oh, my!" sighed Jack dolefully. "Methinks I have bestridden something that hath galled me extensively. I am likewise weary and sore in every limb and joint."

Gallup had stood the riding much better, but even he was lame.

After breakfast Frank went out and found Pablo curled in the sunshine around the corner of the hut. And not more than four feet from the Mexican lad was a rattlesnake.

The crack of the pistol in Frank's hand caused Pablo to start up with a jump. He stared in astonishment at Merry, who stood over him, holding the smoking pistol. Then he looked and saw the headless snake stretched on the ground.

"Oh, *Madre de Dios!*" he cried. "You shoot de snake! Mebbe you save me from de snake!"

"Perhaps so," nodded Frank, with a slight smile. "You had better be careful, for snakes are not all the dangerous things you will find on the ground."

Pablo made a spring and caught Frank's hand.

"To me you are so verree goode!" he said, kissing Merry's hand in a manner that surprised Frank somewhat.

Then he saw the pistol with which the snake had been shot.

"*Carrambo!*" he cried, in astonishment. "Where you geet eet? De peestol. Eet do belong to my seestar."

For Merry had shot the snake with the pistol given him by Gonchita.

"How you haf eet?" asked Pablo, with great eagerness. "Where you geet eet?"

Frank was fairly cornered. As a result, he sat down there and told the Mexican boy of his capture by Cimarron Bill's gang and of Gonchita.

"Then she be steel alife?" exclaimed Pablo. "Beel haf not keeled her!"

"He had not then."

"But she help you to geet away?"

"Yes."

"Then mebbe Beel be verree angry weeth her—mebbe he keel her! Eef he do that——"

"If he does he ought to be hanged! Pablo, Bill is sure to be hanged or shot before long, anyhow."

"But he tell Gonchita he mak' verree much monee. He say big men what can buy the law pay him much monee."

"I know what he means, Pablo. A lot of men have banded together to rob me of my mines, this one here and another in Mexico. They expected to do so with ease at first, but made a fizzle of it. They thought to take the mines from me by law; but now they know they cannot do that, and they have hired Bill and his ruffians to seize it. Those men are the ones who are paying Bill for his work. He expects they will protect him when it is done. He is looking for a pardon for all past offenses."

"But you weel not let him beat you?"

"Not if I can help it. He has failed thus far. He attacked the mine with his ruffians and was repulsed."

"De nex' time he do eet deeferent. He come een when you do not expect. Mebbe he geet somebody to gef de mine up to them."

"Nobody here," said Merry, with a laugh. "I can trust my men."

"You theenk so."

"Oh, I'm sure of it."

"One try to shoot you not long 'go."

"Yes. How did you learn of that?"

"Pablo have de ear. He hear something."

"What did you hear?"

"Dat man be paid to try de shoot."

"Look here, how do you know?"

"Oh, I hear some of de men talk. They all say they pritee sure of eet. How you like my seestar?"

The boy asked the question with such suddenness that Frank was a bit startled.

"I am sorry for her, Pablo. I'm sorry Bill has her in his hands."

"Oh, Beel he say he marree her; but I know he lie. Mebbe she know eet now. Beel want her to help heem. You theenk she verree bad girl?"

This question was put almost pathetically, Pablo again grasping Frank's hand and gazing wistfully into Merry's eyes.

"No; I do not think she is very bad."

"She do noteeng to make you theenk so?"

"Well, she fooled me somewhat at first by telling me a story about her wounded father. She had such an innocent way that I swallowed the yarn. That was how I fell into Bill's hands. I accompanied her to go, as I supposed, to her wounded father. She decoyed me into a trap."

"But afterward—afterward?" eagerly asked the boy.

"She seemed to change in a most remarkable manner, and helped me out of it. But for her, I fancy I'd surely been disposed of by those ruffians."

"Then you see she be not so verree bad. When she first see you mebbe she never seen you before. Mebbe she haf promeessed to Beel that she take you eento trap. Aftare she see you she be soree, and she want you to geet away."

"I think that was about the way things happened, Pablo."

"I am glad you do not theenk she ees so verree bad girl. What you do eef I breeng her here?"

"What would I do?"

"*Si señor*; how you like eet?"

Pablo was watching Frank's face closely.

"Why, I would do my best for her," said Merry. "I should feel it my duty after what she did for me."

"You would not be verree angree?"

"No."

"Nor verree please'?"

"Why, for your sake I would be pleased."

"But you never care for your own sake at all? You never want to see my seestar again?"

"I should be glad to see her and thank her."

"Dat ees all?"

"And to do her any other favor in my power. I am not ungrateful enough to forget what she did for me."

"Dat ees all?"

"What more do you want?" demanded Merry, in surprise.

"Notheeng," murmured Pablo regretfully, as he turned and walked away.

CHAPTER XV.

MERRY'S DISCOVERY.

The actions of Tracy seemed strangely suspicious to Merry, who undertook to watch the man, only to find that Pablo seemed to be watching him still more closely. Thus it happened that Merry followed the foreman up the valley and saw him meet another man at a point removed beyond view of the mine.

The man Tracy met was none other than Hop Anson, readily recognized at a distance by his bandaged hand.

"Something doing!" muttered Frank, as he crouched behind the rocks and watched the two. "Tracy wanted to lynch Anson. Now they meet like this, apparently by appointment. My foreman is playing some sort of a double game."

This point was settled in Frank's mind. He longed to be near enough to hear what was passing between the two, but could not reach such a position without exposing himself.

The men were suspicious that they might be watched. They did not remain there long. But Frank distinctly saw Anson give Tracy something, which the latter placed in his pocket. Then the foreman turned back, and Hop Anson vanished in the opposite direction.

Frank was tempted to step out and confront the foreman, demanding to know what it meant, but he chose to remain quiet and seek the truth in another manner. So he let Tracy pass.

But when the foreman had disappeared Merry sprang up and went racing after Hop Anson, hoping to run the rascal down. He came out where he could see far along a broad gorge, and there, riding into the distance, mounted on a good horse, was Anson. Frank knew the folly of trying further pursuit, so he stood still and watched the vanishing figure.

"I'd like to know just what it was that Hop Anson gave Tracy," he said, aloud.

Immediately, within less than twenty feet from him, Pablo, the Mexican boy, arose into view.

"I teel you what eet was," he said. "Eet was monee."

Frank was startled by this sudden appearance of the boy.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, I watch de Tracy man," returned the lad craftily. "I see something."

"Were you near enough to hear their talk?"

"Just a leetle beet."

"Ha! What was it? What did you hear?"

"De man with hurt hand he geef oder man monee. Oder man take eet. Say eet not enough. Must have two times more as much before he do something man with hurt hand want heem to do. Man with hurt hand mad. Eet do no goode. Oder man say breeng as much more twice over to heem at same place same time to-morrow."

It is needless to say that this revelation was intensely interesting to Merriwell.

"Why, Hop Anson has no money!" exclaimed Frank. "Where did he get it? It must have come from Bill. In that case, an attempt is being made to bribe my foreman. I have a traitor in the mine, and he means to deliver me into the hands of the enemy."

"Tracy man he say to man with hurt hand that Pablo, the brother of Gonchita, ees here."

"So Tracy told Anson that?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"Well, I think I need a new foreman—and need him bad! It is about time for Mr. Tracy to get out!"

"You wait and watch, you ketch heem."

It was arranged that Pablo should return in advance to the mine, in order that they might not be seen coming in together. So the Mexican boy strolled back with assumed carelessness.

But it happened that Jim Tracy was watching, and he saw Pablo, whereupon he hastened to meet the boy.

"Where have you been?" harshly demanded the foreman.

Pablo looked surprised.

"I go to tak' de walk," he said.

"You little liar!" snarled Tracy. "You have been playing the spy! I know what you have been doing!"

"De spyee—how you mean?"

The Mexican lad seemed very innocent.

"I've seen you sneaking around. Why are you hanging around here, anyhow? Why don't you get out?"

"Dat none of your busineeze," returned the lad saucily.

"You little runt!" growled Tracy, catching the boy by the shoulder. "Do you dare talk to me that way?"

"You beeg rufeen!" cried Pablo. "You hurt! Let of me a-go!"

Then he kicked the foreman on the shins. Immediately, with a roar of rage, Tracy struck Pablo with his fist, knocking the boy down.

Pablo was armed with a pistol, and this weapon he snatched out when he scrambled to his feet. But Tracy was on hand to clutch him and wrest the weapon from his grasp.

"You little devil!" grated the man. "I'll cut your throat on the spot!"

There was a terrible look in his eyes as he whipped out a knife and lifted it.

"Drop that!"

Crack!—the report of a revolver emphasized the command, and the bullet struck the knife and tore it from the hand of the aroused ruffian.

Frank Merriwell had arrived just in time to save Pablo, who was bent helplessly backward over Tracy's knee, the hand of the wretch being at his throat.

Tracy shook his benumbed and quivering hand, releasing the boy and looking at Frank resentfully.

"Oh, you're not badly hurt!" said Merry, as he strode up. "My lead struck the knife blade, not your hand. And I seemed to be barely in time, too."

"Oh, I wasn't going to hurt the kid!" declared Tracy harshly. "I was going to teach him a lesson, that was all. I wanted to frighten him a little."

"Well, your behavior looked remarkably bloodthirsty. You seemed on the point of drawing the knife across his throat. That was enough for me. You may go, Tracy, but you are to let Pablo alone in the future."

"If he insults me——"

"Report to me; I'll make him apologize. Go."

Tracy seemed to wish to linger to argue over the matter, but the look in Merriwell's eyes forbade it, and he picked up the knife and slouched sullenly away.

"I hope he did not hurt you much," said Frank, lifting Pablo's hat to see the bruise made by the ruffian's fist.

With a cry, the boy grasped his hat and pulled it down upon his head.

But Frank had made a most surprising discovery, and it was enough to give Merry something to meditate over.

He decided that the boy must be closely watched, and he longed for the presence of old Joe Crowfoot, than whom no one was more fitted to such a task.

But the outlaws had averred that old Joe was "food for buzzards," and the protracted absence of the redskin led Merry to fear that he had looked into the Indian's beady eyes for the last time.

Frank spoke to no one of his discovery. As far as possible, he kept his eyes on Pablo, as if he believed the boy meditated treachery of some sort.

Frank's friends wandered about the place and investigated the mine, watching operations.

The calm of the valley was most deceptive, and both Ready and Gallup declared they could not conceive any possible danger lurking near. Hodge, however, professed to feel a warning in the very peacefulness, which he declared was the calm before a storm.

Jim Tracy sulked. His treatment by Frank was altogether displeasing to him, and he felt that he had been humiliated, which caused him to register a secret vow of vengeance.

Pablo was generally found lingering about Frank's cabin or somewhere near Merry.

"He knows a good thing when he sees it," said Ready sagely, "and he means to stick to it. He doesn't seem in any great hurry about rushing to the rescue of his 'seestar.'"

Frank smiled in a knowing manner, observing:

"Perhaps he has reasons to know that his sister is in no great peril at present, and he is satisfied to stay here."

"He's a gol dern lazy little beggar!" said Gallup. "An' he oughter hev to wash his face once in a while."

The evening was cool and agreeable. The sun dropped peacefully behind the mountains and the shadows gathered deeply in the gorges and cañons. The roar of the stamps sank to silence, and peace lay like a prayer on the valley.

Frank and his friends sat about the cabin door and chatted of old times. Sometimes they sang little snatches of the old songs.

And as the darkness deepened a slender, boyish figure lay on his stomach and wiggled cautiously nearer and nearer, taking the utmost pains not to be seen.

This eavesdropper was Pablo, and he evinced the greatest interest in all they were saying; but it was when Frank spoke or sang that he listened with the utmost attention, keeping perfectly still. Thus it was that the boy heard Hodge say:

"Merriwell, I'm half-inclined to believe that dirty little Mexican rascal is a fakir. I suspect him."

"Of what?" asked Frank.

"Of being a spy. He told a slick tale, but I've had time to think it over, and somehow it seems too thin. Why shouldn't Bill send him here to play the spy?"

"My dear Bart," said Merry, with a laugh, "what would be Bill's object? What could the boy do?"

"He might get a chance to put a knife in your back, old man."

"I'll chance it. I do not believe Pablo that bad. I'll trust him."

"Well, I wouldn't trust any greaser."

"I hate you, Señor Hodge!" whispered the listening boy, to himself. "I hate you; but I love Frank Merriwell!"

The miners gathered near their quarters. As far as possible, Frank had secured miners who were not Mexicans, but there were a few Mexicans among them.

Among the men were some who were hard characters when they were drinking, and Merry had taken particular pains to make rules and regulations to keep liquor away from them.

The morning after the encounter between Pablo and Jim, the foreman, Frank arose and flung open the door of his cabin, but immediately made the discovery that a sheet of paper was pinned

to the door with a knife.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Here's something interesting!"

Gallup came slouching forward, followed by Ready.

"What, ho!" cried Jack, as his eyes fell on the knife and the paper. "Methinks I see something! Hist! That is what the tragic actor said when he appeared upon the stage. He crept in and looked around, after which he said, 'Hist!' And he was hissed."

"By gum!" cried Ephraim. "There's writin' written on it! What does it say?"

This is what they read written sprawlingly on the sheet of paper that was pinned to the door by the knife:

"FRANK MERRIWELL: You are hearby giv notis that you are to send away the boy Pablo instanter. He promised to come to his sister, and he has not come. You are warned not to keep him. BILL."

Frank looked at the notice and laughed.

"Well," he said, "that is rather interesting. So Bill wants the boy? Why doesn't he come and take him?"

Hodge came and read the notice, a deep frown on his darkly handsome face.

"What do you make of it, Merry?" he asked.

"Give us your opinion."

"Nerve."

"Shall we give up the boy?"

Now Bart had not favored Pablo, but at this juncture he grimly declared:

"I'm against it."

"Good!" nodded Merry. "Let Bill come and take him! If the boy's story is true, it would not be a healthy thing for him to fall into Bill's hands."

Just as he spoke these words Jim Tracy came around the corner and appeared on the scene. He halted, appearing surprised, and stared at the knife and the notice.

"Whatever is it?" he asked.

"Something left there during the night," said Merry. "Read it."

Tracy looked it over.

"Well, Bill sure wants the greaser kid," he said, "an' I reckon you'd best give the youngster up."

"Why do you reckon that?"

"Cimarron Bill is a heap dangerous."

"He may be," said Merry; "but he has failed thus far to get ahead of me. I don't like his notice, if this came from him. But I thought you took pains to have the place guarded at night, Tracy?"

"So I does, sir."

"Then how did Bill or any of his gang manage to creep up here and pin this to my door?"

"That I can't say, sir."

"I think I'll look after things to-night," said Frank grimly. "If we're getting careless around here Bill may walk in some night and seize the mine before we know a thing of what's going to happen."

He jerked the knife from the door, took the paper and placed it in his pocket, after which he indicated that he was ready to speak with the foreman, who had some matter of business to discuss.

When Tracy departed Frank sat down and meditated, for he had noticed something peculiar and remarkable.

There were ink-stains upon the thumb and two of the fingers of Jim Tracy's right hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

FRANK DETECTS TREACHERY.

Needless to say Frank did not send Pablo away. He did not tell the boy of the warning found on the door. Instead, he called the Mexican lad and said:

"Pablo, I want you to watch Tracy closely for me. Will you?"

"Señor Frank can be sure I weel," said the boy.

"If possible, I want you to get some of Tracy's handwriting and bring it to me."

"Eet I will do, señor."

"But look out for him. He's dangerous. Don't let him catch you playing the spy."

"I tak' de great care 'bout that."

Before noon the Mexican boy came hurrying to Merry, his big dark eyes glowing. He caught hold of Frank's hand and gave it an excited pressure.

"I haf eet!" he said.

"What is it you have?"

"Some of hees writeeng. He do eet in de mine offeese when he think no one watch heem. I see heem through window. He put eet in lettare, stick eet up, put in pocket, then drop um. I know; I watch; I pick eet up. Here eet ees!"

He thrust into Merry's hand a soiled, sealed and undirected envelope.

"Eet ees inside," said Pablo, all aquiver.

"Come in here," said Frank, leading the way into the cabin.

Bart and Jack were watching Ephraim Gallup at a distance from the cabin, the Yankee youth being engaged in a brave attempt to ride a small, bucking bronco.

When they were inside the cabin, Frank closed and fastened the door. Making a hasty examination of the envelope, he quickly lighted a small alcohol-lamp beneath a tiny brass tea-kettle, which he partly filled with water.

In a very few moments steam was pouring from the nozle of the kettle. Holding the envelope in this, Merry quickly steamed open the flap, taking from it a sheet of paper.

Pablo's eyes seemed to grow larger than ever as he watched. Frank unfolded the paper and read:

"I have decided to except terms, and to-night will be the time for you to come down on the mine. The whisky will be yoused to get the men drunk, jest as you perposed, and I'll hev them all filled up by ten o'clock. Wate tell you hear three shots right together, then charge and you'll take the mine, havin' only Merywel and his tenderfeet backers to fight, and them I will hav fastened into their cabin. J."

Merry whistled over this, showing no small amount of surprise.

"Ees de writin' what you expec'?" asked Pablo anxiously.

"It's somewhat more than I expected," said Frank. "By Jove! there will be doings here to-night."

He quickly decided on the course he would pursue. Carefully drying the flap of the envelope, he placed some fresh mucilage on it, thrust the message into it, and resealed it carefully.

"See here, Pablo," he said quickly, "if you can do it, I want you to take this and drop it just where you found it, so that Tracy will be pretty sure to recover it. I do not wish him to know that it has been picked up. Do your best. If you can't do it, come and tell me."

"I do eet," assured Pablo, as he took the envelope, concealed it beneath his jacket, and slipped from the cabin.

Frank had been given something to think about.

"So Tracy has turned traitor," he meditated. "He has decided to betray the mine into the hands of Cimarron Bill's gang. It was his writing on the notice pinned on the door, not Bill's. That notice was a fake, and it made him angry because it didn't work out as he planned. Bill got at him through Hop Anson, who must have been in Bill's employ all along. Well, to-night is the time I give those ruffians their final setback. Another repulse will discourage them. They would have descended on the place while I was in their power if they had fancied there was any chance that I might escape with my life."

Pretty soon he walked out, with his hands in his pockets, and joined his friends, laughing heartily over Gallup's trials, and seeming undisturbed by any worry.

Later he entered the mine and found that Tracy was not about. Nor could he discover anything of Pablo. The afternoon was far spent when the Mexican boy suddenly appeared before Frank.

"Hello, Pablo!" said Merry. "What's the word?"

"I followe heem," whispered Pablo excitedly. "I haf drop de letter where he find eet when he look

for eet. Then he find time to go 'way. I followe. I see heem take letter to place in rocks long distance down vallee. He hide eet there. Pablo let heem go; stay watch letter. He haf hoss hid some piece off. He geet to hoss, geet on heem, ride off."

"That's all?"

"Dhat ees all."

"Well, you have done well, Pablo," said Merry. "I'll not forget it."

Pablo again grasped Frank's hand, which he kissed.

"You freen' to Pablo," he said. "You goode to heem. He not forget."

"Tell no one what you have seen and done."

"You look out for Beel."

"You may be sure I'll do that, Pablo. When Bill comes here, he'll receive a warm reception."

That night after supper, as the miners sat about the long table in the low, open room, smoking their pipes and cigarettes and enjoying the grateful coolness of the evening, Jim Tracy, the foreman, came into the room and cried:

"Well, boys, you've been working right hard to open up this yere old mine, an' I appreciates it, if the young man what owns the property don't. It's a long distance to town, an' ye can't all git off together to have a leetle blow, so I has brought ye some good whisky, and I perposes that you all takes a drink on me."

Saying which, he produced two big quart bottles and held them above his head, so the lamplight fell upon them.

Instantly two shots sounded through the place, and the bottles were smashed in the foreman's hands by a pair of bullets, the glass flying and the liquor spattering over him.

In through the doorway at the opposite end of the room stepped Frank Merriwell, a pistol in each hand.

"Keep your hands up and empty, Jim Tracy!" he said, in a commanding tone. "It will be unhealthy for you if you lower them!"

Behind Frank were Bart, Jack, and Ephraim, with Pablo hovering like a shadow still farther in the rear.

Tracy was astounded.

"What in blazes does this mean!" he snarled, but he kept his hands up, as Frank had ordered.

"It means that I am onto your game to drug these boys and betray us all. Steady! If you try to get a weapon I shall drop you! You know I can shoot a little. Just tie him up, fellows."

"With the greatest pleasure," chirped Jack Ready, as he waltzed lightly forward, accompanied by Hodge and Gallup.

In spite of the protests of Tracy, they bound him hand and foot, so that he could barely wiggle.

The miners had been amazed, but they believed Merry when he told them of Tracy's plot to betray the mine.

"He would have drugged you all," said Frank. "Then, when Bill's gang charged on the mine, it's likely many of you would have been killed. But what did he care about that. Now we'll fool Cimarron Bill and teach him a lesson."

He explained his plan to them, and they readily agreed. So it happened that, a little later, the miners began to sing and shout and pretend to be riotously merry. This they kept up until it seemed as if they were engaged in a fearful carousal. Then the noises began to die out and grow less.

It was past ten o'clock when dead silence seemed to rest on the camp. Frank Merriwell stepped to the door, lifted his hand and fired three shots into the air.

Five minutes later the sound of galloping horses coming up the valley was distinctly heard.

"Here they come!" breathed Frank. "All ready for them!"

Right up to the mine-buildings charged the horsemen. They were dismounting when Frank's challenge rang out sharp and clear:

"Hold, Cimarron Bill! Stop where you are! Stop, or we fire!"

The outlaws uttered a yell and charged, firing the first shots.

Then Merry gave the command, and the armed and waiting miners fired on the raiders. It was a withering volley, and must have astounded the ruffians.

Bill, however, had come this time determined to succeed, and he called on his men to break down

the doors. As they were hammering at the front doors, Frank led some of the men out by the back way and charged round the buildings.

The encounter that took place was brief and sanguine. The miners were encouraged by Hodge, Ready, and Gallup, who fought with savage fury, and the raiders began to waver.

Suddenly a tall figure came rushing into the thick of the fight and confronted Frank.

It was Tracy, who had been released from his bonds by a sympathetic miner.

"Yah!" he snarled, having heard Merry's voice and recognized him. "So it's you! I've found you! Take that!"

He pitched forward a revolver and fired pointblank at Frank.

At that very instant, with a cry, Pablo, the Mexican boy, leaped in front of Merry.

Struck by the bullet intended for Frank, the little fellow tossed up his arms and fell backward into Merriwell's clasp. At the same instant somebody shot Jim Tracy through the brain.

As Merriwell lowered the death-stricken boy, the raiders, completely baffled, gave over the attack and took to flight, leaving half their number behind, stretched upon the ground.

"Are you hurt—badly?" asked Frank, as one of the boy's arms dropped limply over his neck and seemed to cling there.

For a moment there was no answer. Then came the faintly whispered words:

"I—theenk—I—am—keeled—Señor Merriwell."

"Oh, no, Gonchita!" said Frank earnestly; "not as bad as that! It cannot be!"

"You know me," was the surprised whisper. "How you know I am Gonchita?"

"Oh, I discovered it the other day—I found you had your hair tied up beneath your hat. Here, men—somebody bring a light! Be lively about it!"

"All right, sir," said one of the men. "Have one directly."

"No use, Señor Merriwell," came weakly from the lips of the disguised girl. "I shall be dead in a minute. *Ay-de mi!* Poor Gonchita! You theenk she ees verree bad girl? Beel he say he weel marree her. He get me to fool you, señor. Then you are so verree brave! Señor Frank, I theenk you are de han'someest, de braveest man I evere know. I run away from Beel. I wear de boyee's clothes an' come here. Dat ees all. Now I haf to die."

"Perhaps not, Gonchita," said Merry, with infinite pity for the unfortunate girl. "We'll see what can be done for you."

She managed to press one of his hands to her lips.

"So goode—so han'some!" she whispered. "Good-by, señor! Eet ees ovare."

Then one of the men came out with a lighted lantern; but before the light fell on the face of the wounded girl Frank knew he was holding a corpse in his arms.

Among the dead was found Hop Anson. Jim Tracy lay where he had fallen immediately after the shot which ended the life of poor Gonchita.

Such of the ruffians who were wounded were cared for as well as possible. The dead were buried there in the valley.

Cimarron Bill's band was completely broken up.

On his next visit to town Merry had a marble slab cut for the grave of the Mexican girl, which was located at a distance from those of the outlaws.

On the slab were chiseled these words: "Poor Gonchita!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WAR-WHOOP OF OLD ELI.

The afternoon sun lay scorching hot upon the arid plain. Heat waves moved in the air like the billows of a phantom sea. To the west were barren mountain-peaks and the nearer foot-hills; to the east the unbroken plain lay level to the horizon.

Behind the body of his dead horse lay a sorely wounded man, with his dog crouching close at his side. The dog's dry tongue lolled from the animal's mouth; at times the poor creature whined and

sought to lick the hand of its master; anon he growled fiercely, the hair bristling on his neck, and started up in a savage manner.

"Down, Boxer, down!" the man would order, in a voice ever growing weaker. "You can't help. The red devils will get you with a bullet. Down, sir!"

At which the dog would sink back, whine again and draw his filelike tongue along the hand or cheek of his master.

"Heavens!" muttered the man. "For a swallow of water. I'd give the last ounce in the saddle-bags if I could finish one or two more of those murderous curs before I cash in!"

His almost nerveless hands grasped the barrel of his rifle, and he looked away toward the spot where six horsemen had drawn up in a little cluster just beyond bullet-reach.

They were Indians, mounted on tough ponies, and some of them armed with modern weapons. Two or three carried lances, on which the glaring sun glinted.

They had hunted him down; they had killed the horse beneath him and wounded him unto death. The bullet was through his body, and the sands of life were ebbing fast. He had reached the end of his trail, and the red fiends out there on the baking plain knew they had only to wait a while and then ride forward unmolested and strip off his scalp. Yet, being far from their reservation, the savages were impatient at the delay. Their hearts were vengeful within them, for in the chase he had slain two of their number.

One of them, an impetuous young buck, was for making haste in finishing the paleface. He motioned toward the declining sun and suggested that the wounded man might try to crawl away with the coming of darkness. Besides, they had far to go, and it was a waste of time to wait for the paleface to die. Likely he was so far gone that he could not shoot to defend himself, and there would be little trouble in getting near enough to despatch him.

The impetuous spirit of this savage prevailed, and soon the redskins began riding around and around man and horse and dog, spreading out into a circle with great gaps and slowly closing in, now and then uttering a challenging yell. As they closed in they flung themselves over upon the sides of their ponies opposite the wounded man, so that their horses seemed riderless. Occasionally a shot was fired from beneath the neck of a racing pony.

The dying man gathered himself a little and watched them. A puff of white smoke leaped out before a pony and was quickly left behind to dissolve and fade in the heated air. A bullet threw up a bit of dust within three feet of the white man. The dog bristled and growled. Another bullet clipped a stalk from a cactus plant five feet away.

"They're within shooting distance," whispered the doomed wretch. "Wonder if I've got nerve enough to drop a pony."

He rested his rifle on the body of the dead horse and waited. Out on the plain the racing ponies began to swim in a haze. He could see them indistinctly, and he brushed a hand across his eyes.

"I'm going fast, Boxer," he muttered to the dog. "My sight is failing! I'm burning inside! And I know you're choking yourself, poor dog! It's a hard way to pipe out."

The dog whined sympathetically and pressed closer. A bullet whistled past the head of the man. He tightened his grip on his rifle, sought to take aim, and finally fired.

His bullet went wide of the target he sought, and a yell of derision floated to his ears through the hot air.

"No use!" he muttered huskily. "I'm done for! It's the finish! They can close right in and wipe me out!"

The savages seemed to know it, and they were drawing nearer.

Of a sudden out from the depths of a long barranca, a mighty fissure in the plain, produced in former ages by a convulsion of nature, or marking the course of a river—out from one end that rose to the surface of the plain not far from the circling savages, came a horse and rider. As the rider rose into view he began shooting with a magazine rifle, and his first bullet caused a redskin to lose his hold and tumble end over end in the dirt, while the pony galloped on.

The following Indian stooped and seemed to catch up his wounded comrade as he swept past.

The lone horseman rode straight at them in a reckless manner, working his repeater.

A pony was wounded, another plunged forward into the dirt. In another moment the redskins wheeled and were in full flight, astounded and demoralized by the attack, two of the horses carrying double, while another left drops of blood upon the ground.

The daring paleface uttered a strange war-whoop of triumph: "Brekekek Co-ax, Co-ax, Yale!"

Never before had those Indians heard such a singular cry from the lips of a white man. It seemed to fill them with a mad desire to get away, to flee at top speed. It struck terror into their hearts, as many a time the same slogan has struck fear to the hearts of those battling against Old Eli on some athletic field. They urged their ponies forward, and away they went, scurrying into the distance, with bullets singing around them.

The man behind the dead horse lifted himself and strained his bedimmed eyes, seeing the youthful rider shoot past in pursuit of the savages. The dog rose, planting his forefeet on the horse's body, and barked madly.

When he was satisfied that the Indians were in full retreat, with little thought of turning or offering resistance, Frank Merriwell, for it was he who had dashed out of the barranca, drew up and turned about, galloping back toward the man he had dared so much to save.

But he had come too late.

As Merry rode near the dying man had fallen back beside his dead horse. Over him stood the dog, covered with dust, its eyes glaring redly, its teeth disclosed, ready to defend the body of its master. As Frank drew up the dog snarled fiercely.

Merry saw at a glance that the situation of the dog's master was serious in the extreme. He dismounted and stepped forward, leaving his horse, knowing well the animal would stand. As he approached the dog grew fiercer of aspect, and he saw the creature meant to leap straight at his throat.

"Good dog!" he said, stopping. "Fine dog! Come, sir—come! Ah-ha, fine fellow!"

But all his attempts to win the confidence of the dog were failures.

"The man is dying," he muttered. "Perhaps I might save him if I could get to him now. Must I shoot that dog? I hate to do it, for the creature seems very intelligent."

At this moment the man stirred a little and seemed to realize what was happening. He lifted his head a little and saw the dismounted horseman and the threatening dog.

"Down, Boxer; down, sir!" he commanded. "Be quiet!"

His voice rose scarcely above a whisper, but the dog reluctantly obeyed, still keeping his eyes on Frank, who now stepped up at once.

"You're badly wounded, sir," he said. "Let me see if I can do anything for you."

"Give me water—for the love of Heaven, water!" was the harshly whispered imploration.

In a twinkling Frank sprang to his horse and brought back a canteen that was well filled. This he held to the lips of the wretched man, while the crouching dog watched every move with his red eyes.

That water, warm though it was, brought back a little life to the sinking man.

"God bless you!" he murmured gratefully.

The dog whined.

"Can't you give Boxer a little?" asked the dog's master. "He's suffering as much as I am."

Frank quickly removed from his saddle-bags a deep tin plate, on which some of the water was poured, and this the dog greedily licked up, wagging his tail in thankfulness.

"Poor old Boxer!" sighed the doomed man.

"Now, sir," said the youth, "let me examine your wound and find out what I can do for you."

"No use," was the declaration. "I'm done for. It's through the lung, and I've bled enough to finish two men. The blood is all out of me."

But the young man insisted on looking and did what he could to check the flow of blood.

The doomed man shook his head a little.

"No use," he repeated. "I'm going now—I feel it. But you have done all you could for Old Bens, and you won't lose nothing by it. What's your name?"

"Frank Merriwell."

"Well, Pard Merriwell, you sure went for those red devils right hot. I allowed at first that you must have four or five friends with ye."

"I'm alone."

"And it was great grit for you to charge the red skunks that way. However did you happen to do it?"

"I saw what was going on from the high land to the west with the aid of a powerful glass. I knew they had a white man trapped here. I struck the barranca and managed to get down into it, so I was able to ride close without being seen and charge up from this end, where it rises to the level of the plain. That is all."

"It was nerve, young man, and plenty of it! My name is Benson Clark. I'm a miner. Been over in the Mazatzals. Struck it rich, young pard—struck it rich. There was no one but me and old Boxer, my dog. I took out a heap of dust, and I opine I located a quartz claim that certainly is worth a hundred thousand dollars, or I'm away off. Been a miner all my life. Grub-staked it from the

Canadian line to Mexico. Have managed to live, but this is my first strike. No one staked me this time, so it's all mine. But see, pard, what black luck and those red devils have done for me! I'm finished, and I'll never live to enjoy a dollar of my wealth. Pretty tough, eh?"

"Pretty tough," admitted Frank Merriwell; "but brace up. Who can tell——"

"I can. Bens Clark is at the end of his trail. Young man, I want you to see me properly planted. You'll find enough in the saddle-bags here and in the belt around my waist to pay you for your trouble."

"I want no pay, sir."

"Well, I reckon you may as well have it, as I have neither kith nor kin in the wide world, and most of my friends have cashed in ahead of me, so I'm left all alone—me and Boxer."

The dying man lifted his hand with a great effort and caressed the dog. The animal whined and snuggled nearer, fixing his eyes on his master's face with an expression of devotion and anxiety that was quite touching to see.

"Good old Boxer!" sighed the man, with deep feeling. "You'll miss me, boy, and you're the only one in all the wide world. What will become of you, Boxer?"

Again the dog whined a little, touching the bloodless cheek of the man with its tongue.

"I'll do what I can for your dog, sir," said Frank Merriwell.

"What do you mean? Will you take Boxer and care for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do it! You'll never be sorry. You'll find him the most faithful, devoted, and intelligent of dumb animals. Truly, he knows almost as much as a man—more than lots of men. It's a shame he can't talk! He knows what I say to him almost always. I've almost fancied he might be taught to talk; but that's ridiculous, I know. Take him, Frank Merriwell, treat him well, and you'll never regret it."

The dog seemed listening. He looked from one to the other in a peculiar manner, and then, as if realizing what had passed and that he was soon to part with his master forever, he uttered a whining howl that was doleful and pathetic.

"Poor old Boxer—good boy!" said Benson Clark. "I've got to go, boy."

The dog crept close, and the dying man weakly folded the animal in his arms.

Frank Merriwell turned away. The sunlight was so bright and strong on the plain that it seemed to cause him to brush a hand over his eyes. He stood looking far off for some moments, but was given a start by hearing a weak call from the man.

"I'm going!" breathed Clark huskily. "Here—in my pocket here you will find a rude chart that may lead you to my rich mines in the Mazatzals. Feel in my pocket for the leather case. That's it. Take it—keep it. It's yours. The mines are yours—if you can find them. Boxer is yours. Be good to him. Poor old Boxer!"

He closed his eyes and lay so still that Frank fancied the end had come. But it was not yet. After a little he slowly opened his eyes and looked at Merry. Immediately Frank knelt beside him, with uncovered head.

The dying man then looked at the dog.

"Boxer," he said faintly, "I'm going off on my long trail, and we'll never meet up again this side of the happy hunting-grounds. Good-by, old dog! This is your new master. Stick to him like glue, old boy. Fight for him—die for him, if you have to. I opine you understand what I mean."

A strange sound came from the throat of the dog—a sound that was almost like a human sob. If ever a dog sobbed that one did. Agony and sorrow was depicted in his attitude and the look in its red eyes.

The miner took the dog's paw and placed it in Frank Merriwell's hand, his body lying between them.

"I make you pards," said Benson Clark.

Then he whispered to Frank:

"Can't you pray? I've clean forgot all the prayers I ever knew. But I feel that I need a prayer said for me now, for I'm going up before the judgment bar. Pray, partner—pray to the Great Judge that He will be easy with me."

So Frank Merriwell prayed, and that prayer fell upon the heart of the dying man with such soothing balm that all fear and dread left him, and he passed into the great unknown with a peaceful smile on his weather-worn face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE FUNERAL.

Frank found the saddle-bags and the belt about the dead man's waist heavy with gold. It took him some time to make preparations for transporting the precious stuff, and it was no easy task for him to quiet his horse and induce the animal to stand while he lifted the corpse and placed it where it could be tied securely on the horse's back.

He had no thought of leaving the body of Benson Clark to be devoured by wolves and vultures.

The sun was resting close down to the blue tops of the western mountains when everything was ready to start.

The dog had watched every move with eyes full of singular intelligence, but made no move or sound until Merry was ready to go.

Then Frank turned more water from the canteen, after taking a few swallows himself, placing it before Boxer in the tin plate. The dog licked it up.

"Good Boxer!" said Merry, patting the beast's head. "I'm your master now, my boy. Your other master is dead. He has told you to stick to me. Did you understand?"

The dog made some strange swallowing and mumbling sounds in its throat, as if trying to talk back in words.

"By Jove!" said Merry, gazing at the creature with great interest. "You are a knowing fellow, and you actually try to talk. Your master fancied you might be taught to talk."

Again those strange swallowings and mumbings issued from the dog's throat, and the creature wagged its tail a little.

"We'll go now," said Frank. "It's a good distance to the mine, and we have something to do before we can set out in earnest."

So they started off, Frank leading the horse bearing the ghastly burden, while the dog walked behind with hanging head, the perfect picture of sorrow.

A strange funeral procession it was, making its way toward the setting sun and the hazy mountains. The dead horse was left behind, while far in the sky wheeled two black specks, buzzards waiting for the feast.

The Indians had long vanished from the face of the plain, yet Frank knew their nature, and he was not at all sure he had seen the last of them.

The sun vanished behind the mountains and the blue night lay soft and soothing on the hot plain when the funeral procession came into the foot-hills.

It was not Frank's intention to carry the dead man farther than was needful, and, therefore, he kept his eyes about him for some place to bestow the body where it might rest safe from prowling beasts.

This place he found at last, and, with the aid of a flat stone, and with his bare hands, he scooped a shallow grave. Into this the body was fitted. Over the man's face Frank spread his own handkerchief. Then he besprinkled the dry earth lightly over the body at first, afterward using the flat rock to scrape and shovel more upon it, ending with covering it heavily with such stones as he could find, knowing well with what skill the ravening beasts of the desert could use their claw-armed paws.

For a time the dog sat and watched everything. When his late master was placed in the grave he whined and cried softly; but when the body was covered he lay down beside the grave in silence, and there was in his posture something so heartbroken that Frank was moved to a great pity.

"Poor old Boxer!" he murmured. "It is the end to which all living things must come, each in its own time. But it is the law of nature, and it is not so bad, after all. Blessed is he who goes to his last deep sleep without fear, feeling that he has done his best and is willing to trust everything in the hands of Him who sees and knows all. The fear of death and what may follow is such as should trouble alone the coward or the wicked wretch. Boxer, your master seemed to pass without fear, and something tells me it is not so bad with him. His case is in the hands of the Great Judge, and we may rest sure that he will be done no wrong."

Was there ever such a strange funeral oration! A youth with bared head and solemn face, speaking above a grave, and a silent, grief-stricken dog as the only mourner and attendant! The still Arizona night all around, with no sound of humming insect, no stir of foliage, no whisper of moving breeze, the dome of heaven above, studded with millions of clear stars! The dog did not move or lift its head, but Frank saw the starshine glint upon his eyes, which were wide open and fastened upon the speaker.

When the work was completed Frank knelt for a moment beside that grave, praying softly, yet with an earnestness that bespoke his faith that his words were heard.

It was over. His horse was at a little distance. He went and brought the animal up and adjusted the saddle. The dead man's belt, stuffed to bursting and wondrous heavy, he had fastened about his own waist.

"Come, Boxer," he said, again stooping to pat the head of the dog. "We must go. Bid farewell to your master's grave. It's not likely you may ever again come beside it."

The dog stirred. He sat up and lifted his muzzle toward the stars. From his throat came a low note that rose and swelled to the most doleful sound imaginable.

With his blood chill in his body, Frank listened while the dog sang a requiem above that grave. Tears started from Merry's eyes, and never while life was his could he forget that sound and that sight. Never chanted words of mass had more of sorrow! No human tongue could speak greater grief.

At last the sound died away into silence, and the dog stood on all fours, with hanging head and tail, his muzzle kissing some of the rough stones heaped on that grave. How long he might have remained in that attitude cannot be said; but soon Frank spoke again and called him to follow. At the word he turned, and his manner denoted he was ready.

Merry swung into the saddle and started, looking over his shoulder. In dead silence, the dog followed.

And so they passed into the still night.

CHAPTER XIX.

NEW ARRIVALS IN HOLBROOK.

The town of Holbrook had been greatly stirred. It had not yet settled into its accustomed grooves. The proprietor of the best hotel in town had received a consignment of fine furniture, carpets, draperies, wallpaper and pictures, and he had set about renovating and decorating several of the largest rooms in his house, having for that purpose a number of workmen imported from some Eastern point. It was said that the rooms had been rearranged to connect with each other in a suite, and that when they were completed, and furnished, and decorated they were dazzlingly magnificent, nothing like them ever before having been seen in the place. The good citizens of Holbrook wondered and were amazed at all this; but they did not know that not one dollar had been expended by the proprietor of the hotel. All this work had been done without expense of his to accommodate some guests who came in due time and took possession of those rooms.

The California Special had dropped four persons in Holbrook, who regretfully left the comfort of a palace car and looked about them with some show of dismay on the cluttered streets and crude buildings of the Southwestern town. Holbrook was even better in general appearance than many Western towns, but, contrasted with clean, orderly, handsome Eastern villages, it was offensive to the eyes of the proud lady who was aided from the steps of the car and descended to the station platform with the air of a queen. She turned up her aristocratic nose a little on glancing around.

This woman was dressed in the height of fashion, although somewhat too heavily for the country she now found herself in; but there was about her an air of display that betokened a lack of correct taste, which is ever pronounced in those who seek to attract attention and produce astonishment and awe. She had gray hair and a cold, unattractive face. Still there was about her face something that plainly denoted she had been in her girlhood very attractive.

She was followed by a girl who was so pretty and so modest in appearance that the rough men who beheld her gasped with astonishment. Never in the history of the town had such a pretty girl placed her foot within its limits. She had a graceful figure, fine complexion, Cupid-bow mouth, flushed cheeks, large brown eyes and hair in which there was a hint of red-gold, in spite of its darkness.

A colored maid followed them.

From another car descended a thin, wiry, nervous man, who had a great blue beak of a nose, and who hastened to join the trio, speaking to them.

The hotel proprietor had at the station the finest carriage he could find, and this whisked them away to the hotel as soon as they had entered it, leaving the loungers about the station wondering, while the train went diminishing into the distance, flinging its trail of black smoke against the blue of the Arizona sky.

At the hotel the lady and her daughter occupied two of the finest rooms, the colored maid another, less expensively furnished, and the man with the blue nose was given the fourth.

Holbrook wondered what it meant.

The lady ordered a meal to be served in her rooms.

The report went forth at once, and again Holbrook stood agog.

The hotel register was watched. Finally the man with the restless eyes and blue beak entered the office and wrote nervously in the register.

Barely was he gone when a dozen persons were packed about the desk, seeking to look over one another's shoulders to see what had been written.

"Whatever is it, Hank?" asked one. "You sure kin read writin'. Whatever do you make o' it?"

"'Mrs. D. Roscoe Arlington,' the fust name," said the one called Hank. "Then comes 'Miss Arlington,' arter which is 'Mr. Eliot Dodge,' an' lastly I sees 'Hannah Jackson.'"

"Which last must be the nigger woman," said one of the rough men.

"I allows so," nodded Hank. "An' it 'pears to me that name o' Arlington is some familiar. I somehow thinks I has heard it."

"Why, to be course you has!" said another of the men. "D. Roscoe Arlington, did you say? Who hasn't heerd that name? He's one o' them big guns what has so much money he can't count it to save his gizzard. Ev-rybody has heerd o' D. Roscoe Arlington. If he keeps on gittin' rich the way he has the past three years or so, old Morgan won't be in the game. Why, this Arlington may now be the richest man in this country, if ev'rything were rightly known about him. He owns railroads, an' mines, an' ships, an' manufacturin' plants, an' nobody knows what all."

"That sartin explains a whole lot the fixin' up that has been a-doin' around this ranch," said a little man with a thirsty-looking mouth. "They was a-preparin' fer the wife o' this mighty rich gent."

"But say!" exclaimed a young fellow with a wicked face, "ain't she got a slick-lookin' gal with her, what?"

Some of them laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Go on, Pete!" cried one chap. "You're a gay one with greaser gals, but you won't be able to make a wide trail with that yar young lady, so don't be lookin' that way."

"Wonder whatever could 'a' brought such people here," speculated a man with tobacco juice on his chin. "They must mean to stay a while, else they'd never had them rooms fixed up the way they are."

A ruffianly-looking man with a full beard broke into a low laugh.

"Why, ain't none o' you heard about the fight what's bein' made to git holt o' a certain mine not so very fur from yere?" he asked. "I mean the mine owned by a young chap what calls himself Frank Merriwell. You oughter know somethin' about that."

"Why, 'pears to me," observed the fellow with tobacco juice on his chin—"pears to me I did hear that thar was trouble over a mine somewhar down in the Mogollons, an' that Cimarron Bill had been sent to take it."

"He was sent," said the full-bearded man.

"Then I 'lows he took it, fer Bill's sure to do any job he tackles."

"He ain't took it none. Frank Merriwell is still a-holdin' the mine, an' Bill has had his troubles, leavin' a good part o' his backers stiff arter the ruction."

"Say you so? Waal, this Merriwell sure must be a hot fighter. But Bill will down him in the end, an' you kin bet your last simoleon on that."

To which the man with the full beard said nothing.

"All this don't explain any to me jest why this lady an' her party is hyer," said the one with the thirsty mouth.

"It ain't noways likely she's lookin' arter Cimarron Bill none," said another.

"Whoever is a-takin' my name in vain?" demanded a voice that made them all start and turn toward the door.

"It's Cimarron Bill hisself!" gasped one, in a whisper.

And the entire crowd seemed awe-stricken and afraid.

CHAPTER XX.

MRS. ARLINGTON HAS A VISITOR.

The black maid stood over the little table at which mother and daughter sat taking tea.

"Sugar, Jackson," said the lady wearily.

The maid lifted the sugar-bowl, but, finding no tongs, was compelled to use a spoon.

"Why don't you use the tongs, Jackson?" asked the woman.

"Dar am no tongs, ma'am," answered the maid.

"No tongs? no tongs?" exclaimed Mrs. Arlington, in astonished surprise. "And I directed that everything should be prepared here—that we should have every convenience of a first-class hotel. Dear me! Why, I've found nothing right! The hardship of spending some days in such a place will prostrate me. I know it will!"

"But why have you come here, mother?" asked June Arlington, in a voice that denoted culture and a refined nature. "I cannot understand it. You told me in the first place that you were going to Mexico. Then I heard you urging father to come here. When he said it was not possible, you seemed to get angry, and you declared that you would come here yourself. But why should you come because he could not? That I wonder at."

"He would not!" exclaimed Mrs. Arlington, sipping her tea. "It was his duty. Never mind the particulars, June; you may know some time, but not now."

"And I did not wish to come here, mother. You knew that."

"My daughter, I have decided that it is necessary to keep you with me. I determined on that after your surprising behavior the last time you went to Fardale. You deceived me, June! I cannot forget that."

The words were spoken with cold severity. June flushed a little.

"It was for Chester's good, as I explained to you," she said somewhat warmly. "He has never thanked me for it, yet it is I who have kept him in Fardale Academy. Had I not entreated Dick Merriwell to be easy with him, Chester must have been compelled to leave or be expelled before this."

"I cannot believe that, June. But, were it true, it is no excuse for your action. I want no favors from either of the Merriwells. I will accept nothing from them! Dick Merriwell is my boy's enemy, and he shall know what it is to have an Arlington for a foe. I have determined on that. I repeat that I'll accept nothing from him."

"Once——" June stopped short. She had been on the verge of telling her mother that once that lady had accepted something from Dick Merriwell—her life! For, as Mrs. Arlington slipped on the icy platform of the railway-station at Fardale and was falling beneath the wheels of a moving train, Dick had grasped and held her till the cars passed and she was safe.

But June had seen her mother turn blue with anger at mention of this affair, so she checked herself now, not wishing to arouse the lady.

Tea was finished in silence, mother and daughter being occupied with their thoughts.

The maid moved softly about the table.

They had just finished when there came a tap on the door.

"See who it is, Jackson," directed Mrs. Arlington.

The man with the blue beak was at the door.

"I must speak with Mrs. Arlington," he said, and entered, hat in hand.

"What is it, Mr. Dodge?" asked the lady, frowning coldly and plainly annoyed.

Eliot Dodge paused and looked at June significantly.

"Oh, is it a private matter?" asked the lady.

Flushing a bit, June arose at once and withdrew, from the room.

"William Lamson has arrived in town, and demands to see you," said Dodge, when June had disappeared, the maid having likewise withdrawn.

"That man?" said Mrs. Arlington, with a little start and a slight shiver. "I have brought you to do the business with him. You are a regular attorney of the C. M. A. of A., and you have my instructions."

"So I told him."

"Well?"

"He refused pointblank to do any business whatever with me."

"He did."

"Yes. I talked to him pretty straight until—ahem!—until I could say no more."

"You could say no more?"

"No, madam; it was impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"He had drawn and cocked a revolver and pointed it at me. He told me to shut up and take word from him to you at once or he would shoot me."

"What a dreadful creature!"

"He is, indeed, madam; he's a typical ruffian of the worst sort."

"And, therefore, the very man to accomplish the work," said she, with growing interest. "But I dislike very much to have dealings with such a fellow."

"I thoroughly understand that, madam."

"You might attend to the matter fully as well."

"That is true, Mrs. Arlington."

"You told him so?"

"I did."

"And still——"

"And still he drew a gun on me. He is bound to see you. He says he will, and I am sure he is a man to make his word good. Really I don't know how you are going to get out of it."

"Then I shall not try," said the lady, composing herself.

"You mean——"

"I'll see him."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"Send him up at once. I may as well have it over."

Eliot Dodge hesitated.

"I shall be in my room," he said. "If you need me——"

"I understand. Go bring this man to my door."

Dodge departed, and Mrs. Arlington waited. When there came a knock on the door she coldly said:

"Come in!"

Cimarron Bill entered the room!

Mrs. Arlington had not called her servant to let this man in. She glanced toward the door of the room into which her daughter had retired, and the look on her face was one of apprehension. Cimarron Bill was a wicked man, as his every aspect betokened, and this woman could not think without shame that June should have any knowledge of her dealings with such a creature.

So she arose hastily, which was quite unlike her, and crossed the floor to close the door, a strange thing, considering that she seldom did a thing that another could do for her.

When June was thus shut out, the woman recrossed the floor to likewise close the door of the room into which the colored maid had retired.

All the while Cimarron Bill, hat in hand, stood watching her closely with his evil eyes. For him it must have been a most exceedingly strange thing to come thus into the presence of a woman whose husband was known far and wide as a money king, a woman whose every wish that wealth could serve was sure to be granted almost as quickly as expressed.

When she had closed the doors she turned about and faced him, surveying him from head to feet with her cold and penetrating eyes. He looked back at her with a sort of boldness, for this man was not one to be in the least downcast in the presence of a human being of whatever degree.

Mrs. Arlington motioned toward a chair.

"Will you sit down, sir?" she invited.

"Thank you, madam," said Bill, casting aside the rough manner of speech that he sometimes assumed and now using very decent English. "I don't care if I do."

Whereupon he placed his hat upon the table and sat upon a chair, with a certain pantherish undulation of his body, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin.

"Mr. Dodge saw you," said the woman, remaining standing. "I directed him to inform you that he was my accredited agent and prepared to transact any business with you. I thought it better for him to attend to this affair."

"And I, madam, if you will excuse me, thought it best that we should come face to face and have our dealings thus. That is why I declined to do any business whatever with the gent with the blue nose."

"I did not suppose it would be necessary for me to go so far into this matter until I was informed of your failure to take possession of the property that rightfully belongs to the Consolidated Mining Association of America. I must say, sir, that I am very much displeased over your failure."

"And you can be no more so than am I myself," returned Bill, civilly enough, yet with a sort of boldness that did not please her, as she was accustomed to much deference and respect. "But you must know it is difficult, even in this country, to find men who are eager to put on themselves the brand of outlaws, and I acknowledge that my force was not sufficient. The young dog is a stiff fighter, and that I had not counted on, him being a tenderfoot to a certain degree—though," he added, as if on second thought, "he's not so very tender, after all."

"You were told to collect an army, if necessary. Mr. Dodge informs me that you were directed to get together a force sufficient to make failure out of the question. Yet you were repulsed and beaten off when you went to seize the mine."

"Twice," said Bill grimly. "And the second time a full half of my men were dropped cold or hurt so bad that they were put out of the fight. It was not just my fault that I failed then, for the treachery of a Mexican girl betrayed my plans to Merriwell, so he was ready with a trap when I expected to take him by surprise. That is how it came about, madam. I had his foreman bribed and should have walked into possession of the mine with little or no trouble but for the girl I mention. It was a bad piece of business."

"Bad!" she exclaimed, nodding a little. "It was very unfortunate!"

"A word that scarce expresses it, madam. The rest of my men, the curs, with one or two exceptions, weakened and gave it up as a bad job. And then, on top of that, I was informed that the syndicate had grown disinclined to press the matter further in such a manner, fearing to get itself into serious trouble."

"That's it!" said the woman sharply. "But I have taken hold of this matter. The syndicate seems willing to obtain the mine by some other and slower method. I am not. I cannot brook delay! I have a reason why I wish the taking of the mine with the smallest possible delay, and it makes no difference to me how the work is accomplished. That is why I am here on the scene of action. I shall remain here until I triumph! If you are able to accomplish the work, well and good. If you are not, then another man must be found for it."

Cimarron Bill smiled in a most evil manner.

"Madam," he said, "I think you will have trouble to find in all this country another man so well prepared to accomplish the task."

"Yet you confess that you have failed twice."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"For which reason," he averred, "I am all the more dangerous. There is an old saying that the third time never fails. I am ready for the third trial."

"I am glad to hear you speak this way. What will you do?"

"Gather a stronger force and lay my plans so there can be no failure."

"It is well."

"But that will take much money, madam. You have it at your command. It is almost certain that all of us, to the last man, will bear the brand of outlaws. We may be hunted. It may be necessary for me to hasten into Mexico and lose myself there for a time. I must have money in abundance for myself. As for the men who take part with me, they will all demand high prices. When it is over and the mine is delivered into the possession of the syndicate, I shall not trouble about any one save myself. The men who are with me may look out for themselves."

This was said in a most cold-blooded manner, speaking plainly the real character of the wretch.

"I care nothing about that," said the woman. "Fix that matter as you choose. How much money will you require?"

"Let me see," said Bill, as if meditating. "It will take, I am sure, at least fifty men. They may be got at various prices, some more, some less; but there will be the bringing of them together and other expenses. I should say that they must cost at least two hundred dollars each, which makes a pretty little sum of ten thousand dollars."

"Then it will cost ten thousand dollars?" said Mrs. Arlington quickly. "I'll draw the sum from my own private account."

"Wait a bit, madam," said the chief of desperadoes. "I have reckoned for the men, but that does not include myself. I have said that I must be well paid. I value myself quite as much as fifty common men, and that is another ten thousand, or twenty thousand dollars in all, for which sum I am ready to undertake the job. I'll add, also, that I guarantee it shall not fail this time."

It seemed that such a sum must have staggered the woman. Indeed, her face went a trifle pale, but her lips were pressed together, and she coldly said:

"It is a bargain! You shall have the money, but not until you have accomplished the work. Understand that, not until the work is done!"

CHAPTER XXI.

SEEN FROM THE WINDOW.

Never before had there been such a bargain between such a man and such a woman. It was the strangest compact on record. And no wonder Mrs. Arlington had closed the doors that her daughter and her maid should not hear! Had June known all she must have turned with loathing and horror from the woman.

Had D. Roscoe Arlington known he must have been shocked and heart-torn beyond measure. Had he known he must have wondered if this woman had matured from the sweet country girl who once declared with blushes and hanging head that love in a cottage with him was all the happiness she asked. Had he known he might have remembered the soft moonlight night in June when beneath the fragrant lilacs they plighted their troth, and surely his gold-hardened heart would have melted with anguish over the frightful change.

In truth, Mrs. Arlington had become deranged, as it were, on one point. Her son was her idol. She had petted, and flattered, and spoiled him. She had sent him off to school at Fardale with the conviction that he was certain to rise superior to all other boys there. And from him she had come to learn that he had not risen, but had been imposed upon, defeated, baffled, and held down by another lad who was the recognized leader in the school. Into the ears of his astonished and angry mother Chester Arlington had poured his tale of woe, and it had filled her soul with intense hatred for this other boy by the name of Merriwell who had dared think himself better than her Chester. She had gone to Fardale to set things about as they should be, and had failed. That seemed to fill her with such bitterness that she was quite robbed of sober judgment and reason.

When Mrs. Arlington learned that the mining syndicate had claims to the mines belonging to Frank and Dick Merriwell, she was aroused. When she came to understand that the taking of those mines by the syndicate would leave the Merriwell brothers almost penniless and would be the signal for Dick Merriwell to leave Fardale, she determined that the thing should be brought about at any cost of money, or time, or trouble to herself.

And it was in pursuit of this determination that the wife of D. Roscoe Arlington had come to Arizona and placed herself face to face with a ruffian like Cimarron Bill, with whom she now struck a bargain that was most astounding.

Was the woman in her right mind?

It made little difference to Bill if she were sane or not, as long as he obtained possession of that money. But when he asked for it in advance she smiled upon him coldly, almost scornfully.

"You were paid money by the syndicate, and you pledged them to accomplish a task at which you failed. This time there will be no money forthcoming until the work is done."

In return the man smiled back at her, and he said:

"That settles it! I'm not a fool. When the work is done I may find myself on the run for Mexico, with the law reaching for me. In such a case I'll have no time to collect. Cash in advance is my motto. You'll bargain with me, or you'll fail, in everything. You cannot get another man to fill my boots in the whole country. And if you were to throw me down and give the job over into the hands of another gent, I'd speak one word to him that would be enough."

"What do you mean?" she asked, wondering and angry. "What word?"

"The word 'stop,'" said Bill. "When Cimarron Bill says 'stop,' you can bet they stop. They know what it means if they don't. If you don't think so, count the notches on my guns."

"You mean that you would turn against me?"

"Not exactly, madam; I mean that I have no idea of letting any other gent get my job. I do this piece of work—or no one does it. I rather admire the sand of this Merriwell, though I'd slit his throat, just the same, for the price. If there was no object in being against him, I'd surely be for him; and it seems that you ought to know better than to put Cimarron Bill in the ranks of the enemy."

"It's a threat!" cried the woman.

"Not so; it's a business statement, begging your pardon, madam. I don't propose that any gent shall jump my claim."

"How can I be sure you'll not play me false? How can I know you'll not take the money and do

nothing?"

"The syndicate paid me in advance, as you know. I did my best to earn the money. It was not my fault that I failed. In this case, if you pay the sum I have named, I swear to you I'll know no rest until I have succeeded. If I cannot succeed in one way, I will in another."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll capture or kill Frank Merriwell himself."

"If you could do that!" said the woman, with great eagerness. "He is the great stumbling-block."

"That's right. With him out of the way, taking the mine would be easy."

"Is there no way this can be done before you try to seize the mine?"

"He keeps pretty close to it. If he could be caught by himself. I have had my hands upon him twice, and he has slipped me both times. Next time he will not!"

"Next time——"

"An accident will happen to him," assured Bill, with deadly meaning. "That will be the simplest method."

"You are right!" she said, in a whisper. "If that could happen——"

"Would you pay the money?"

"I would. Understand, I make no bargain with you for such a thing, but that mine must be torn from him somehow. I have with me some money."

Cimarron Bill understood her well, and he nodded.

"Madam," he said, "give me a little time and I'll find a way to see to it."

At this moment there was a commotion in the street, the sound of fighting dogs, shouts of men, and the clatter of horses' hoofs.

Bill rose quickly and strode to the window, looking down into the street. A handsome Irish setter had been attacked by two mongrel dogs, and he was giving those dogs the surprise of their lives. He had one by the neck in a moment, and the mongrel was shaken like a rat. When the setter let go the mongrel took to his heels, howling with pain and terror. Then the setter turned on the other dog and a battle that was fierce enough for a few moments ensued, which ended again in the complete triumph of the setter.

Two young men had ridden into town behind the setter, and they had drawn up to witness the result of the fight. A crowd had quickly gathered, and the triumphant setter was loudly applauded.

At sight of one of the two horsemen Cimarron Bill burst forth with an exclamation of excitement.

"Look!" he said, pointing from the open window. "See—see that fellow on the dark horse!"

Mrs. Arlington was near the window.

"The one with the small mustache?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the one."

"I see him."

"Well, that's Frank Merriwell!" said Bill.

Cimarron Bill was right. Frank Merriwell and Bart Hodge had ridden into Holbrook, and with them had come Boxer, the dog. Boxer had been attacked by the mongrel curs, and he showed his mettle by quickly putting them to flight.

As Bill gazed down from that window the evil light in his eyes deepened.

"Remember our bargain!" he said in such a terrible voice that the woman at his side shuddered.

Then she saw him bring forth a revolver, and, knowing what he meant to do, she uttered a little scream and ran back into another part of the room, unwilling to witness the dark deed.

Quickly kneeling, Bill rested his elbow on the window-ledge and took aim, meaning to send a bullet through the heart of the rightful owner of the Queen Mystery Mine.

The commotion in the street and her mother's cry had brought June Arlington into that room. June saw the man with the revolver, and her eyes fell on the horseman below. She recognized Frank Merriwell, for all that he was bronzed and changed, and had a small mustache.

With a sudden scream, the girl flung herself on Bill and spoiled his aim, so that when the revolver spouted smoke the bullet flew wide of the mark intended.

Bill uttered a savage snarl, wheeling about.

"You wretch!" panted the girl, who was now pale as snow. "You murderer!"

The man was dazzled by her beauty. Immediately he moved back from the window, bowing low.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said. "He sure is an enemy of mine, and out here we shoots on sight. But mebbe he is your friend, in which case I lets up and gives him another show."

In that moment of excitement he had fallen into the frontier manner of speaking.

She looked at him with unspeakable horror in her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she panted. "You—you—murderer! Mother—this man—why is he here?"

But Mrs. Arlington, usually cold as ice and perfectly self-possessed, had quite lost her nerve. She sank into a chair, seeming on the verge of fainting, while she gave Bill a look that, ruffian though he was, he understood as an appeal to be left alone with June.

Nor was he loath about getting out of that room. His pistol had been discharged from the window, and, though the bullet had found no human target, men might come in haste to ask unpleasant questions.

"I begs your pardon, madam," he said, hurriedly picking up his hat. "I thinks I'll call again and finish this yere bit o' business. Just now I has another matter to attend to."

Then he hastened out.

June had flown to her mother.

"Tell me—tell me, mother, what it means!" she implored.

"My smelling-salts," faintly breathed the woman. "My heart, June! I—I'm afraid!"

Now, June knew well that the one great fear of her mother's life was sudden death from a heart trouble that came upon her at times, and so the girl hastened to bring out the bottle of salts and hold it beneath the pale lady's nose till she was somewhat recovered, though still resting limp on her chair and breathing heavily.

"What does it mean, mother?" asked the girl again. "I do not understand these strange things. I do not understand why such a wicked-looking man should be here in this room and about to shoot down in cold blood a young man in the street. He would have shot him from this very window had not I spoiled his aim."

Mrs. Arlington turned her eyes toward her daughter's face, but looked away quickly, still trembling.

"Did you know him at whom the man was about to shoot?" she weakly asked.

"Yes, I knew him, or I am much mistaken. It was Frank Merriwell. I saw him at the hotel in Fardale the day I returned to him those papers. You recollect, mother?"

"Yes, I remember it all too well, and it was the giving back to him of those papers that has made no end of trouble for us all. But for that foolish act of yours, June, he would not still be holding the mines that are rightfully the property of the C. M. A. of A."

"If those mines do not belong to him, how is it that he can hold them?"

"He has possession, and he holds it with armed men."

"But the law——"

"The law is slow, and, without those papers, it is not very sure. It is your folly, girl," declared the woman reproachfully, "that has made no end of trouble. It is your folly that brought Frank Merriwell near to his end a few moments ago, though you it was who saved him then."

"Mother, you speak in riddles! How can that be? I gave him back what was his. And have you forgotten that it was his brother, Dick, who kept you from slipping beneath the car-wheels, where you must have been maimed or killed?"

At this Mrs. Arlington sat up, and something like anger took from her her great pallor.

"No," said she, "nor have I forgotten that it was Dick Merriwell who brought upon my son all his trouble at Fardale! Dick Merriwell has been his blight there! Dick Merriwell is his enemy. He has tried to set himself over my boy, and no one shall do that!"

June knew how useless it was to talk of this matter with her mother, who refused to listen to reason, and so she did not try to press it further; but she again asked who was the man who had tried to shoot from the window.

"He was a miner," said Mrs. Arlington.

"And what business had he here in this room?"

"That is nothing to you, girl. Forget that you saw him here."

"A thing easier said than done, mother. I saw his face and his eyes, and I know he is a wicked man and one to be greatly feared. Why should you have dealings with such a wretch?"

"You ask too many needless questions, June. Look out and tell me if you still see anything of—of—Frank Merriwell."

But when June looked from the window Frank Merriwell was not to be seen on the street, which had again resumed its usual aspect.

"I must have a spell of quiet to restore my nerves, June," said Mrs. Arlington, when the girl had told her. "Leave me. Call Jackson. I think I will lie down."

So the colored maid was called, and June lingered to make sure there was nothing she could do for her mother, who coldly bade her go.

In her own room June found herself filled with tempestuous thoughts and vain speculations. She was bewildered by it all, and there was much that she could not understand, for her mother had told her little or nothing of what had brought them to that Arizona town. She was wise enough to know full well that the lady had not come there in search of health, and surely it could not be pleasure she expected in such a place, which left but one thing to suppose—it was business. But what sort of business could she have there? and why should she meet and do business with a murderous wretch like the man who had tried to shoot Frank Merriwell from the open window?

Knowing there was little danger of interruption, June found pen, ink, and paper and sat herself down to write a letter. She thought at first that she would make it very brief, and she found it exceedingly hard to begin; but when she had begun it, it ran on and on until she had written many pages. Sometimes she laughed over it, and sometimes she blushed; once her chin quivered and tears seemed to fill her splendid eyes. When it was all finished she read it over, her cheeks glowing, and at the end she kissed the paper, at which the blush swept down to her very neck, and in great confusion she folded it all hastily and put it into an envelope, which she hurriedly sealed. Although she was not aware of it, she had spent nearly two hours over the letter. On the envelope she wrote a name and address, and then, finding her hat, she slipped out to mail it.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SENSATION IN TOWN.

Frank's little "scout," as he called it, on which expedition he had driven the redskins from the wounded miner, had convinced him that Cimarron Bill and his gang had withdrawn from the vicinity of the Queen Mystery Mine.

So it came about that Merry and Bart Hodge started for Holbrook, bringing with them the gold Frank had found in the saddle-bags and belt of the dead miner.

Boxer would not be left behind. Since the death of his former master the dog kept close to Frank, for whom he seemed to have formed an affection quite as deep as that he had entertained for Benson Clark.

Frank and Bart came, dust covered and wearied, into Holbrook.

Boxer's engagement with the mongrel curs, who set upon him, was an incident to enliven their advent in town, and it demonstrated the mettle of the setter.

The shot that came from the window of the hotel was somewhat surprising; but, as the bullet failed to pass anywhere near either Bart or Merry, they did not fancy it was intended for them. Still Frank dropped a hand toward the pistol swinging at his hip, thinking the lead might be intended for Boxer.

A puff of smoke was dissolving before the open window, but Cimarron Bill had vanished, nor did he again appear there. Neither Frank nor Bart had seen him.

So they were not greatly alarmed, and they laughed over the manner in which Boxer had put his assailants to flight, merriment which was joined in by many of the spectators who had gathered to witness the fight.

"Good boy, Boxer!" said Merry. "You did that up slickly."

At which the setter turned toward Frank and showed his teeth in a grin, and something followed that caused several of the bystanders to gasp and stagger or stand dazed and astounded.

When Frank and Bart rode on two or three of those men hurried into Schlitzenheimer's saloon, where one of them banged the bar with his clenched fist, and shouted:

"By thunder! that's the first time I ever heard a dog talk! Was I dreaming?"

"None whatever, pard!" declared another, mopping sweat from his face. "I heard it plain enough. For the love of goodness, Fritz, give me a snifter of tanglefoot! I need something to brace my nerves after that!"

"Vot id vos you peen sayin'?" asked the fat Dutchman behind the bar. "Vot vos dot voolishness apoudt der talkings uf a tog?"

"No foolishness," declared the sweating individual, as whisky and glasses were placed on the bar. "I'll swear to it. The dog that came in with those young gents an' whipped two other dogs in short order sartin' made an observation in good, clean United States, or I'm the biggest liar on two legs."

"Say, Benchy!" said the Dutchman scornfully, "I pelief you vos readiness to haf anoder attack py dose delerium triangles, ain'd id! Uf you vill undertook my advice, you vill off svear alretty soon und safe yourseluf from der snakes some droubles."

"This is my first drink to-day," asserted Benchy, as he poured with shaking hand; "and I'd not take this if I didn't need it a whole lot to steady my nerves arter hearin' a dog talk."

"It's on the level, Fritz," assured the man who had banged the bar with his fist. "I heard it myself. The young fellow with the mustache says to the dog arter the dog had licked t'other dogs, says he, 'Good boy, Boxer; you done that up slick.' Then the dog turns about and grins up at him and winks, and he opens his mouth, and I hope I may be struck dead where I stand this minute if he didn't answer and say, 'Oh, that was no trick at all, Frank; those low-bred curs haven't any sand.' I heard it, Fritz, and I'll swear to it with my last breath!"

"You vos craziness!" said the Dutchman. "Oh, you vos drying some jokes on me to play alretty."

But now several of the others asserted that they also had heard the dog speak, and that the animal had uttered the very words quoted by the man called Spikes.

"Id peen a put-up jobs!" shouted Schlitzenheimer angrily. "Uf vor a greadt vool you tookit me, you vos not so much uf a jackass as I look to peen! Id vos nod bossible a tog vor to speech, und I vill bate zwi t'ousan' tollar it on!"

"But I heard him!" declared Benchy.

"I'm another!" averred Spikes.

"We all heard him!" cried the others at the bar.

"You got vrom my blace uf pusiness out britty queek!" ordered the Dutchman, in a great rage. "I vill not had so many plame liars aroundt! Und dond you back come some more alretty until you vos readiness apology to make vor me drying to vool!"

"Look here, Fritz," said Benchy, leaning on the bar, "I'll bet you ten dollars coin of the realm that the dog can talk! If I had been alone in hearing the beast, I might have thought myself fooled; but all these other gents heard him, and so there is no mistake. Do you take me?"

"Den tollars haf nod seen you in a month," declared Schlitzenheimer disdainfully. "Howeffer, uf you prings pack by you dot tog und he vill speech my saloon in, I vill gif you den tollars my own moneys out uf, and all der drink you can a whole veek vor. Now, you tookit my advice und shut upness or make goot britty queek."

"I'll do it!" cried Benchy, and he hastened forth.

Frank and Bart had proceeded directly to the bank, where their dust was weighed and taken on deposit. This done, they left and sought a square meal in the very hotel where Mrs. Arlington and June were stopping. Fortunately the presence of his guests, who paid extravagantly well, had caused the proprietor to have on hand an unusual stock of cooked food, and he was able to see that the young men from the mines were provided for in a manner that surprised and pleased them not a little.

Although he took good care to keep out of sight, Cimarron Bill knew Frank Merriwell was in the hotel. At the bar of the place Bill found a rough, bewhiskered fellow, whom he drew aside.

"Bob," said Bill, in a whisper, "are you ready to tackle a tough proposition?"

"For the needful, Bill," was the quiet answer of the man, who, in spite of his rough appearance, was known by his mild manner of speech as Gentle Bob. "What is it?"

"You know the young tenderfoot gent what I have been stacking up against—the one what I spoke to you about?"

"I reckon."

"Well, he is now eatin' in the dinin'-room."

"Sho!" said Bob, in placid surprise.

"Fact," assured Bill. "Him an' one of his pards is thar. They came inter town together a short time ago. Now, I could pick a quarrel with them, and I allows I could shoot 'em both; but it would be knowed agin' me that I had been tryin' to jump their claim, which sartin' would rouse feelin's. In your case, as you were nohow consarned in the raid on the mine, it would be different, an' I 'lows you might find a way o' doin' the job easy an' slick. You kin plead self-defense, an' I promise you there will be plenty o' money to defend ye."

"It's the money fer the job I'm a-thinkin' of first, Bill," said Bob.

"A good clean thousan' dollars if you shoots the young gent with the mustache," whispered Bill.

"Do you mean it?" asked Bob, looking at him hard. "Where does it come from?"

"That I allow is none of your business. You has my word that you gets it. And I opine the word o' Cimarron Bill is knowed to be good."

"As his bond," said Gentle Bob, taking out a brace of pistols and looking them over. "I takes the job, Bill; and there sartin will be a funeral in these parts to-morrer."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BOXER CREATES A STIR.

When Frank and Bart came out of the hotel, with Boxer at their heels, they found a group of men on the steps engaged in earnest discussion. Immediately, on sight of the two young men and the dog, the babel of voices fell to a hush and the men all squared about and stared. But Merry immediately noticed that it was not at Bart or himself that they were staring, but at Boxer. The dog seemed to observe this, likewise, for he stopped short, with one paw uplifted, surveyed the men, and Frank, who was a clever ventriloquist, made the animal apparently say:

"Say, Frank, what do you suppose the ginnies are gawking at?"

"Mother av Moses!" cried an Irishman in the group. "Oi swear be all the saints the baste did spake!"

"Yah! yah!" chattered a pig-tailed Chinaman by the name of Sing Lee, who ran a laundry in town. "Dogee talkee allee samee likee Chinyman."

"Go on, you rat-eater!" contemptuously exclaimed the dog. "If I couldn't talk better than you I'd go drown myself!"

Needless to say this brought the excitement of the crowd to a high pitch.

Benchy and Spikes were on hand, and now the former appealed to Frank.

"Is that your dog?" he asked.

"Well, I lay claim to him," smiled Merry.

"He—he—can he talk?"

"Didn't you hear him?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well, what better evidence do you want than your own ears?"

"That's enough; but Schlitzenheimer called me names and said I was trying to put up a joke on him because I told him I heard the dog talk."

"Who's Schlitzenheimer?"

"He runs the saloon down the street right in front of which your dog whipped those other dogs what jumped on him. He's a black-headed Dutchman. Come on down and show him the dog."

"Come on!" cried others.

Merry didn't mind the lark, but he now turned to the dog, with a very serious expression on his face, saying:

"How about it, Boxer? I believe you told me you hold an antipathy against Dutchmen. Will you go down to Schlitzenheimer's with me?"

The dog seemed to hesitate, and then he answered:

"Oh, I don't care; go ahead. I'm not stuck on Dutchmen, but I'll teach this one a lesson."

"All right," said Merry. "Come on."

Benchy triumphantly led the way, being followed by Frank and Bart and the dog, with the crowd at the heels of them. The Irishman was protesting his wonderment, while the Chinaman chattered excitedly.

Within the hotel a man had been watching and listening. He was a bewhiskered ruffian, and he strode forth and followed the crowd to the Dutchman's saloon. Cimarron Bill watched his tool depart, smiling darkly and muttering to himself:

"Good-by, Bob! You're going up against a hard proposition in Frank Merriwell, and it's not likely you'll call to collect that little sum of money from me. All the same, I hope you get in a shot, for you shoot straight, and you may make a round sum for my pocket, as I'll compel the old lady to lay down the cash. I'll be able to scare her into it by threatening to tell the whole story and bring her into the game as an accomplice. That will yank her around to her feet in short order, I opine."

For all of Bill's reputation as a "killer," he was willing to let this piece of work over to the attention of another.

So Gentle Bob followed Merriwell, an evil purpose in his black heart, nor knew that his employer believed and half-hoped he might be going to his own end.

Benchy burst into the saloon, uttering a cry of triumph.

"Here comes the dog!" he said. "Now I have you, you old duffer! You'll find out he can talk."

Schlitzheimer stared at the door, through which the crowd followed Frank, and Bart, and the dog.

"Vos dot der tog?" he said.

"Do you take me for a monkey, you lobster-faced frankfurter?" saucily demanded the dog.

"Hey?" squawked the saloon-keeper, turning purple. "Vot id vos? Dit I hear correctness?"

"Be careful, Boxer," said Frank reprovingly. "Don't be so free with your lip. You may offend the gentleman."

"Gentleman!" exclaimed the setter, in a tone of profound contempt. "Do you call that sourkraut-barrel a gentleman? I'm surprised at you, Frank!"

At this there was a burst of laughter, and Schlitzheimer turned as red as he had been pale a moment before.

"Vot vor did dot tog wanted to insult me?" he exclaimed indignantly. "I dit not someding to him do!"

"Boxer, I'm surprised!" cried Frank. "You will get me into trouble with your careless language. I insist that you apologize immediately to the gentleman. I insist, sir!"

"Oh, very well," said the dog; "if you insist, I'll apologize. I was joking, anyway."

"And I add my own apology, Mr. Schlitzheimer," said Merry. "I hope this will be sufficient?"

"Oh, yah, dot peen all righdt," said the Dutchman at once. "But py dunder! der tickens id does peat to heard a tog dalking!"

"It's a good one on you, Fritz!" cried Benchy triumphantly. "Remember your agreement! You're stuck!"

"Vale, I will stood py dot agreements," said the saloon-keeper, rather reluctantly, "efen if in pusiness id does preak me up. Und I vill sdant treat der crowdt vor. Sdep up, eferpody, und your trink name."

"That's the talk!" cried the dog. "You're not such a bad fellow, Schlitzzy."

Schlitzheimer leaned on the bar with both hands and looked over at Boxer.

"Vot will you haf yourseluf?" he asked.

"Excuse me," said the setter; "I'm on the water-wagon. Go ahead, gentlemen, and don't mind me."

So they lined up in front of the bar, expressing their amazement over the accomplishment of the dog and burdening Merriwell with questions, all of which Frank cheerfully answered or skilfully evaded.

Boxer had been lifted and placed on one end of the bar, where he immediately sat, surveying the line of men with his clear, intelligent eyes.

"Hello, Mike!" he called to the Irishman. "When did you leave the Old Dart?"

"It's goin' on three year now," answered the son of the Old Sod civilly; "and me name's not Moike—it's Pat."

The dog seemed to wink shrewdly.

"It's all the same," he declared; "Mike or Pat makes no difference, as long as your last name is Murphy."

"But me last name's not Murphy at all, at all—it's O'Grady, av yez plaze."

"Thanks," snickered the dog. "I have it down pat now. It's a way I have of finding out a man's name when no one takes the trouble to introduce him. Drink hearty, Pat; the whisky'll add to the beautiful tint of your nose."

"Begorra! it's a divvil the crayther is!" muttered Pat, nudging his nearest neighbor.

"Ah, there, Chink!" called the setter, seeming to get his eye on the Chinaman, who was staring open-mouthed. "How's the washee-washee business?"

"Oh, velly good, velly good!" answered the Celestial hurriedly, backing off a little, his face yellowish white.

"Vele," said Schlitzenheimer, holding up a glass of beer; "here vos goot health to der smardest tog vot effer vos."

"Drink hearty," said Boxer; and, with the exception of Frank and Bart, all swallowed their drinks. Not wishing anything to drink, and still desiring to join in so that the saloon-keeper might not be offended, Frank and Bart had taken cigars, which they slipped into their pockets.

"Dot tog peen der vonder der vorld uf," said Schlitzenheimer, gazing admiringly at Boxer. "Vot vill you soldt him vor?"

"There's not enough money in Arizona to buy him from me," answered Frank at once.

"You know a good thing when you see it," chuckled the dog.

"Vos there anything exception talk vot he can do?" asked Fritz.

"Lots of things," answered Merry. "He can play cards."

"Beenuckle?" asked the Dutchman.

"You bet! He's a dabster at pinocle."

"Easy, Merry!" cautioned the setter, in a whisper. "If you want to skin the old bologna-sausage out of his shekels, don't puff me up. I can't beat him at his own game."

"Vale, I pet den tollars you can't dot do!" cried Schlitzenheimer. "I nefer vould acknowledgment dot a tog could peat me!"

Frank sternly turned on Boxer.

"What do you mean by getting me into such a scrape?" he demanded, shaking his finger at the setter. "You know I never gamble, and I will not bet on a game of cards. If you make any more such foolish talk, I'll not let you play at all."

The dog hung his head and looked quite ashamed.

"Beg pardon," he whined softly. "I was joking again!"

"I'll blay der fun uf him vor," said Schlitzenheimer. "Id vill peen a creat jokes to said I had a came uf beenuckle blayed mit a tog. Come on."

He hurried out from behind the bar.

"Begorra! Oi'd loike to take a hand in this!" cried Pat O'Grady, as a square table was drawn out and the cards produced. "It's a shlick game av peenockle Oi play."

"But three-handed——" said Frank.

"Be afther makin' the fourth yesilf."

"I have to hold the cards for Boxer, he having no hands of his own," explained Merry.

Then it was that Gentle Bob stepped forward, saying, in a very quiet voice and polite manner, that he would be pleased to enter the game.

Now, with the exception of Frank and Bart, all knew that Bob was a very bad man to offend, and so they were willing enough that he should play, and it was soon arranged.

Frank was keen enough to see in what manner the ruffianly looking fellow with the quiet voice was regarded, and, as he was not in Holbrook in search of a quarrel, he raised no dissent. However, he gave Hodge a look that Bart understood, and the silent youth nodded. From that moment Bart watched Gentle Bob closely.

The crowd drew about the table, eager to witness a game of cards in which a dog took part.

Merry sat on a short bench, with Boxer at his side. The cards were cut, and the deal fell to Schlitzenheimer.

"Be careful, Dutchy," advised Boxer. "We're watching you, and you'd better not try any slick tricks."

"Eferything on der lefel shall pe," assured the saloon-keeper, pulling at his long pipe.

O'Grady was likewise smoking, and his pipe contrasted ludicrously with that of Schlitzenheimer.

When the cards were dealt, it fell the dog's turn to meld first. Frank spread out the cards and held them in front of Boxer's nose.

"I will meld one hundred aces," said the dog. "Put 'em down, Frank."

Merry did so.

"Sixty queens," called Boxer, and Merry spread them out.

"Lally ka lolly loka!" chattered Sing Lee, or something like that; whereupon Boxer seemed to fix the Chinaman with a scornful stare, and observed:

"You ought to take something for that. It must be painful."

"Gleatee Sklot!" gasped the Celestial. "Dogee hab a debbil!" And he backed away.

"That's right," said Boxer. "I like you a long distance off, the longer the distance the better I like you."

"Pay attention to the game," said Frank. "Are you going to meld anything else?"

"Forty trumps, twenty spades, and twenty hearts," said Boxer.

"Dunder!" muttered Schlitzenheimer, and his hands trembled so that he dropped some of the cards.

"Get a basket," snickered the dog; and the crowd laughed loudly at the saloon-keeper's expense.

When all the melding was finished they prepared to play.

"I'll lead the ace of trumps," said Boxer.

Frank ran the cards over.

"It's here," he said. "But I didn't see it."

"What's the matter with your eyes?" snapped the dog. "Didn't I meld one hundred aces? You ought to learn something about this game!"

"I seldom play cards," said Merry apologetically.

"Well, you want to keep your eyes open!" exclaimed Boxer sharply. "These chaps may try to skin us."

At this Gentle Bob looked up and said:

"I do not mind a little faking none whatever, but I sure objects to being called a skin, either by a dog or his master, so I opine it will be best for somebody to apologize."

And, as he made this remark, he suddenly whipped forth a pistol, with which he covered both Frank and the dog, but held the weapon more in Merry's direction.

Cimarron Bill's tool had found the opportunity he sought, and he meant to make the most of it.

Merry saw in the fellow's eyes the full extent of his evil purpose.

"If the apology is not forthcoming instanter," murmured the ruffian, "I shall puncture the wonderful talking dog with a bullet!"

Now, it seemed that Bob had Frank at a great disadvantage, but at this point Bart Hodge shoved the muzzle of a pistol against the fellow's ear and harshly commanded:

"Put up that gun—instanter! If you don't I'll blow the whole top of your head off!"

But Bart had made a miscalculation, for Gentle Bob had not come alone to the saloon, having noted well that Frank Merriwell had a friend. He had picked up a chap of his own sort, and now this fellow had a gun at Bart's head.

"You're the one who'll lose the ruff o' his head!" he said. "You put up your gun!"

Gentle Bob still sat pistol in hand, but Boxer had taken advantage of an opportunity to drop down from the bench to the floor.

Of a sudden there came a wild yell from Bob, who kicked out with his feet and flung himself backward, his pistol being discharged straight up at the ceiling.

Boxer had seized him by the leg beneath the table.

Instantly there was a fearful uproar in the saloon. The action of the dog had disconcerted the plans of every one. Hodge ducked and whirled, catching the ruffian at his back a fearful blow on the solar plexus that drove him slam against the bar, and he went down and "out."

Merry went across the table in a leap at Gentle Bob, from whom he tore the revolver that the fellow was trying to use on Boxer.

"Let up, boy," said Frank to the dog. "I'll attend to his case."

Boxer seemed reluctant to let go, but he did so at the second command.

Merriwell pinned Bob down and deftly disarmed him, removing every weapon, which he passed over to Schlitzenheimer.

"Take care of these tools, sir," he said, "until I leave town. It will save this fellow's life—perhaps."

"Und dot vill peen a pity!" muttered the saloon-keeper, who had no love for the ruffian, but held him in great awe.

Having disarmed Bob, Merry rose and commanded him to get up. The fellow rose immediately and sprang at Frank, trying to strike him.

Boxer would have mingled in, but Bart held him in check, saying:

"Keep out of it. Frank can attend to that case now without any of your aid."

Hodge was not mistaken, as Merriwell quickly demonstrated. He avoided the blows of the ruffian and quickly knocked him down. Bob rose, only to be struck in the eye and sent to the floor again. Four times this happened, and then Merry picked the wretch up, carried him bodily to the door, and kicked him into the street, observing:

"If you come back here or bother me again, I'll send you to the hospital for a month!"

And the dog barked with great satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BOXER TO THE RESCUE.

The second ruffian was ejected, and Frank and the talking dog were regarded with unbounded admiration by every one present.

"I neffer haf seen Shentle Pob done upness pefore," remarked Schlitzenheimer. "He vos a pad man."

"You bettee!" put in Sing Lee, who crept forth from behind a barrel, where he had taken refuge during the encounter. "Him velly bad. Him shootee, stabbee, killee."

"An' so he will," nodded Pat O'Grady, seeming quite concerned. "It's me opinion he wur lookin' fer throuble whin he came here."

"Well, he found it," smiled Merry.

"That's what!" said Boxer, wagging his tail and looking up at Frank knowingly. "But he tasted disagreeable. You don't suppose it will make me sick, do you?"

Frank stooped and patted the dog's head.

"I hope not," he laughed. "You got hold of his leg just in time, old boy."

"Oh, I didn't dally when I saw him throw his gun out," said Boxer, winking rapidly with both eyes. "I allowed he was going to begin shooting directly."

"Uf you vould tookit my device," said Schlitzenheimer, "you couldt out uf dis town get a hurriness indo."

"Thot's roight," nodded O'Grady. "It's moighty dangerous to remain after this, Oi know."

"Pob vill got vor heemseluf another gun, und he vill look vor you on der sdreet," declared the saloon-keeper.

"Well, he may find us, eh, Boxer?" smiled Frank.

"Sure thing," said the dog. "And I reckon you can shoot as quick and as straight as he can."

Schlitzenheimer shook his head and averred that Bob was the greatest pistol-shot known in those parts, which, however, did not seem to alarm Frank Merriwell in the least.

Suddenly there came a scream from the street, the voice being that of a girl, and the sound indicating that she was in great fear and distress.

Frank sprang to the open door, Boxer barking at his heels, and Hodge was not slow in following.

The cry had issued from the lips of June Arlington, who was then on her way to the post-office to mail the letter she had written, not wishing her mother to see it.

June had arrived in the vicinity of the saloon as Gentle Bob was turning away. She noted that the man's face was cut and bruised and one eye was swollen. His appearance led her to look at him with something like sympathy, when, of a sudden, he turned on her, smiling evilly, and seized her arm.

"Derned ef you ain't a right peert gal!" said the fellow insolently. "Gimme a kiss, sweetness."

Then June screamed and tried to break away, striking at him with her clenched fist. She was frightened and angry.

"Stop yer squarmin'!" snarled the fellow, who had thought to kiss her quickly before she could make much resistance, and then hasten along, it being his intention to boast of what he had done.

But June would not stop. She saw a tall, athletic young man come bounding through an open doorway into the street, followed closely by a dog and another young man. Her eyes recognized the one in advance, and she cried out:

"Mr. Merriwell, help—help, quick!"

With a growl of rage, Gentle Bob released her and turned. As he did so, the dog, terrible in his fury, shot past Frank, and made a great spring through the air straight at Bob's throat.

Bob threw up his arm, and the teeth of the dog fastened on it. The force of the creature's leap hurled the ruffian backward.

The man went down in the dust, and Boxer was at him with all the fury of a mad animal. He would have torn the wretch to pieces right before their eyes, but Frank fearlessly grasped the dog and pulled him away, at the same time crying commandingly to him.

"Keep him off!" palpitated Bob, now filled with a great terror for the fierce animal. "Don't let him touch me ag'in! He's near bit me to pieces now!"

"You got just what you deserved, and no more, you miserable creature!" said Frank indignantly.

Then he turned and asked June what Bob had been doing.

"Oh, he grasped me, and he tried to kiss me!"

"Did he!" grated Merry, very white. "Then I should have let Boxer finish him!"

"No, no!" gasped June.

"No, no!" exclaimed Bob.

"On your knees!" cried Frank, in ringing tones—"on your knees and apologize to the young lady! If you don't do it, so help me, I'll let Boxer get at you again!"

Bob did not hesitate. Ruffian and desperado though he was reputed to be, he cast himself on his knees before June and humbly begged her pardon, all the while watching Boxer, who glared back at him and licked his chops.

"Get up and go, you pitiful coward!" said Frank. "Keep out of my sight while I'm in town, and be careful not to try any dirty tricks. If you hurt me, Boxer will eat you up; if you hurt Boxer, I'll have your life! Go!"

The wretch lost not a moment in getting away.

Frank stooped and picked up the letter June had dropped. He was restoring it to her when his eye caught the address upon it, and he stared in astonishment.

"MR. RICHARD MERRIWELL,
"Fardale."

That was the name and address he read. Then he looked closely at June and recognized her.

"Miss Arlington?" he exclaimed, his hat in his hand; "is it possible?"

The color was coming back into her cheeks.

"Mr. Merriwell," she said, "let me thank you for coming so quickly to my assistance."

"It was Boxer who got there first. But I'm amazed to see you here—here in Arizona."

"I don't doubt it."

"What brings you to this place?"

"I came with my mother."

"Your—your mother?" he said, still further astonished. "And your father—he is here, also?"

"No, sir."

"He is coming?"

"No, sir, I believe not."

Merry had thought at once that there might be a very good reason why D. Roscoe Arlington should come to Holbrook to learn just how well the hired ruffians of the syndicate had performed their tasks, but the presence there of Mrs. Arlington and June, without D. Roscoe, rather bewildered him.

June looked back toward the hotel windows, thinking it must be that her mother had heard her cry and would be looking forth; but was relieved to see nothing of the lady.

"You were on your way to mail this letter?" said Frank, divining her destination.

"Yes."

"May I accompany you, to make sure you are not molested further?"

She accepted his escort. Bart had lingered near, and Frank presented him.

"An old school and college chum, Miss Arlington," he said, "and one of my closest friends."

Bart lifted his hat and bowed, smiling a bit on the pretty girl. In his way, which was dark and silent, he was almost every bit as handsome as Frank himself, and it is no cause of wonderment that June could not wholly repress the flash of admiration that came into her splendid eyes.

On his part, Bart was quite smitten with her, and he stood watching Frank walk away at her side, Boxer following, smiling without envy, yet thinking his friend fortunate to have the company of such a charming girl for even a brief time in that part of the country.

Frank found himself somewhat embarrassed, not a little to his surprise, as he walked down the street with June. The girl was the daughter of the man who was doing his best to bring upon Merriwell complete ruin—or seemed to be doing his best to that end, for Frank could not know that all his trouble at the Queen Mystery had not risen directly from D. Roscoe Arlington. Much less did he suspect that any great part of it came without Mr. Arlington's knowledge and through the vengeful malice of Mrs. Arlington.

It was not agreeable to speak of this matter with June, and still in his heart Merry was more than eager to know what had brought the girl to Holbrook. He had not forgotten that it was the hand of June that had restored to him the precious papers relating to the mines when those papers had been stolen from him in Fardale, a service for which he remained grateful.

Further than this, Frank had learned that Dick had a deep interest in June—so deep, indeed, that the boy himself did not quite suspect its measure. Merry had been able to read his brother, and his good sense told him beyond question that never would Dick hold his hand from the person of his most persistent enemy simply because that enemy's sister thus entreated him, unless there was back of it all a feeling of affection for the sister that was of no small magnitude.

That June cared something for Dick, Merry more than half-suspected, and the sight of the name on the letter she now carried in her hand seemed very good evidence that this was not false fancy on his part, for did she not care for the lad far away in Fardale, then why should she write to him?

It was June herself who relieved Frank's embarrassment by earnestly turning to him and beginning speech.

"Mr. Merriwell," she said, with such a sober face that he was greatly surprised, "I have wanted to see you since you came into town."

"Then you knew I had entered town?"

"I saw you; and I have wanted to speak with you to warn you."

"To warn me?" said Frank. "Of what?"

"Of your great danger, for you are in danger here. You have in this town a man who would kill you."

"I think we lately parted from such a man," smiled Merry.

"But he is not the one."

"Is there another?"

"Oh, yes! I saw him! Perhaps I saved your life."

At this Frank gave a great start of surprise and asked her how that could be, upon which she told him how Cimarron Bill had shot at him from the window, and how she had spoiled the aim of the would-be murderer. She held back the fact that the man had fired from one of the windows of her mother's rooms, and that her mother had shortly before been in consultation with him. Still Frank was keen enough to see that she was hiding something, and he had the good discernment to come close to guessing the truth.

"Miss Arlington," he said, "it seems that I owe you my life. I heard the shot, but I could not be sure it was fired at me. If I mistake not, the man who fired it has a deadly aim, and I could not have escaped but for your quickness in spoiling his sight. I owe you a great deal more than I can ever repay."

June knew something of the truth, and she was aware that her father was concerned in a movement the accomplishment of which meant ruin to both Frank and Dick; therefore this acknowledgment by Frank of his indebtedness to her caused her to flush with shame.

"It is I who owe you a great deal!" she exclaimed. "See what you have just done—saved me from a ruffian! But your brother—Dick—he did more. He saved me once from the fangs of furious dogs, at another time from being killed in a runaway, and that is not all. It is I who owe you much more than I can ever repay. My brother"—she choked a little—"my brother is Dick's enemy, yet, for a promise to me, Dick has been easy with him and has not forced him in disgrace from Fardale. Oh, Mr. Merriwell!" she suddenly exclaimed, feeling her utter inability to express herself, "it seems to me that never before was a girl placed in such a position as I find myself in! What can I do?"

"You can do nothing, Miss June," he said gently. "You are not to blame for anything that may happen, and I shall not forget that. I am very sorry for you, as I fancy you must be far from comfortable."

At this her pride returned, and she straightened, thinking she could not acknowledge to him that her people were in the wrong.

"You know there is always two sides to any question," she said, "and there may be as much of right on one side as the other. I presume my father has every reason to think himself right."

Now, June knew that it was her mother who hated Dick and Frank with undying intensity, while her father cared very little about either of the Merriwells, save that he had been led to wonder immoderately at the success of Frank in fighting the syndicate; but she wished to avoid the shame of confessing that her mother had such a vengeful nature and could enter with vindictiveness into an affair that might well be left to men.

Frank had no desire to hurt her feelings. He understood her pride and sensitiveness, and he said:

"It is very likely you are correct about that. At any rate, we will not argue it. It is no matter for us to speak of, as what we might say would not change the situation in the least. Still, if I should become satisfied that your father had the right in this thing, even though it stripped me of my last dollar and made me a beggar, I would surrender to him immediately."

She did not doubt him then, and she saw that the character of Frank Merriwell was one to be admired, his one concern being for perfect and complete justice, even though by justice he might be the sufferer. Inwardly she was struck with the conviction that her father seldom made inquiry into the justice of any project he wished to carry through, his one concern being to accomplish his ends by any method whatever, so long as it did not involve him in difficulties of a nature too serious.

"Mr. Merriwell," she said quickly, "you must leave Holbrook just as soon as you can!"

"Why?"

"The man who tried to shoot you is here—the man with the wicked face and evil eyes."

"I am not given to running away from one man."

"It's not that. He is an assassin! See how he tried to kill you without giving you a show! You don't know what moment he may try it again. If he were to meet you face to face it would be different. You cannot defend yourself from attacks in the dark. You have no show."

"Well, there is some truth in that," smiled Merry.

"He will attack you that way again. I know it! He will strike at you from behind."

"Possibly."

"You must go! You must leave Holbrook before dark!"

"I hardly fancy it," muttered Frank, frowning. "I do not like the notion. It leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth to think of running away from Cimarron Bill."

For, although June had not mentioned the ruffian by name, not knowing it herself, her description of him had satisfied Frank that it could be no other than the baffled scoundrel who had twice attempted to seize the Queen Mystery Mine.

"But you will go?" she urged.

"I'll think of it."

They had reached the post-office and were now standing in front of the building. Bart Hodge was sauntering slowly in their direction on the opposite side of the street, having kept within easy pistol-shot of Frank all the while.

Frank's words did not satisfy June. He saw she was in distress.

"If you will not go for your own sake," she said, "please do for mine."

He looked astonished.

"For your sake?" he said. "Why, I had not an idea in the world that it could be of so much concern to you. I'm afraid I do not understand why it should be. Now, if Dick——"

She stopped him with a gesture, her face flushing very warm.

"Don't!" she entreated, in a low voice. "At least, you are his own brother! But it is for my sake more than yours. I cannot explain. Do not embarrass me! But promise me you will go—for my sake!"

Having a quick perception, Frank suddenly fancied he caught an inkling of the truth. In that moment he saw Mrs. Arlington dealing with Cimarron Bill. It was a conjecture, but it struck him hard as the truth.

This, then, was the reason why June wished him to flee from Holbrook. She feared that her mother somehow would become involved in the murder in case Cimarron Bill should carry into execution his dastardly purpose.

Of course, it was not possible for him to be sure he had struck upon the truth.

"It is hard for me to refuse a girl when she corners me like this," he smiled.

"You'll go?" persisted June.

"If you insist."

"Oh, thank you—thank you! I shall not breathe easy until I know you are well out of this dreadful place."

"And I shall not breathe easy as long as I know you remain here, where you may become subject to such insults as to-day happened. It is no place for you at the present time. Holbrook is well enough in its way; but you are too pretty to walk its streets without an escort. Western gentlemen are gentlemen in every sense of the word, and no man can hold the honor of a lady more sacred; but Western ruffians are dangerous, and it seems there are several of the latter class in this place."

"I must remain while mother stays here; I must stay with her."

The letter was dropped in the post-office, and June urged Frank to depart at once; but he insisted on escorting her back to the hotel.

Boxer kept close to their heels, seeming to listen to their conversation at times; but, strange though it may appear, he made no attempt to take part in it, nor did he speak as much as one word during all the time that he seemed neglected by his master.

Frank made a sign to Bart, who crossed the street and joined them.

"I have decided to leave town right away," said Merry. "Have the horses saddled and prepared. We'll start as soon as I have escorted Miss Arlington back to the hotel."

Hodge looked surprised.

"The horses are in no condition, Frank," he said. "You know they are in sore need of a good rest."

"I know it, Bart; but I have a reason for this. We'll go. Get them ready, please."

"All right," said Bart, as he turned away to carry out instructions.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNTO DEATH!

The sun was down in the west and night was gathering over the face of the world when Frank and Bart rode forth from Holbrook, setting their faces to the southwest. Boxer trotted behind them.

They were not molested, although Frank remained in constant expectation of an attack until they were fairly clear of the place and had it a long rifle-shot at their backs.

The blue night grew upon the distant plain, and the stars were coming forth over their heads as they rode down into the distance, the beating hoofs of the ponies making rhythm on the baked ground. The first cool breath of night touched their heated cheeks with grateful kisses.

"How did you happen to do it, Frank?" asked Bart.

"I found out a thing or two," Merry answered. "Cimarron Bill is in town, and he was watching his chance to get another shot at me."

"Another?" exclaimed Bart; upon which Merry explained how Bill had fired at him already.

"It was rather dangerous to stay there, and I couldn't resist when a pretty girl took enough interest in me to urge me to get away," Frank laughed. "We had some sport with our talking dog, and now——"

"You can't mean to ride far?"

"Remember the hut we passed on the way into town? It's not very far. We'll stop there to-night."

"Good!" said Bart; and they rode on.

Coming to the deserted hut, they stopped there. The horses were cared for, and Frank and Bart entered the hut with their blankets, where they prepared to sleep until toward morning, planning to rise before daybreak and get an early start, so that some distance could be covered ere the sun rose.

Both of the young men were weary, and they lost little time in drawing their blankets about them and rolling on the floor. Boxer curled in a corner and went to sleep. The door of the hut was left open to admit the cool night air.

Frank fell asleep at once, and Bart was not slow in following his example.

They were awakened in the middle of the night by a snarl, a cry, a struggle, and a fall. Both sat up, grasping their weapons.

The moon was up, and by its light, which streamed in at the wide-open door, a man and a dog were seen struggling on the floor. The dog was Boxer, who had leaped at the throat of the man as he came slipping in at the open door.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Hodge. "What's the meaning of this?"

"One of my friends has arrived," said Frank. "Boxer has him."

The struggle was fierce and terrible. The dog seemed to have the man by the throat. Before either Merry or Hodge could interfere the moonlight glinted on something bright in the hand of the man, who struck and struck again.

Not a sound came from the dog. But the bright thing in the man's hand grew suddenly dark.

"Heavens!" gasped Frank, leaping forward. "He has a knife!"

Then a terrible sound came from the throat of the man, and he lifted his arm no more. The thing in his hand, dark and dripping, fell to the floor of the hut.

A moment later the man rolled into the shadow, and then Boxer was seen dragging himself away, while the man lay still.

"Boxer! Boxer!" cried Frank, bending over the dog. "Are you hurt, boy? Merciful goodness! he ripped your whole side open with that knife!"

Hodge struck a light and bent over the man who lay in the shadow. When the match burned out in his fingers he dropped it and stepped out to join Merriwell, who had picked up the dog and carried the creature into the open air.

Bart found Merry sitting on the ground, with the dog in his arms. Boxer had been cut in a terrible manner, and was bleeding in a way that plainly told his end was near.

"Oh, the wretch!" choked Merry, in a husky voice. "Oh, the wretch who did this! He ought to be hanged!"

"No need of hanging for him," said Hodge. "He'll be beyond that in less than three minutes."

"You mean——"

"He's pretty near dead now. Boxer's teeth found his jugular vein."

"Who was it, Bart?"

"The fellow who made the row in Schlitzenheimer's saloon."

"Gentle Bob?"

"Yes."

"One of Cimarron Bill's hired tools, or I am mistaken! He followed us here and tried to creep in on us with that knife, meaning to finish the job at which he failed in town. Boxer saved us. Good old Boxer! Poor old Boxer!"

The dog whined a little on hearing this name from Frank's lip's, and feebly wagged his tail. The moonlight showed his eyes turned toward Merry's face.

"Is it so bad there's no show for him?" asked Hodge, in genuine distress.

"No show!" sobbed Frank. "He's finished, Bart! It's a shame! The most knowing dog in the whole world! And he has to die like this, killed by a human being that is more of a beast than he!"

"It's a shame!" said Bart.

The dog licked Frank's hand. Merry bowed his head, and tears started from his eyes.

"Poor Boxer!" he choked. "Boxer, we have to part here. You're going to another country, where I must follow in time. It's all up with you. You may find your first master over there; but he'll never love you more than I have. Good-by, Boxer!"

The dog uttered a whine. And so his life ended in Frank's arms, with the moonlight falling on them and the stillness of the Arizona night all around.

Hodge entered the hut, only to come forth, bringing the blankets and looking very sick.

"For Heaven's sake, let's get away from here!" he exclaimed.

"The man in there?"

"Dead!" said Bart. "The place is gory! I'm faint from it!"

Boxer's body was wrapped in a blanket, and they mounted and rode away, Frank carrying the dead dog in his arms to find a burial place where there could be no chance that his body should be exhumed by any prowling thing of the desert.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COMING OF CROWFOOT.

Rap! rap! rap!

"Wait a minute!" called Frank. "No need to knock the door down!"

He flung the door of his cabin wide open, standing on the threshold.

It was early dawn in Mystery Valley. Sunrise was beginning to gild the barren peaks of the Mogollons. The new day had come to its birth in a splendid glow, and the world smiled refreshed after the cooling sleep of the departed night.

Frank was just risen and not yet fully dressed, but about his waist was his cartridge-belt, and his pistol swung ready in the holster at his hip. He had no use for the weapon, however.

Outside the door stood old Joe Crowfoot, his blanket drawn about his shoulders. Those keen eyes gazed on Merry with an expression of friendly greeting.

With a shout of surprise and joy, Frank clasped the old redskin in his arms in the most affectionate manner.

"Old Joe Crowfoot, as I live!" he cried, showing unusual excitement and delight. "Why, you old reprobate, here you come popping back from the grave after I've been mourning you as dead! What do you mean by it, you villain?"

"Ugh!" grunted old Joe, something like a merry twinkle in those beady eyes. "Strong Heart him think Crowfoot dead, eh?"

"Hang me if I didn't!"

"Crowfoot him heap tough; no die easy," declared the Indian.

"I should say not! Why, you tricky scoundrel, they told me you were done for."

"Who tell so?"

"Some of Cimarron Bill's delectable gang. They averred they had disposed of you for good and all."

"Waugh! No let such cheap carrion kill me!" said Joe. "They mebbe think some they do it. Joe he fool um heap lot."

"But where have you been?"

"Oh, all away round," was the answer, with a wide sweep of the arm. "Joe him scout—him find out how land lay. Do a little biz."

"Do business? What sort of business?"

"Catch the sucker some."

"Catch the sucker? What's that?"

The redskin flung open his dirty red blanket and tapped a fat belt about his waist, which gave back a musical clink.

"Play the game of poke'," he exclaimed. "Make heap plenty mon'."

"You've been gambling again?"

"Strong Heart him guess," nodded Joe, with something like a sly smile.

"You villain! And I'll wager you got away with your ill-gotten spoils."

"Heap do so," said Joe. "Have some firewater. Find one, two, three, four crooked paleface follow to kill and rob. Let firewater 'lone till fool crooked palefaces so um no follow some more. Then go safe place drink firewater a heap."

"You've been drunk, too!" cried Merry.

"Mebbe so," admitted the Indian. "White man firewater heap good while um last; heap bad when um gone. Make um feel much glad at first, then much sorry little time after."

Frank laughed heartily at the queer manner of the old Indian as he said this.

"I suppose that's about right," he said. "I've never tried it to find out."

"Strong Heart him no try firewater?" exclaimed Joe, in surprise. "Crowfoot him think all paleface drink the firewater."

"Well, here is one who doesn't. I've seen too much trouble come from the stuff."

"Ugh! Strong Heart him got heap more sense than anybody Joe ever see," asserted the Indian admiringly. "Once git taste of firewater, always be heap fool and drink him some. Many times old Joe he say no drink some more. Head all swell, middle all sick, mouth all dry, taste nasty a lot, bone ache—then him say no more the firewater. Mebbe he go 'long some time, but bimeby he take it some more. White man make firewater. Bad! bad! bad! No firewater made, nobody drink it."

From inside the cabin a voice called.

"What, ho! Methinks thou hast found a philosopher, Merry! Bring the sage in that I may survey him with my heavenly blue eyes."

"Yes, dew!" drawled another voice. "I want to set my eyes onter him, by gum!"

Merry led the old Indian into the cabin.

"Here he is," Merry laughed. "Crowfoot, these are some of my friends, whom you met last summer. You remember them. They played ball with me in the Mad River country."

"Ugh!" grunted the redskin. "Heap remember!"

Bart Hodge stepped forward, his hand outstretched to the Indian.

"I am glad to see you again, Crowfoot," he said.

"Me same," said Joe, shaking Bart's hand. "You heap good to ketch hard ball when Strong Heart him make it go fast like a bullet and man with stick he—whish!—strike at it so, no hit it at all."

They all laughed at the Indian's manner of describing Bart's skill at catching.

"Consarned if it ain't a sight fer sore eyes to see ye, Mr. Crowfoot!" said Ephraim Gallup, as he froze to the redskin's hand and shook it warmly. "Yeou was the best mascot a baseball-team ever hed."

"How! how!" said the old fellow. "Nose Talk him stand way out far, ketch ball when it come there. How! how!"

"Nose Talk!" laughed Frank. "Well, that's one on you, Gallup!"

Jack Ready was smiling blandly. He gave his hand a little flirt in salute, and stepped forward with an odd movement.

"Gaze on my classic features, Joseph Crowfoot, Esquire," he invited. "See if you can recollect what I did in the game."

"Sure remember," nodded Crowfoot. "Talk-talk a heap, no do much else."

Then the joke was on Jack, and even Bart Hodge was forced to smile, while Gallup gave Ready a resounding smack on the shoulder with his open hand.

"Bless my punkins!" snickered the Vermonter. "That's a thunderin' good one on you, Jack!"

Ready looked sad.

"Alas!" he sighed. "Is it thus I am to be defamed! And by a copper-colored aborigine! The thought is gall to my sensitive soul! I shall peek and pine over it! For days to come no sweet smile shall adorn my beautiful features!"

Joe looked puzzled.

"No say something bad," he declared. "When Red Cheek him talk-talk a heap lot other man that throw ball he got a lot mixed, no make good pitch. Red Cheek him help win game a heap."

Jack's face cleared at once.

"Crowfoot, you have poured soothing balm on my wounded heart!" he cried. "I'm glad to know that I do amount to something, for, so help me! of late I have begun to wonder what I was made for!"

"Sit down, Joe," invited Frank. "We're going to have breakfast in a short time, and you are to eat with us."

"Ugh!" said the Indian, disdainingly a chair and sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. "Joe him do so. Him a heap empty. Mebbe after him eat him tell Strong Heart something much good to hear."

When breakfast was over the old Indian lighted his rank pipe and smoked contentedly, still sitting on the floor, with his back against the wall.

Through the open door came the sounds of work at the mine. Frank was not yet running the mine day and night, with shifts of men, but it was his intention to do so later. Smoke was rising from the high pipe of the stamp-mill, and soon the stamps began to rumble and roar, awaking the echoes of the valley. The sound was a pleasant one in Merriwell's ears.

"This running a mine in Arizona is a snap," said Jack Ready, as he elevated his feet to the top of

the table, in which the breakfast-dishes and remnants of the meal remained. "The hardest part of it seems to be washing the dishes. It's Gallup's turn this morning."

"Not by a thuttering sight!" exclaimed Ephraim. "Yeou can't shoulder that onter me! You've gotter wash the dishes to-day. I done it yisterday."

"Is it possible!" cried Jack. "Why, I thought it was day before yesterday, or, perchance, the day before that. Alas, how time flies—tempus fugit!"

"Now, don't go to springin' any Latin on us!" growled Gallup. "You never learned enough Latin to hurt ye, an' ye don't want to try to show off."

"Behold how the green-eyed monster turneth a friend into a critic!" said Jack.

"You can attend to the dishes later," said Frank. "Just now I am anxious to hear the good news Crowfoot said he might have to tell. What is it, Joe?"

"Some time little while 'go, few days, you be in Holbrook?" questioned the Indian, pulling away at his pipe.

"Yes, I was there—Hodge and myself."

"Joe him been there since."

"And you bring good news from that place?"

"Heap good to Strong Heart. In Holbrook him find white woman who hate him a lot, eh? White woman she is the squaw of man who make for Strong Heart big trouble 'bout mine."

"You mean Mrs. Arlington?"

"Ugh! Mebbe that her name."

"That is it. She is in Holbrook, or was a few days ago."

"She hate Strong Heart a heap."

"I reckon she does," nodded Frank, wondering how the old redskin found out so much.

"She come to get bad men to take mine."

"Possibly that is right."

"Joe him know it. She make much business with Cim'run Bill."

"That I suspected, although I did not find it out for a certainty while in Holbrook."

"It so."

"Go on."

"She give Bill heap much mon' to buy bad men to take from Strong Heart the mine."

"Is that so?"

"Waugh! Joe him find out. Joe he play sharp; he listen."

"Crowfoot, you're as good as a detective."

"No know 'bout that. Find out white squaw she hate Strong Heart, then try to find out more. Now squaw she heap sorry she come to Holbrook."

"She is sorry?"

"Heap so."

"Why?"

"She have papoose girl with her—young squaw."

"Her daughter June."

"Ugh! Now she no have young squaw."

"What's that? What do you mean by that. What has become of June?"

"You tell," said Joe, with a strange gesture. "She gone. Old squaw tear hair, tear run from her eye, she make a loud weep. Ha! Now you hear good news, Strong Heart! Now you know your enemy have the great sorrow! That make your heart much glad!"

But Frank was on his feet now, his face rather pale and a look of excitement in his eyes.

"See here, Crowfoot," he said, "do you mean to tell me that June Arlington has disappeared and that her mother does not know what has become of her?"

Joe nodded.

"Laugh!" he said. "Laugh, Strong Heart!"

But Frank did not laugh; instead, to the wonderment of the Indian, he betrayed both consternation and dismay.

"Are you sure of this, Joe?" he demanded. "How long had the girl been missing when you left Holbrook?"

"The sun had slept once."

"By which you mean that one night had passed?"

"Ugh!"

"Then this is serious, indeed! Something most unfortunate has happened, or June Arlington would not be missing overnight. Boys, prepare at once to start for Holbrook! Get ready to mount and ride as fast as horseflesh can carry us; We'll start at the earliest moment possible!"

Crowfoot arose, a look of wonderment in his dark eyes. He reached out and grasped Frank's arm.

"What would Strong Heart do?" he asked.

"I'm going to Holbrook hotfoot," was the answer. "I'm going to find out, if possible, what has happened to June Arlington, and I shall do my best to return her to her mother, if she has not already returned when I reach there."

The redskin's hand dropped from Merriwell's arm and the old fellow stared at the white man in uncomprehending amazement.

"Why so?" he asked. "Paleface squaw she hate you, she is your enemy. Now she have something to think a heap of, and no time to make trouble for Strong Heart. He should have a great happiness that it is so. Why does he hurry to the bad white squaw? Is it to laugh at her? Is it to see her weep and cry?"

"No, Crowfoot; it is to find out, if possible, what has happened to the girl, just as I said a moment ago, and to return her to her mother."

The Indian shook his head.

"Waugh! No understand!" he declared. "Strong Heart him much strange."

"Joe, will you go with us? You shall have a good horse. I may need your aid. Will you go?"

"Joe him go. No understand; him go, all same."

"Then hustle, fellows!" cried Frank. "We'll be off soon!"

He rushed from the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ARRESTED IN HOLBROOK.

Another morning was dawning when five weary horses bore five persons into the town of Holbrook. The animals had been pushed to the utmost, and the riders showed signs of deep fatigue. The dust of the desert lay white upon men and beasts.

At the head of the party rode Frank Merriwell, showing of them all the least weariness, his lips pressed together with an expression of grim determination.

Bart, Jack, and Ephraim were behind, with old Joe bringing up the rear.

Straight to the hotel they went, where Frank learned immediately that Mrs. Arlington was still there, and he also found out that she was very ill, having been completely prostrated by the vanishing of June, who was still missing.

When Frank asked to see the woman he was told that the doctor attending her had said no one was to see her without his permission.

"Then I must see that doctor in a hurry," Merry declared. "Where can I find him?"

He was directed and hastened to the home of the doctor, who proved to be a red-faced, pompous little fellow.

"Impossible to see the lady," declared the doctor. "She has heart trouble, and it might prove fatal. I cannot permit it."

"See here, doctor," said Frank, "I have ridden a right good distance to see her, having heard of the disappearance of her daughter June. I have come to see what I can do about tracing the missing girl and restoring her to her mother. To start the work right, I should have an interview with the lady."

"Hum! hum!" coughed the doctor. "I don't know about it." He shook his head, but Merriwell

caught his eye and continued to talk earnestly until the man gradually ceased his opposition.

"I'm afraid it's not just the wisest thing," he said. "But still it is anxiety over her daughter that has brought her to this pitiful condition. If you can do anything to relieve that anxiety, it may be better than medicine. But you must take care not to excite her more than possible."

This Frank readily promised, and they set out for the hotel.

Having ascended to the rooms occupied by Mrs. Arlington and those she had brought with her, the doctor entered first, being admitted by the faithful colored maid. In a few moments he came out and said:

"I forgot to ask your name, but Mrs. Arlington says she will see you. Come in."

Frank followed the doctor into the room.

Mrs. Arlington, partly dressed, was reclining on a couch, propped up amid cushions. She was very pale and showed signs of great worry and grief.

The moment her eyes rested on Frank, who came forward, hat in hand, she gave a great cry and started up. The doctor hurried to her side, cautioning her against becoming excited, but she appeared to heed him not in the least.

"You?" she cried, pointing at Frank. "You have dared to come here?"

Merry bowed.

"I know of no reason why I should not come here," he said. "I have heard of your misfortune, and —"

"Wretch!" the woman panted, glaring at him. "How dare you! I'll have you arrested at once!"

Frank was surprised by this reception, but he kept his composure, although he was struck by a thought that the woman must be mad.

"Why should you have me arrested?" he asked. "For defending my property? I scarcely think you will do that, madam!"

"You—you scoundrel!" panted Mrs. Arlington, pointing at him. "Where is my daughter? You shall never leave this place until you restore her to me!"

This did stagger Merry somewhat.

"Mrs. Arlington," he said, "I have come to offer my services in searching for your daughter. If I can be of any assistance——"

"You—you lured her away!" declared the shaking woman. "You were seen talking with her on the street. Is this the way you defend your property? I know your game! You mean to make me promise to drop the battle against you, on which condition you will restore June to me! I have been told that you would try that trick! But I am ready for you, and you shall be arrested immediately. You have walked into the trap!"

"My dear woman," said Merry quietly, "you never were more mistaken in all your life. I know absolutely nothing of the whereabouts of your daughter; but I fancied you might be able to tell me something that would serve as a clue in the search for her."

"Don't tell me that! I have sense enough to know you would not offer to help me find her!"

Startled by the sound of Mrs. Arlington's excited voice, Eliot Dodge, her agent, who was in an adjoining room, now entered quickly. When he saw Merriwell he stopped short.

Frank had met Dodge once in Denver, at which time the man with the blue nose had made him an offer in behalf of the mining syndicate for the San Pablo and Queen Mystery Mines, an offer that Merry had scornfully declined. Now Frank recognized the crafty fox of a lawyer at once.

"So you are here, Dodge?" he said. "And I fancy you are behind some of the doings that have been going on in this region of late."

Dodge puckered up his mouth and tried to look at the young man with something like contempt, although the effort was a failure.

"Yes, I am here," he said, in his raspy voice; "and I fancy it is a pretty good thing for Mrs. Arlington that I am. I have been able to show her the inwardness of this last move of yours."

"Then you are the one who has filled her mind with the idea that I know something of the whereabouts of Miss Arlington? Well, Dodge, I know you are not a fool, and, therefore, I must conclude at once that you have some rascally reason for giving her such an impression. Be careful, sir, that you do not make a false step! In this part of the country it is very dangerous. Down here men are sometimes lynched for rascality."

"Don't you dare threaten me!" fumed Dodge, shaking his fist at Frank. "There is a warrant out for your arrest, and you'll find that the end of your career is pretty near."

Frank smiled derisively.

"You remind me of a snapping cur, Dodge," he observed; then he turned from the man, as if not deigning to waste further words on him. "Mrs. Arlington," he said earnestly, "I assure you on my honor that I have come to you with the most friendly intentions. I assure you that I have ridden more than one hundred miles for the purpose of offering my services in the search for your daughter. You may not believe me, but it is the simple truth. You have received me in a manner most disheartening; but I understand that your nervous condition must be the excuse.

"I am not your enemy. I do not wish to fight you. I am fighting the Consolidated Mining Association of America. I would not like to think that I have a woman among my enemies, who have hired murderers and ruffians to try to seize my property! Such a thought is most distasteful to me. I have had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, and I found her a most charming girl. I was interested in her. When I learned that she had disappeared I lost not a moment in gathering a few friends and starting for this place. We have covered the ground as fast as possible, taking the heat into consideration. If any one has told you that I am even remotely connected with the disappearance of Miss June that person has lied to you and deceived you. If you will give me a little aid, I shall exert myself to the utmost to restore June to your arms. That is all I have to say."

She heard him through with impatience. Frank saw before he had finished that her mind was set and that he had wasted his breath.

"Like your brother," said the woman passionately, "you are a scoundrel! Like him, you assume the airs of a gentleman. I know your tricks, and I am not deceived. You have been told that there is a warrant out for your arrest. It is true—and here is the officer to serve it!"

Behind Merry there was a heavy step. He turned and found himself face to face with a plain, quiet-looking man, who promptly said:

"Are you Frank Merriwell?"

"I am."

"Then let me tell you that I am Ben File, city marshal of Holbrook, and you are my prisoner! If you try to pull a gun, I'll shoot you in your tracks!"

Frank showed his nerve then. He did not even change color, although the arrest had fallen upon him so suddenly.

"Your words are plain enough, sir," he said. "There is no reason why I should provoke you into shooting me, as I have nothing to fear from arrest."

"I have been led to understand that you are a very dangerous character," said File, looking Merry over in some surprise. "You do not seem so at first glance."

Frank smiled a bit.

"I assure you I am not in the least dangerous," he said. "I surrender without the least resistance."

Eliot Dodge stood in the background, rubbing his hands together and grinning.

"Mr. Dodge," said the city marshal, "will you be good enough to relieve this young man of his weapons."

"Eh?" said Dodge nervously. "I—I—yes, sir."

He came forward and took Frank's revolvers, handling them gingerly, as if fearing they would explode in his hands. He passed them over to File, who afterward searched Merry himself.

In spite of Frank's coolness, he was indignant over the outrage.

Mrs. Arlington astonished the doctor by seeming stronger and better than she had been since it was known that June had disappeared.

"Now I have you!" she said exultantly. "If you do not tell me at once where my daughter may be found it will go still harder with you."

Merry gave her a look of pity.

"Madam," he said, "I fear that you are not in your right senses. Your action in coming to this part of the country and bringing your daughter here, where you have had dealings with ruffians, confirms me in this belief. I cannot believe you would do such things if perfectly sane."

"You insult me!" she exclaimed, tossing her head. "But you shall pay dearly for your insults! The law will punish you!"

"And are you to stand clear of the law—you, who have incited ruffians to attack me and my property? I am well aware that law and justice may frequently be two different things; but I fancy it will be to your discomfort to have the whole truth come out. I know a ruffian called Cimarron Bill fired at me from the window of this very room. How came he here unless by your permission? And were you in partnership with a man of his character in an attempted murder?"

Frank's fearless words struck home, and the woman turned pale, in spite of herself.

"Oh, doctor!" she said, sinking back on the couch.

The astonished physician, who had remained dumb and staring through the most of this scene, now cried to Frank:

"See what you have done! See what you have done!"

"She brought it on herself," retorted Merry, turning away, his heart hardened toward the woman. "I have ridden a hundred miles to do everything in my power to find her daughter and restore her to her mother, and I am—arrested!"

There was deep bitterness in his tone and manner.

"Mr. File," he said, "I am ready to go with you, sir."

"Hold! Wait!" called Mrs. Arlington from the couch. "Tell me where you have taken my daughter!"

Frank gave her a look, shook his head a bit, and again turned away.

"Oh, tell me!" pleaded the wretched mother. "I can't bear this suspense! My poor June!"

Then she sat bolt upright and almost screamed:

"If you harm a hair of her head, I'll make you regret it until the day of your death! You'll be compelled to tell! I'm going to see that you are sent to prison! I'll make a convict of you!"

Frank did not retort. As he was walking out with File's hand on his shoulder, the woman fell on her knees and begged him to restore her daughter.

"Too bad!" said Merry, when the door was closed. "I believe she really thinks I know something about the girl."

File said nothing until they had descended to the street. On the steps of the hotel he paused and looked hard at Frank.

"Young man," he said, "you don't act to me like a desperado. I'm mightily disappointed in you. From what I heard, I supposed you a ruffian. To tell you the truth, I'm rather inclined in your favor."

"Thank you," said Frank, with a bit of bitterness. "Little good that does me, although I am grateful to know that I have not become villainous in appearance. I came here to do that woman a favor, knowing all the while that she hated me, and this is the way I have been received."

"Why did you take so much pains to come?"

"Because I know her daughter, a handsome, refined, noble-hearted girl. It was not for the woman's sake, but for her daughter's that I put myself to the trouble that has drawn me into this scrape, Mr. File. Tell me, what has been done to find and rescue June Arlington?"

"Everything possible," said the city marshal. "But the girl seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. She vanished in the very heart of this town, too. It's a most mysterious affair. Mr. Merriwell, I regret that my duty compelled me to place you under arrest and now compels me to lock you up. I hope circumstances may give you your freedom very soon."

Frank was somewhat touched by these simple words.

"Go ahead," he said. "But you had better get me under lock and key before my friends find out what has happened. They might raise trouble, and I don't want to see anybody hurt over this affair."

So they started down the street, walking side by side, like two friends. File did not even keep a hand on Merry.

They had proceeded but a short distance when a man suddenly appeared in the open doorway of a saloon. Frank saw the pistol in the man's hand, and he recognized his mortal enemy, Cimarron Bill.

As Bill appeared in that doorway, Merry knew the fellow's purpose was to make a second attempt to kill him, and Frank was unarmed and defenseless, under arrest at the time.

As Bill's weapon came up Frank made a sidelong spring. He did this at the very instant, it seemed, that the revolver spoke. The fact was that he sprang a trifle before the shot was fired. His movement seemed much like that of a man death-smitten by a bullet, and Cimarron Bill dodged back at once, believing he had accomplished his dastardly purpose.

Frank was not touched.

But the bullet meant for him had found a human target. Ben File swayed from side to side, his legs buckling beneath him, and fell into Merriwell's arms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BILL HIKES OUT.

"Got it!" whispered File huskily. "He nailed me good and plenty that time!"

Without a word, fearing Cimarron Bill might discover he had shot the wrong man and seek to rectify his bad work, Frank lifted File in his muscular arms and ran into a store with him.

The city marshal was stretched on a counter.

"Send for a doctor!" commanded Merry. "And turn out a posse to take Cimarron Bill. He fired the shot."

At the mention of Cimarron Bill, however, consternation reigned. The desperado was all too well known in Holbrook, and scarcely a man in all the place cared to face him.

"No use," said File faintly. "Nobody'll dare touch Bill. He'll get out of town deliberately without being molested."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Merry. "Why, you don't mean to say they will let that murderous hound escape?"

"He'll escape now that I'm flat. There's not a man in Holbrook that dares face him."

"You're mistaken!" said Merry. "There is one man!"

"What one?"

"This one!"

"You?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean to say——"

"That I dare face that man! Give me my weapons and I'll go out and get him!"

Ben File looked at the boyish young man incredulously.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said, as they were trying to stop the bleeding of his wound, which was in his left side. "That man has a record. He's the deadliest ruffian in Arizona. He would kill you."

"I don't believe it," said Frank. "I've seen his like before. Give me my revolvers, and I'll go take him. I'll bring him to you if you live!"

File fumbled in his huge pockets and brought out Merry's long-barreled revolvers.

"Go ahead if you want to," he said. "Somehow I take stock in you, though I'm afraid it's your funeral you're going to. Anyhow, if I'm booked to cash in, I don't mind giving you a show to levant. Here comes the doctor."

The same red-faced little man came rushing into the store, brought there by a messenger who had gone in search of him.

Frank examined his weapons, and then walked out of the store.

There was considerable excitement on the street, caused by the shooting. Merry minded no one, yet kept his eyes wide open for every one. As fast as he could step he proceeded straight to the open door from which Cimarron Bill had fired the shot. He had a pistol in either hand when he stepped through that doorway.

As he had expected, it was a saloon. Three persons were in the room, but Cimarron Bill was not there.

"Gentlemen," said Merry, "I'll be obliged if you will tell me where I can find the white-livered cur who just shot Ben File from this doorway."

They stared at him as if doubting their senses.

"If it's Cimarron Bill you're looking for, young man," one of them finally said, "take my advice and don't. It's the most unhealthy occupation you can engage in, and I advise——"

"Cut out the advice," said Merry sharply; "and tell me where the cowardly dog has gone."

"He ambled out o' yere directly arter doin' the shootin', and we last sees him lopin' down the street that-a-way. But you wants to keep a heap long distance——"

Frank waited for no more. He was satisfied that Bill had departed just as the man said, and he wheeled at once and started down the street.

Merry knew full well what sort of mission he had undertaken, but he was not daunted in the least by its magnitude. Cimarron Bill was his deadly foe, but he now saw his opportunity to bring the ruffian to an accounting for his crimes, and he did not propose to let the chance slip.

So he inquired as he passed down the street and found that Bill had hurried to the saloon kept by Schlitzenheimer.

Again Merry had his pistols ready when he entered the saloon. Early though it was, he found four men there engaged in a game of draw poker, and one of the four was old Joe Crowfoot.

Schlitzeneimer gave a shout when he saw Frank.

"My gootness!" he cried. "How you vos? Vere vos dot dalking tog alretty? I vouldt like to blay dot tog anodder came beenuckle of."

Frank was disappointed once more in failing to discover Cimarron Bill. He asked if the man had been there.

"He vos," nodded Schlitzeneimer. "Und away he dit his saddle take."

"He took his saddle?"

"Yah."

"Then his saddle was here?"

"It he dit keep here, vor id vos very valueless," said the Dutchman. "He vos avraid stolen id would pe. I know Pill. Ven he come und say, 'Vritz, you tookit my saddles und keepit it a vile undil vor id I call,' I say, 'Yah, you pet.' I haf nod any anxiety him to make some drouble by."

"If he came for his saddle it is likely he meant to use it. Was he in a hurry?"

"Der piggest hurry I ever knew him to pe indo. Ven I invortationed him to a drink take, he said he could not sdop vor id."

"He's on the run!" exclaimed Frank. "Where does he keep his horse when in town?"

"Ad Dorvelt's shust down a liddle vays."

Frank almost ran from the saloon and hurried down the street to Dorfelt's stable.

He was stared at in the same wondering amazement when he asked for Cimarron Bill.

"Mebbe you has urgent business with that gent?" said one man.

"I have," answered Merry. "He shot Ben File about ten minutes ago, and I am after him."

"Waal, you'll have to hustle to ketch him, an' I 'lows it's jest as well fer you. His hoss was saddled jest now, an' I opine he's well out o' town by this time."

Frank listened to hear no more. On the run, he set out to find his friends.

Singularly enough, not one of them knew anything of his arrest, although they had heard of the shooting. He found them in short order, and what he told them in a very few words stirred them from lassitude to the greatest excitement.

"Fellows," he said, "I'm going to run Cimarron Bill down if it takes a year! I've given my word to Ben File that I would bring Bill back. I mean to make good. Are you with me in this chase?"

They were with him to a man.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OLD JOE TAKES A DRINK.

Away on the horizon, riding to the southeast, was a black speck of a horseman as Frank, Bart, Jack, and Ephraim galloped out of town on fresh mounts secured by Merry.

"There he is!" cried Frank. "We mustn't lose him! We must keep him in view and run him down before nightfall. Can we do it?"

"We can try!" said Bart grimly.

These young fellows seemed made of iron. All their weariness had vanished, and they sat in their saddles like young Centaurs, with the exception of Gallup, who could not be graceful at anything.

"This is what might well be called the strenuous life," observed Jack Ready. "It's almost too much for my delicate constitution. I fear my health will be undermined and my lovely complexion will be ruined."

"He has seen us," declared Frank. "He knows we are after him! It's going to be a hard chase."

"How about June Arlington?" asked Bart.

"When I gave Ben File my word to bring Cimarron Bill back I was under arrest for kidnaping June Arlington. Had I not made that promise I might still be under arrest. I must keep my word to File. I hope to do something for June later."

So they rode into the scorching desert, seeming to be gaining on the man ahead for a time.

The sun poured down mercilessly. Alkali dust rose and filled their nostrils. Red lizards flashed before them on the ground at rare intervals. And far ahead the black speck held into the distance.

"He knows where he's going, fellows," said Frank. "He's not the man to strike blindly into the desert. He'll come to water and feed before his horse gives out, and so we must find the same."

But fate seemed against them. Afar on the desert a haze arose and grew and became a beautiful lake, its shores lined with waving trees. And in this mirage the fugitive was swallowed up and lost. When the lake faded and vanished the black speck could be seen nowhere on the plain.

"Vanished into a gully of some sort," said Frank. "We must find just what has become of him."

So they kept on; but in time they came to feel that the search was useless. Water they had brought for themselves, together with some canned food; but the only relief they could give the horses was by pouring a little water over a sponge and wiping out the dry mouths of the poor animals.

They were forced to turn aside and seek some hills, where Frank felt certain there was a spring.

Thus it was that nightfall found them at the spring, but Cimarron Bill was gone, none of them knew where. There was feed for the horses in the little valley, and they made the best of it.

Frank was far from pleased. Everything had gone wrong since their arrival in Holbrook, and the prospect was most discouraging.

"By gum! it's too bad to hev to give it up," said Ephraim.

Frank shot him a look.

"I have no intention of giving it up," he said. "But I confess that I made one bad mistake."

"What was that?"

"I left Crowfoot back there in Schlitzenheimer's saloon playing poker."

"You think he'll be skinned, do you?" said Bart.

"Oh, I'm not worrying about that. The old reprobate can take care of himself. I knew it would be almost impossible to drag him away from that game, and that was why I did not bother with him. Didn't want to lose the time. But that redskin can follow a trail that would bother a bloodhound. If we had taken him at the start, he'd never lost the scent."

They lay on the ground and watched the heavens fill with bright stars. The heat of the day melted into coolness, and all knew it would be cold before morning.

Frank had anticipated that they might have to spend the night in this manner, and blankets had been brought.

They seemed alone in the wild waste, with no living thing save their horses within miles and miles. So, with no fear of attack, they wrapped their blankets about them and slept.

The wind swept almost icy through the little valley before morning dawned. As the eastern sky grew pale Frank opened his eyes and sat up.

A moment later a shout from his lips aroused the others.

Merry was staring at a familiar figure in a dirty red blanket. In their very midst old Joe lay stretched, and apparently he had been sleeping as soundly as any of them. Nor were his slumbers broken by Merry's shout, which astounded Frank beyond measure, for never before had he known the old fellow to sleep like that. Always when he had stirred he had found the beady eyes of the redskin upon him.

"Behold!" said Jack Ready. "Lo, the noble red man is again within our midst. But how came it thus?"

"Waal, may I be honswizzled!" grunted Gallup.

Frank flung aside his blanket.

"Something is the matter with him!" he said, in a tone that indicated anxiety. "If there wasn't, he'd not sleep this way. I wonder what it is. Is he dead?"

But when the red blanket was pulled down it was found that Joe lay with a quart bottle clasped to his heart in a loving embrace. The bottle was fully two-thirds empty.

"That explains it!" said Merry, in deep disgust. "The old dog is drunk as a lord! That's how we happen to have the pleasure of finding him asleep. I'll give any man fifty dollars who will catch him asleep when he is perfectly sober."

"What a picture he doth present!" said Ready. "Look upon it! And yet there is something in it to bring sadness to the heart. Behold how tenderly he doth hold the long-necker to his manly buzzum! 'Tis thus that many a chap hugs a destroyer to his heart."

"The old sinner!" said Hodge. "I don't see how he got here without arousing any of us. There's his horse, picketed near the other animals."

Frank stooped and tried to take the bottle from Joe's clasp, but the sleeping Indian held it fast.

"Go heap better five dol's," he muttered in his sleep.

"He's still playing poker," said Frank.

He gave Crowfoot a hard shake.

"Wake up, you copper-colored sot!" he cried. "Wake up and see what you've got in your hands."

"Four king," mumbled Joe thickly. "Heap good!"

At this the boys laughed heartily.

"That's a pretty good hand!" said Frank. "It takes four aces or a straight flush to beat it."

Then he wrenched the bottle away, whereupon the redskin awoke at once.

"Mine! mine!" he exclaimed, sitting up.

"It's poison," said Frank, and smashed the bottle.

With a snarl of fury, the Indian staggered to his feet and made for Merry, drawing a wicked-looking knife.

"Look out!" cried Gallup, in consternation.

Frank leaped to meet old Joe, clutching his wrists and holding him helpless, while he gazed sternly into the bloodshot eyes of the drunken old man.

"What's this, Crowfoot?" he demanded. "Would you strike Strong Heart with a knife? Would you destroy the brother of Indian Heart? Has the poison firewater of the white man robbed you of your senses?"

"Firewater Joe's!" exclaimed the redskin. "No right to spill um! No right! No right!"

"I did it for your own good, Crowfoot," said Merry quietly. "You are in bad shape now. I want you to come out of it. You may be able to help us. What you need is a good drink of water."

"Ugh! Water heap good. Joe he take some."

Immediately Frank released the old man's wrists, and Joe slipped his knife out of sight with something like a show of shame.

In another moment Merry had his canteen, filled it at the spring, and handed it to Crowfoot, who gravely took it and began to drink. The boys stood around, and their eyes bulged as the old man held the canteen to his mouth, tipping it more and more skyward, a deep gurgling coming from his throat. He continued to drink until the canteen was quite emptied, when he lowered it with perfect gravity, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and observed:

"Joe him a little dry!"

"Well, I should say so!" smiled Frank. "Your interior must have been as parched as an alkali desert, Joe."

"If he takes many drinks like that," said Ready, with a queer twist of his mug, "there'll be a drought in this country that will make an ordinary dry spell look like a back number."

Crowfoot did not smile. Giving back the canteen, he sat down on the ground, resting his elbows on his knees and taking his head in his hands. He was the picture of misery and dejection.

"Injun big fool!" he groaned. "Last night feel much good; to-day feel a lot bad. Big pain in head."

"We've all been there many's the time," sang Jack Ready softly.

Then the eccentric chap sat down on the ground beside the redskin, about whom he placed an arm.

"Joseph," he said, "methinks I know how it is! I have felt that way heap often. Ugh! Sick all over."

Joe grunted.

"Nothing worth living for."

Another grunt.

"Much rather be dead with the beautiful daisies growing on my grave than living in such misery."

Again a grunt.

"Internal organs all out of gear, stomach on a strike, head bigger than a barrel. Are those the symptoms, Joseph?"

"Much so," confessed old Joe.

"Joseph, you have my sympathy. You've never been to college, but you have received part of a college education. I have taken my degree in that branch. I'm a P. M. of J. C.—Past Master of Jag

Carriers. But I have reformed, and now 'lips that touch wine shall never touch mine.' Joseph, I would reclaim you. I would woo you tenderly from the jag path that leadeth to destruction. It is broad and inviting at first, but toward the finish it is rough, and hubbly, and painful to travel. Pause while there is yet time. My heart yearns to save you from destruction. Listen to the pearly words of wisdom, that drop from my sweet lips. Shun the jag juice and stick to the water-wagon. Heed this advice and your days shall be long ere you pass to the happy hunting-grounds."

"Hear talk a lot," said Joe; "no say anything. Make Injun lot sicker!"

Gallup laughed heartily, slapping his knee.

"That's right, by gum!" he cried. "The wind blows ev'ry time Jack opens his maouth."

"You are jealous," said Ready. "You are jealous of my wisdom and eloquence. Get thee behind me, Nose Talk! Your face is painful to look upon."

"Don't you go to makin' that kind of gab!" snapped Gallup. "If yeou do, dinged if I don't jolt ye one in the slats!"

"Such language! Slats! I'm shocked! Never have you heard words of slang ripple from my tuneful vocal chords. I disdain such frivolity! Slang gives me a pain! Go lay down!"

"Lay!" snorted Ephraim. "I'm no hen!"

"Let's have breakfast," said Hodge. "We may as well get on the move before it grows too hot."

It did not take long to prepare breakfast, but old Joe seemed to grow ill at the sight of food. All he wanted was water, and he threatened to drink the weak little spring dry. After a time, he seemed more inclined to talk.

"No ketch Cim'r'n Bill?" he said.

"So you found out we were after him?" said Frank.

"Ugh!" nodded the Indian. "Joe no big fool only when firewater is to get. He play poke', all time him keep ear open. Mebbe him learn a whole lot."

"It's quite likely. If you had been with us yesterday, we might have stuck to Bill's trail. Now it is lost, and he may get away."

"Crowfoot he know how find Bill."

"What's that? You know how to find him?"

"Ugh!"

"Well, that is interesting, for I am bound to find him. I gave Ben File my word to bring Bill back, and I'm going to keep that promise. If you can help——"

"You bet!" grunted Joe.

"How did you find out so much?"

"Joe him take drink in saloon. Keep much careful not git full. Make um believe so. Go sleep. Hear men talk in whisper. Waugh! Find out a heap."

"Well, you're a clever old rascal!" cried Merry; "and I'm in love with you!"

"Joe him play game pritty slick," said the Indian. "Same time him get one, two, three drink. That bad. Make um want heap more. Make um take firewater when um git out town."

"So you really got drunk because you were trying to do me a good turn?" said Merry. "Joe, I appreciate it! But what did you hear?"

"Bill him go to Sunk Hole."

"Sunk Hole?" cried Frank. "That place?"

"Where's that?" asked Hodge, who was deeply interested.

"Down in the White Mountain region, near the head of Coyote Creek."

"Why did you exclaim, 'That place?'"

"Because it is a camp made up of the worst characters to be found in the Southwest. It is a place without law and order of any sort. Murderers, gamblers, and knaves in general flee there when in danger. They are banded together to defy the law. Travelers who happen into that wretched place seldom come forth. At times the ruffians quarrel among themselves and shoot and kill with impunity. The people of the Territory have more than once asked that the place be invaded by troops and wiped off the map. It is a standing disgrace."

"An' Cimarron Bill has gone there?" asked Ephraim Gallup, his eyes bulging.

"So Joe says."

"Waal, I ruther guess yeou'll take a couple of thinks afore ye foller him any further."

"I shall follow him into Sunk Hole if I live!" declared Merry grimly; "and I mean to bring him out of the place, dead or alive. I do not ask the rest of you to risk your lives with me. You are at liberty to turn back. Joe——"

"Him stick by Strong Heart!" declared the old Indian quickly. "You bet!"

"Thank you, Joe!" said Frank. "I shall need you to show me the road to the place, for I have heard Sunk Hole is not easy to find."

"I hope," said Bart Hodge quietly, "that you do not fancy for a moment that I'm not going with you? I don't think you would insult me, Frank, by entertaining such a thought. I shall be with you through thick and thin."

"Dear me!" said Ready. "How brave you are! Please stand in the glow of the limelight where we can admire your heroic pose! La! la! You are a sweet creature, and one to make the matinée girls rave with adoration."

"Don't get so funny!" growled Hodge, who always took Ready's chaffing with poor grace.

"Softly! softly!" smiled Jack, with a flirt of his hand. "Let not your angry passions rise. You can't play the bold and fearless hero any better than can your humble servant. I'm in this, and you want to watch me and note what a bold front I put on. I'll wager a lead nickle you will begin to think me utterly fearless, and all the while, beyond a doubt, I'll be shaking in my boots. Oh, I can make an excellent bluff when I have to."

"Bluff heap good sometime," said Crowfoot. "Mebbe bluff take pot."

"But it's a mighty poor thing if the other fellow suspects and calls," said Jack.

"Waal," drawled Gallup, "darn my punkins! I s'pose I'm in fer it, but I kinder wisht I was to hum on the farm."

Frank knew the Vermonter well enough not to fancy by those words that Ephraim was badly frightened. It was Gallup's way of expressing himself, and, even though he might be afraid in advance, the tall, lank fellow always showed up well "in a pinch."

"Then it's settled," said Merry. "We all go."

"Joe him not talk all he find out," put in the Indian.

"Is there more? Well, give it to us quick. There are many miles of alkali between here and Sunk Hole."

"Joe him hear men whisper 'bout gal."

"Eh? About a girl?"

"Ugh!"

"Then it must be about June Arlington? What did they say?"

"Mebbe Bill him know where she is."

"What?" cried Merry, clutching the redskin by the arm. "Is that possible?"

"Reckon um heap so."

"Then there is a double reason why I should get my hands on Cimarron Bill!"

"Mebbe Joe he no hear right; no could ketch all men whisper. He think gal she be took to Sunk Hole."

Frank reeled, his face going white.

"Merciful Heaven!" he gasped. "June Arlington, innocent little June! in that dreadful place? Come, fellows, we must go! June Arlington there? The thought is horrifying! If that is true, Cimarron Bill may go free until I can do my best to get June out of that sink of wickedness! Come, fellows—come!"

"We are ready!" they cried, in response.

CHAPTER XXX.

FRANK IN SUNK HOLE.

The Great Dipper indicated by its position that the hour was not far from midnight. Crowfoot halted and pointed downward, where, in the gloom of a round valley, a few lights twinkled.

"Sunk Hole!" he said.

"At last!" breathed Frank.

The others stood in silence, looking down at those lights. Suddenly they started, for to their ears came the sound of music, dimly heard because of the distance.

"Perchance my ears deceive me," said Ready; "but I fancy I hear the soothing strains of a fiddle."

"Sure as fate!" exclaimed Bart Hodge.

"Listen!" cautioned Merry.

There were other sounds, a sing-song cry at intervals, and then hoarse laughter and several wild whoops.

"By gum!" exclaimed Gallup. "Saounds jest like one of them air country dances they uster hev over to Billing's Corners, Varmount. The boys called them 'hog wrestles.'"

"See," said Merry, "there is one place that seems more brightly lighted than the others. It's right in the center of the other lights. Fellows, I believe there is a dance going on down there!"

"Just what I'm beginning to think," said Bart.

"My! my! How nice!" exclaimed Jack. "Let's go right down and get into it! Balance your partners all! All hands around! Let her sizzle!"

"That would be a splendid place for you to get into a dance!" said Frank sarcastically.

"But a dance there!" exclaimed Hodge.

"It does seem mighty strange," agreed Frank. "Still something of the kind is going on. Hear 'em yell!"

And now they could faintly hear the sound of feet keeping time to the music.

"We've struck this place in a most excellent time to get into it," said Merry. "I suppose one of us ought to go back and watch the horses."

The horses had been left in a little pocket some distance behind and they had climbed on foot to the point where they could look down into the round valley.

"No need watch um now," said Joe. "Um hosses all picket fast. We go down there, better go quick."

"Correct," agreed Frank. "Just show us how to get down."

"Follow," said the redskin. "Take heap care."

The path over which he led them, if path it may be called, was precarious enough. At times they felt that they were on the edge of some precipice, with a great fall lying beneath. But the aged redskin went forward with surprising swiftness, causing them all to strain every nerve to keep up with him, and in time he brought them down into the valley.

"Take lot care," cautioned Crowfoot. "Have guns reddy. No can tell. May have to use um 'fore git out."

"It's quite likely," said Merry grimly.

So they all made sure that their pistols could be drawn quickly and readily, and then they crept toward the dark huts, from the windows of which lights gleamed.

The sounds of fiddling and dancing grew plainer and plainer. Now and then a shout would awake the echoes.

"Where do they find their 'ladies' for a dance?" asked Hodge wonderingly.

"Oh, there are a few women in this hole," answered Merry. "Perhaps others have come in."

They reached the first hut and paused where they could peer along the street, if such it could be called, for the huts had been built here and there, so that the road between them zig-zagged like a drunken man.

In the very center of the place was the building, somewhat larger than its neighbors, from which came the sounds of revelry. Doors and windows were wide open. The music having stopped, there might be heard a hum of voices, and then the wild, reckless laugh of a woman floated out upon the night air.

Frank shuddered a little as he heard the sound, which, to his ears, was more pitiful and appalling than any cry of distress that could fall from female lips.

"Poor creature!" he thought. "To what depths has she fallen!"

They went forward again, slipping around a corner, and Merry stumbled and fell over the body of a man that was lying prone on the ground.

"Hold on!" he whispered. "Let's see what we have here. It's a man, but I wonder if he is living or dead."

He knelt and felt for the man's heart.

"Living all right," he declared; "but dead in one sense—dead drunk! Whew! what a vile smell of liquor!"

"Let him lie," said Hodge.

"I have a fancy to take a peep at him," said Frank. "Hold still. I want a match. I have one."

Bringing out a match, he struck it and shaded it with his hands, throwing the light on the prostrate man.

The light of the match showed them that the fellow was an unusually large Mexican, dressed after the custom of his people in somewhat soiled finery.

"Dead to the world!" sighed Jack Ready softly.

The match died out in Frank's fingers, but Merry did not rise.

"What are you doing?" asked Jack. "Are you accumulating his valuables?"

"Hardly," said Merry. "I'm thinking."

"Can such a thing make you think! What is passing in your massive brain?"

"I have an idea."

"That's more than Ready ever hed," muttered Gallup.

"Fellows," said Frank, "this man's clothes ought to be a fairly good fit for me."

"Well, what of it?"

"I'm going to wear them. Get hold here, and we'll carry him aside where there'll be little chance that any one will stumble upon us. Let's move lively."

They did as directed, although wondering why Frank should wish to exchange clothes with the drunken Mexican.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DANCE IN SUNK HOLE.

A low-ceiled room with a bar at the end near the door. The odor of smoke, liquor, and perspiration. The place lighted with oil-lamps having dirty chimneys. The lights of the lamps dancing and flaring to the stamp of many heavy-shod feet. A maze of human beings whirling, shifting, prancing, and cutting figures on the floor. Rough-looking men, bearded and armed; disheveled women, their faces glowing with excitement and from the effects of drink. At the far end of the room an old man, mounted on a square box and seated on a chair, sawing away for dear life at his fiddle, while he called the figures in a sing-song tone.

And this was the way the fiddler called:

"First couple balance and swing,
Promenade the inside ring,
Promenade the outside ring,
Balance and swing and cast off six,
Ladies to the right and gents to the left.
Swing the one you swung before,
Down the center and cast off four,
Swing the one that comes to you,
Down the center and cast off two."

The men were such as most women would avoid. With few exceptions, they had wicked faces. They had been drinking, and at intervals some elated and enthusiastic fellow would utter a blood-curdling yell.

But the figures they cut were laughable at times. They "spanked 'er down" furiously. They seized their partners and swung them until often they were lifted off their feet. But those were not the sort of women to mind.

Three or four of the citizens of Sunk Hole were married. Two had daughters old enough to be present at the dance. Other "ladies" had come in from the surrounding country, brought there by their partners.

There were a number of Mexicans in the crowd, and three or four Mexican women.

Into this smoky room came yet another Mexican, a young man, dressed in soiled finery, his wide-brimmed high-peaked hat shading his face. He had a little mustache that was pointed on the ends, and he walked with a swagger. Immediately on entering he made for the bar and called for a drink.

Had any one been watching him closely that person must have noticed that he did not drink the stuff put out to him, but slyly and deftly tossed the contents of the glass into a corner under the bar.

This newcomer was Frank Merriwell, who had disguised himself as well as possible and boldly walked into this den of ruffians.

Having pretended to drink, Frank stood back in a retired spot and looked the dancers over.

In a moment his eyes fell on Cimarron Bill, who had a Mexican girl for a partner and was enjoying himself in his own peculiar way.

Frank knew it would not be safe to come face to face with Bill, although he saw at once that the desperado had been drinking heavily and could barely "navigate" through the mazes of the dance.

"Gents chassé and put on style,
Resash and a little more style—
Little more style, gents, little more style,"

sang the fiddler; and the dancers strictly obeyed the admonition by putting on all the style of which they were capable.

Under different circumstances Merry would have been amused by the spectacle; and even now, for all of his peril, he was greatly interested.

Cimarron Bill was not habitually a hard drinker, but on this occasion he had surprised everybody present by the amount of whisky he had imbibed. He seemed determined to get intoxicated, and it was plain that he was making a success of it.

Frank did not wish to dance if he could avoid it, knowing he might be brought face to face with Bill in the course of some of the figures.

All around the sides of the room men were leaning and looking on, some of them laughing and calling to various dancers.

"Go it, Seven Spot!"

"Spank it down, Dandy!"

"Steady, Pie Face! Your left hoof belongs to the church!"

"See Honeydew! He's a holy terror!"

"Watch Lanky Jim cut a pigeon wing!"

"Say, Big Kate can dance some! You bet your boots!"

"Hi! hi! There goes Sweet William, plumb off his pins!"

Now the fiddler was calling:

"First lady out to the right;
Swing the man that stole the sheep,
Now the one that packed it home,
Now the one that eat the meat,
Now the one that gnawed the bones."

Frank found an opportunity to slip along the wall toward the back of the room. No one seemed to pay any attention to him until he accidentally stepped on a big fellow's foot. Instantly he was given a shove, and the man growled:

"What in thunder ails ye, you yaller-skinned greaser? Keep off my corns, ur I'll make hash o' you with my toad-sticker!"

"Pardon, señor, pardon!" entreated Merry, in a soft voice, with an accent that seemed perfectly natural. "I deed not mean to do eet, señor."

"Ef I'd 'lowed ye did I'd sure slashed ye without no talk whatever!" was the retort.

Having no desire to get into trouble, Merry took great pains to avoid stepping on another foot, and he finally reached the point he sought. In the corner at the far end of the room there was not so much light. A bench ran along there, and Frank found a seat on it, where he could lean against the thin board partition, and he did not mind if some of the men stood up before him so that he was partly screened.

Merry knew full well that he had done a most reckless thing in entering that place, where all around him were ruffians and murderers; but there was something about the adventure that he relished, and the danger gave it a spice that was far from disagreeable.

He thanked his lucky stars that this dance had given him the opportunity to get in there without attracting any more attention.

"Meet your partner and all chaw hay,
You know where and I don't care,
Seat your partner in the old armchair."

That particular dance ended with this call from the fiddler; but there were no armchairs in which the ladies could be seated, and Merry crowded up into the corner in order to be as inconspicuous as possible and to escape being disturbed.

There was a general rush for the bar, the fiddler getting down from his box and hastening across the floor, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Some of the women accompanied their partners to the bar and drank with them.

Such depravity was not pleasant to witness, and Merry felt pity for the fallen creatures. Sentiment, however, he sought to put aside, thinking only of the dangerous mission that had brought him into that nest of gambolling tigers.

Two men sat down near Merry. They had been dancing, and observed, with some lurid embellishments, that it was hot. Then one of them said something that interested Frank.

"Bill's goin' it a whole lot stiff to-night."

"That's whatever. Never saw him punish the razzle juice this way afore."

"You know why, mebbe."

"Waal, I opine he's some irked up over his mistake in Holbrook. First time he ever shot the wrong gent. He warn't gunnin' fer File. It was another galoot he was after."

"I jedge that's the matter with him. Bandy tried to joke him some about it, an' Bandy came mighty near gettin' his."

"Bandy's a dern fool! He should 'a' knowed better than to shoot off his mouth at Bill."

"I say so. But Bill he's a-playin' a right steep game in that thar gal business."

"Bill kin play his keerds. You let him alone."

"No danger o' me chippin' in. They say the gal's folks are a heap rich."

"I opine so, else Bill he'd never taken so much trouble over her."

"Oh, I dunno; she's the purtiest leetle thing I ever set my blinkers on. I 'lowed mebbe Bill was lookin' some fer a wife."

"Wife—northin'! He's lookin' fer the dust. Why, he sent word as how he'd skin the galoot what dared hurt her or even say somethin' impolite afore her."

"Let me tell you somethin'."

"Fire erway."

"Han'some Charley has seen that gal, an' I 'low he's taken a likin' to her a whole lot. Bill better look sharp, ur Charley will sure get away with her."

"I ain't the one to give Charley no advice, but if I were, I'd whisper fer him to think twice afore tryin' it."

"Charley's some clever. Look, thar he is a-drinkin' with Bill now. Say, pard, I've got an idee that Charley's doin' his best to load Bill to-night. If that's so, he's got somethin' up his sleeve, an' we want to look right sharp fer a breeze afore this dance is over. I'm goin' to stand ready to duck instanter when the shootin' begins."

Frank could peer past a man in front of him without moving and see the person referred to as Handsome Charley, who was drinking with Cimarron Bill at the bar. This man was larger than Bill and heavier. He had a flushed, reckless face that wore a smile nearly all the time. He had a dark mustache and imperial, and there was about him the atmosphere of a dashing desperado.

Charley at this time seemed very friendly with Cimarron Bill, and it was plain that he was urging Bill to drink again.

"All right," thought Frank; "I'll watch you both."

At this moment a man appeared in the open door and looked timidly into the room.

At sight of this man Frank gave a start in spite of his wonderful nerve, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that he kept himself from crying forth a name.

Eliot Dodge, the crafty lawyer with the blue nose, stood there in the door. No wonder Merry was astounded to see that man appear in such a place and at such a time.

Dodge was rather pale, but an expression of relief flashed over his face when his eyes fell on Cimarron Bill. Then he stepped into the room.

Bill seemed no less astonished, but he advanced to meet Dodge, holding out his hand, which the lawyer accepted.

"However is this, Mr. Dodge?" inquired Bill. "I sure am a whole lot surprised to meet up with you here—that is, I'm surprised to have it occur so soon. Will you wash the dust out of your throat?"

"Don't care if I do," said Dodge, and they crowded nearer to the bar.

"Bill, I thinks mebbe you might present yer friend," chipped in Handsome Charley.

"Waal, Charley," said Bill, "this yere is Mr.—"

"Lewis," interposed Dodge quickly.

"Mr. Lewis," said Bill queerly. "Mr. Lewis, permit me to make you acquainted with Charley Sears, generally called Handsome Charley. Will you take a little pisen with us, Charley?"

Handsome Charley gave Dodge his hand, which the lawyer shook gingerly, his coolness causing the fellow to frown.

They all drank, and Bill lurched, catching at the edge of the bar.

"'Scuse me," he said, with unusual politeness. "Always makes me dizzy to dance. There is a right good lot of whirlin' around in it, you know."

Charley smiled.

"You had a fine partner that last dance, Bill; but you ought to bring out that handsome gal an' take a spin with her, man. I 'low it ain't right to keep her under kiver when every gent yere is yearnin' to set eyes on her."

"They'll have to keep right on yearnin'," averred Bill, frowning.

"You're gettin' a whole lot selfish," declared Charley. "Are you afeared some other gent will git her away from ye if you brings her out?"

"None at all, Charley. But she ain't for this gang to hustle around any, and that's level."

At this the other seemed to take offense.

"I opine, Bill," he said, "that you don't set yourself up as a heap better than the rest of this gang?"

The cruel face of Cimarron Bill took on an expression that was a warning.

"Charley," he said, in a low, smooth voice, with one hand on the bar to steady himself, "I am willing to confess that you disturbs me some. I has my reasons for not bringin' the gal out, an' you'll sure excuse me if I don't recite them none at present. Some other time I may explain."

But Charley persisted.

"Some other time it will be too late," he said. "I'm certain looking to dance one set with the little beauty myself, Bill."

"Sorry to disappoint you," returned Bill; "but the young lady doesn't dance none, if you want to know one good reason."

"Well, at least, you can bring her forth and permit us to gaze upon her a while," suggested Charley.

"Not to-night," was the firm retort.

"Then it certain will seem a heap like you thought her too good for us, and the boys won't like that a great deal if I tell 'em so."

Bill leaned on the bar, his back against it and his elbows resting so that his hands were close to his hips. In that manner he stood perfectly steady, and he was in a position to draw his pistols quickly.

"Charley," he said, his voice like the purring of a cat, all the thickness seeming gone from his tongue, while his wicked eyes narrowed to two thin slits, "I don't think you'll go for to say anything whatever to the boys on this point. You are my friend, I opine. Am I sure right on that?"

At this juncture Handsome Charley realized all at once that Bill was not yet drunk enough not to be deadly. Charley's eyes noted in a flash how the man had steadied himself and was ready for anything, and Charley decided that the time was not yet ripe for bringing on a quarrel.

"Of course I'm your friend, Bill!" he said, with pretended heartiness, "and whatever you says goes with me. I was just speakin' because I has heard some of the boys growlin' over this business. That's all."

Bill smiled, but his smile was anything but pleasant.

"If any o' the boys growl around in your hearin' some more," he said, "refer 'em to me, please. I reckons I can certain stop their growlin' in a hurry."

"All right, all right!" nodded Charley.

"And you, pard," Bill went on—"you, I judge, will say to them that I know my business a-plenty, and that you backs me up. Eh?"

"Sure, sure, Bill."

"I thought you would," nodded the desperado with the deadly eyes. "I opined I could depend on you."

"You bet! Have another drink, you and Mr. Lewis?"

"Excuse us, please," urged Bill. "I hates most mortally to decline; but I has some business to transact with Mr. Lewis, an' I says business first an' pleasure arterwards. Arter we has settled the business I'll stand up here to this yere bar an' drink with you as long as the pisen lasts. Is that all satisfactory like?"

This question was put in a manner that indicated beyond question that it would be best for Charley to acknowledge that it was satisfactory, and the acknowledgment was made.

"Thanks," bowed Bill. "You're a sure enough gent, Charley, an' I'll shoot the galoot what says to the contrary! An' now I reckons you'll excuse us a while. Come, Mr. Lewis, thar's a small back room, an' we'll jest step in thar."

Through this Dodge had stood there pale to the lips, with the exception of his blue nose, for he realized that these men were on the verge of a disagreement, and he understood that a disagreement between them meant shooting in short order. Bill, however, had won out by a display of calm assurance and nerve, which was remarkable, considering his condition.

The ruffian slipped an arm through that of Dodge, and they crossed the floor and passed through a narrow door just as the fiddler resumed his seat and called for the men to select partners and form for the next dance.

Frank had watched every move, realizing full well that there was a possibility of a "gun play" between those two desperadoes. He was unable to hear what passed between them, but still he fancied he knew the bulk of it, and, in spite of himself, in spite of the character of the man, he could not help admitting Cimarron Bill's masterfulness. Frank comprehended that Charley had thought at first of forcing a quarrel, but had been cowed by Bill's manner.

The agitation of Eliot Dodge was also quite apparent. Merry had already marked Dodge down as a coward.

When the two men passed into the back room Frank longed to follow them. He sat there, wondering what course to pursue.

That June Arlington was somewhere in Sunk Hole he now felt certain. The talk of the two men who had been seated near him was assurance enough on that point.

But where was she? How was he to find and rescue her? This task he now understood as the most important one before him and the one to which he was to give his attention at once, regardless of the capture of Bill, which could be accomplished later.

As he sat there, thinking the affair over and seeking to decide on some course to pursue, he was surprised and pleased to distinctly hear Bill speaking in the room beyond the board partition. These boards were thin and badly matched, so that there were large cracks at intervals. One of these cracks happened to be just behind Frank's head. By shifting his position slightly, he brought his ear close to the crack.

The fiddler was tuning up, and the rough men and women were laughing as they formed on the floor for the next dance.

Frank was able to concentrate his mind on anything he chose, at the same time becoming quite oblivious to everything else; and now he shut out the sounds of the room in which he sat and listened with all his ability to hear what passed beyond the partition.

"Sure, partner," Bill's voice was saying, "it surprises me a whole lot to see you come pokin' in here. However did you git here?"

"Terry came with me all the way. You said he would bring word to you from me, but I could not wait. I wanted to have a talk with you face to face, without trusting to any middle man. I felt that I must do it, and that's what brought me here for one thing."

"Waal, here you are, and now open up. I'm ready to listen to anything whatever you has to say."

"In the first place," Frank distinctly heard Dodge say, "Ben File is dead."

"Say you so?" exclaimed Bill, and his voice indicated regret. "I allow I'm a-plenty sorry."

"It was bad work."

"That's right. Don't know how I happened to do anything like that. Never did afore. I saw Merriwell make a jump, and I thought from the way he done it the bullet sure had gone clean through him."

"And you never touched him!"

"Don't rub it in harder than you kin help, Mr. Dodge!"

"Hush! Don't speak that name here! It must not get out that I'm in this game! It would ruin me!"

"That's all right, pard; no danger. Hear the racket out yonder in that room. Nobody would ever think o' tryin' to hear what we're sayin'."

"Still it will be better to keep on calling me Lewis. It's a dangerous game we've tackled, and I want to get it through in a hurry now. That's why I'm here."

"Waal, whatever do you say is the next move?"

"Merriwell got out of Holbrook right after you."

"I knows it. The gent sure chases me a distance, but he gits lost, together with his pards, some time afore night."

"Well, now is the time to make the demand on Mrs. Arlington for the ransom money. It must be rushed along. She's in a state of mind so that she'll be sure to give up easy now. I've waited for this, and I find she will pay well to have June returned to her unharmed."

"That's a heap soothin' and agreeable news. I has waited fer you to say when it was best to make the demand on the old lady."

"And I've waited until I felt sure she was so distressed and agitated that she would yield. She did not wish her husband to know of her presence here, and so she sent no word to him at first. Now she has wired him the whole facts, and we can reckon that he'll be coming this way as fast as steam can carry him. It's best to get the whole deal through, if possible, before he shows up."

"I'm for it."

"You must write a demand on the woman for the boodle. She has diamonds and jewels with her on which she can raise ten thousand dollars. Make her raise it at once. Don't let her delay. Frighten her into it."

"I opines I can do that. I'll give her a scorcher. I'll tell her the gal is all safe an' onharmed, but she has to plunk down instanter or I'll send her one o' Miss June's fingers to hurry her up a leetle."

"That will go. I think that ought to start her."

"If you says so, I'll make it stiffer. What if I adds that one o' the gal's pritty hands will foller? or an ear—mebbe that's better?"

"As you choose. Say that the money is to be placed in my hands to be delivered to your agent, who will meet me on the open plain ten miles from Holbrook in whatever direction you choose. Then I can ride out with it and come back, and you can bring the girl into town under cover of night."

"I reckon that ought to work, partner. This yere game is your plannin', an' I falls inter it because I reckons it was easier than gittin' ahead o' Merriwell an' seizin' the mine. Had I shot up Merriwell, instead o' File, I'd 'a' called on the lady hard fer the price, which, together with the money I'll get out o' this strike, would have made me easy for a right good while."

"I'm against your idea of trying to saddle the kidnaping onto Merriwell."

"Why?"

"I don't think it will go. Merriwell might return to Holbrook. If the demand for money had his name attached, his arrest would seem to put him where it would be necessary for him to produce the girl. Mrs. Arlington was for forcing him to do so when File took him. Anything like that would cause delay, and delay is something we do not want."

"Mr.—ah—Mr. Lewis, you sure reasons correct. We'll jest hitch a made-up name to the demand for money, which will be a whole lot better."

"I think so. And now let's write this demand, so that I may turn about and get out of this hole immediately. You must furnish me with a fresh horse. I'm supposed now to be searching for Merriwell, several men in town having set out upon the same task, for Mrs. Arlington offered a reward for his recapture. I will be able to make a very satisfactory explanation of my absence from Holbrook."

CHAPTER XXXII.

DEAD OR LIVING.

Frank's feelings on listening to this talk, the greater part of which he was able to hear very well, may be imagined far more easily than described. At last he was in full possession of the facts relating to the abduction of June Arlington, and a greater piece of villainy had never come to his knowledge. From the first he had regarded Eliot Dodge as a scoundrel of the worst type; but he had not gaged the man as one who would enter into such a desperate scheme as this.

Merry had also learned that Ben File was dead, and, therefore, he was released from his promise to bring back Cimarron Bill.

Immediately his one thought turned to June and to the devising of some method of discovering her whereabouts and going to her rescue. Later he could think of other things; but not until this great object had been accomplished.

The voices of the men ran on in the little room, though words grew fewer, and Merry knew the demand for the ransom money was being written.

For a moment he thought of the satisfaction it would give him to expose the rascally lawyer and bring him to the end of his tether. Then he saw Handsome Charley speaking quietly in the ear of a man, afterward passing on to another and yet another. There was something in Charley's manner that seemed very significant.

"There's trouble brewing for Bill," Frank decided. "It's coming as sure as fate."

He felt for his own weapons, making sure they were where he could draw them and use them without delay; but Frank did not propose to become involved in the affair unless circumstances made it impossible to keep out.

Again he listened at the crack in the partition, hoping that some word passed between Dodge and Bill would tell him where June was hidden. In this Merry was disappointed. True, Dodge asked about the girl and Bill assured him that she was perfectly safe and unharmed, but that was all.

The dance was over and another was in progress when Bill and Eliot Dodge came from that back room. Handsome Charley and his satellites were watching these two men. But they were permitted to pass to the door, where Bill shook hands with Dodge, who hurried forth into the night.

"How is that, Bill?" demanded Charley, hastily approaching. "I opine you agreed that you an' your friend would sure drink with me arter your business was over. I notices that he has hiked."

Bill turned.

"Count me in, Charley," he said easily. "Mr.—ah—Lewis, he didn't hev time. My neck is again a whole lot dry, and I'll be pleased to irrigate with you."

So they stood up to the bar, and Frank saw a number of men drawing near from different directions, all coming forward quietly.

Charley openly expressed his disapproval of the conduct of Eliot Dodge.

"He certain was most onmannerly, Bill," he declared.

"Forget it," advised Bill curtly.

And this was not at all agreeable to the other.

"Mebbe I can't do that none," said Charley; "but I'll tell ye, Bill, what will help a whole lot."

"Go ahead," said Bill.

"You has right up-stairs in this same ranch a young lady what is handsome enough to make any gent fergit a wrong, an' her I most mightily wants to bring down yere."

Frank heard the words distinctly, and they gave him a start. Handsome Charley was speaking of June Arlington; there could be no doubt of that. He said June was "up-stairs in that same ranch." At last Frank had received the clue he was seeking.

More than Merry saw trouble was brewing between Charley and Bill, and now the attention of almost every person in the room was directed toward them.

Bill's face grew grim, and again his eyes narrowed and glittered.

"See yere," he said harshly, "I allows we has settled the p'int in regard to her, an' so you lets it drop, Charley."

Frank knew that pistols would be out in a few seconds more. He did not wait for the men to draw and begin to shoot.

There was no flight of stairs in the room where the dance was taking place, and, therefore, he immediately decided that the stairs might be found in the back room, where the interview between Bill and Eliot Dodge had taken place. The door leading into that room was closed, but Frank slipped quickly to it, and it readily opened before his hand.

He found himself in a bare room, having but little furniture, a table, a bed, some chairs, and, as Frank had believed likely, a steep flight of stairs ran railless up one side of the room, disappearing at a dark landing above.

In a twinkling Merry was bounding lightly up those stairs, the sounds of loud and angry voices coming from the dance-room, where the music and dancing had now stopped.

Frank knew that whatever he did must be done in a hurry, for, allowing that in the trouble in the dance-room, Handsome Charley should come forth triumphant it was likely that June would be sought by some of those ruffians.

The thought of this spurred Merry on. He pictured to himself the terror of the poor girl seized by

those men and dragged into the presence of the mob below.

"They shall not touch her!" he muttered. "If I can reach her, they shall not touch her!"

Then he found himself, in the gloom of the landing, against a heavy door. He sought to open it, but it was locked.

From below came the sound of a shot. Then there were shouts and other shots.

"The devils have broken loose!" exclaimed Merry, and he wondered how it fared with Bill.

In vain he felt for the fastenings of the door. His heart smote him with the fear that it would withstand any attack he might direct upon it.

Then he found a match and struck it. The light showed him something that made his heart leap with satisfaction.

Across the face of the door, lying in iron slots, was an iron bar that held it fast.

The match was dropped in a twinkling, and Frank's fingers lifted the bar from the slots and its socket. Then he easily opened the door.

At that instant it seemed as if pandemonium broke loose below. There was a perfect fusillade of shots, hoarse shouts from men and wild shrieks from women. There was likewise a terrible crash, as if some part of the building had been ripped down.

"June!" called Frank. "June! June!"

The room in which he found himself was dark and silent.

"June! June! I am a friend! Answer me!"

Still silence.

Again he brought forth and struck a match. It flared up in his fingers, and he lifted it above his head, looking all around.

Stretched on the floor in a huddled heap in one corner was the body of a girl. The glance he had obtained convinced him that it was June beyond question.

Frank sprang forward, again speaking her name and assuring her that he was a friend.

In the darkness he found her with his hands. She did not move when he touched her, and his fingers ran to her face. It was cold as marble to the touch, and a great horror filled his soul.

"Merciful God!" he groaned, starting back a little. "They have killed her. The devils!"

The shock was so great that he remained quite still on his knees for a few moments.

He was aroused by the sound of heavy feet upon the stairs.

Frank sprang up and dashed across the room to the door.

The door leading into the dance-room had been left wide open below. He saw that a number of men had entered the back room, and already two or three were on the stairs. Handsome Charley was at their head.

Frank was trapped!

At once he realized that Cimarron Bill was, beyond a doubt, lying in a pool of his own blood in the dance-room. At last the most desperate and dangerous man-killer of the Southwest had met his master.

Merry had little time, however, to think of anything like this. His own life was in the utmost peril. He drew his revolver, and, with the utmost coolness, put a bullet through Handsome Charley's right shoulder.

With a cry, the man fell back into the arms of the one directly behind him, and that fellow was upset, so that all were swept in a great crash to the foot of the stairs.

"Perhaps that will hold you for a while!" muttered Frank, as he picked up the iron bar and promptly closed the door at the head of the stairs.

He had seized the bar because he thought it might be a good weapon of defense in case his revolvers should be emptied and he remained in condition to fight. Now he thought of something else, and decided that the bar might do for a prop at the door.

"There ought to be some other way out of this room," he muttered. "Isn't there even a window?"

Again he struck a match, looking around with the aid of its light.

At the end of the long room in which he found himself he fancied he must find a window. Toward this end of the room he hurried, and another match disclosed to him a window that was hidden by heavy planking. Plainly the planks had been spiked over the window after it was decided to hold June a prisoner in that room.

Down dropped the match, and instantly Frank attacked the planks with the iron bar.

Fortune must have favored him, for had it been light he could not have been more successful. Every stroke was effective, and he began ripping off the planks.

There was wild excitement below, and Merry prayed for a little time. His heart was filled with a hope that Handsome Charley's fate would be a warning to others, so they would not be eager to rush up the stairs to the door.

In just about one minute he had torn the planks from the window.

Once more he heard men ascending the stairs. Instantly he dashed across the floor, finding the door in the darkness.

"Halt!" he cried savagely, from behind the closed door. "Halt, or I fire!"

Then he sought to prop the door with the iron bar, pressing it down in such a position that it might hold for some moments against an ordinary attack upon it.

"I'll shoot the first man who tries to open this door!" he shouted.

But he did not remain there to await an effort to open the door. Instead he quickly found the girl in the corner, lifted her limp body, and sought the window once more.

Reaching the window, Frank promptly kicked out sash and glass with two movements of his foot.

Bang! bang! bang!—sounded heavy blows on the door behind him, but the iron bar was holding well.

Merry swung his leg over the window-ledge. Desperate as he was, he meant to venture a leap from the window to the ground with the girl in his arms.

But just then, pausing to look down, he was amazed and delighted to see below him his four friends, who were on the point of entering the building, led by Bart Hodge. Instantly Frank hailed them.

"Catch her!" he cried, swinging the girl out over the window-ledge, so that they could see her below.

Immediately Bart and Ephraim extended their arms and stood ready.

"Let her come!" shouted Hodge.

Frank dropped the girl, and the two young men clutched at her as she fell directly into their arms.

At that moment the door behind Merry flew open with a slam and the ruffians came bursting into the room.

One of them held a lighted lamp.

The fellow in advance saw Frank in the window and flung up his hand. There was a loud report and a burst of smoke. When the smoke cleared the window was empty, Frank having disappeared.

"Nailed him!" shouted the ruffian who had fired. "Nailed him for sure!"

He rushed forward to the window and looked down, expecting to discover the body of his victim stretched on the ground. But in this he was disappointed, for neither Frank nor his friends were beneath the window. Into the darkness of the crooked street some dusky figures were vanishing.

Frank had leaped from the window, being untouched by the bullet that fanned his cheek in passing. He struck on his feet, but plunged forward on his hands and knees. In a moment he was jerked erect by some one who observed:

"Methinks your parachute must be out of order. You descended with exceeding great violence. What think you if we make haste to depart?"

"Jack!" exclaimed Frank.

"The same," was the assurance, as Ready clutched his arm and started him on the run. "Dear me! I know this strenuous life will yet bring me to my death!"

Ahead of them Frank saw some figures moving hastily away.

"The girl——"

"They've got her," assured Jack. "Old Joe is with them. We'll talk it over later."

So they ran, well knowing the whole of Sunk Hole would be looking for them within thirty minutes. It did not take them long to come up with Bart, Ephraim, and old Joe.

Behind them there sounded shouts and commands, and it was well the whole of Sunk Hole had been at the dance, else the place must have been aroused so that they would have run into some of its inhabitants. Here and there amid the buildings they dodged until they arrived at the edge of the collection and struck out for the side of the valley, Crowfoot leading.

It was necessary to trust everything to the old Indian. Without him they could not have known with any certainty that they were taking the proper course to enable them to get out of the valley.

The girl was passed from one to another as they ran. They did not waste their breath in words.

The old Indian ran with an ease that was astonishing, considering his years.

Looking back, they could see torches moving swiftly here and there through the town, telling that the search for them was being carried on.

Soon they came to a steep gully that led upward, and the ascent was very difficult, even at first. It grew more and more difficult as they ascended, and it became necessary for them to work slowly in the darkness, the girl being passed upward from time to time, as one after another took turns at creeping ahead.

Joe did not seem to have much trouble, but he did not bother with the girl. Finally he said:

"Here come bad palefaces! Make some big hurry!"

It was true that a party of men were running toward the gully. Their torches danced and flared, showing them with some distinctness.

To the right and left in other parts of the valley were clusters of torches.

"Heap try to stop us," exclaimed Crowfoot. "One way to go up there, 'nother way down there, this be 'nother way. They know all. That how um come here so fast."

By the time the men with the torches reached the foot of the gully Frank and his comrades were so far above that they were not betrayed by the torchlight. But one of the ruffians bade the others listen, and at that very moment Ephraim Gallup dislodged a stone that went clattering and rattling downward with a great racket.

Instantly a wild yell broke from the lips of the ruffians below.

"Here they are!" they shouted. "They're up here!"

Then one of them began to blaze away with his pistols, and the bullets whistled and zipped unpleasantly close to the party above.

Bart Hodge stooped and found some rocks as large as ducks' eggs in the hollow of the gully. He knew it would expose their position if he should answer the fire with his revolvers, and so he simply hurled those rocks with all the accuracy and skill that had made him noted on the baseball diamond as a wonderful thrower to second base.

The first rock struck a fellow on the wrist and broke it. The third hit another man on the shoulder, and not many of the six Bart threw failed to take effect.

Astonishing though it seemed, this method of retorting to the shooting proved most effective, and the ruffians scattered to get out of the way, swearing horribly.

The fugitives continued till the top of the gully was reached and they struck something like a natural path that soon took them where they could no longer see the valley nor hear their enemies.

Knowing they would be followed still farther, they halted not for a moment until their horses were reached. Then they paused only to make ready and swing into the saddle.

Even as June was passed up to Frank she sighed and seemed to come a little to herself. And as they rode into the dusk of the night she recovered consciousness, the cool breeze fanning her face. She wondered and shuddered until she heard the voice of Frank Merriwell reassuring her, and then she was certain that it was all a dream. In her prison room she had listened with shaking soul to the sounds from below, she had crept to the barred door and heard Cimarron Bill and Eliot Dodge talking below, and the horror of knowing the rascally lawyer was in the plot that had brought about her abduction and detention in that den had been a fearful shock to her. When the quarreling and the shooting began, she was filled with mortal dread. She heard some one on the stairs and fumbling at her door, and then, kneeling in a corner of the room, all the world slipped away from her, and she remembered nothing more until she awoke in the arms of her brave rescuer, Frank Merriwell.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RETURN TO HOLBROOK.

Haggard from worry and need of sleep, her face seeming drawn and old, her eyes feeling like coals in her throbbing head, Mrs. Arlington welcomed Eliot Dodge, who came into the room, looking dejected yet seeming to appear hopeful.

"June! June, my child?" cried the tortured mother. "Have you no news of her?"

"Nothing but—this," said Dodge, pulling out an unsealed letter.

Then he briefly told of being held up by three ruffians, who had given him the letter.

Mrs. Arlington read it, and fell half-fainting on the couch, while Dodge bent over her with protestations of sympathy.

"My poor girl!" gasped the miserable woman. "And she is in the power of such monsters! The ransom money must be paid! She must be saved at once!"

"Is there no way to avoid paying the money?" said Dodge. "Is it not possible she may be saved in some other manner?"

"I think it is," said a clear voice, as the door was thrust open and Frank Merriwell, covered from head to heel with the dust of the desert, escorted the rescued girl into the room. "Mrs. Arlington, I have brought you your daughter."

With a scream of joy, Mrs. Arlington leaped up and June ran into her arms.

Eliot Dodge seemed to turn green. He stood and stared at the girl in a sort of blank stupor, failing to observe that just behind Frank Merriwell, who still wore the clothes taken from the intoxicated Mexican, there was the officer newly appointed to fill the place left vacant by the death of Ben File.

"June! June! June!" cried Mrs. Arlington, her face flushed with gladness. "Is it you, my poor girl! I can scarcely believe it! How does it happen? Tell me how you come to be here!"

"I am here, mother, because I was rescued from those horrible ruffians by that brave gentleman whom you have so greatly wronged, Frank Merriwell. He risked his life for me. I will tell you all, but first—first I must tell you that you have trusted a snake. I mean that monster there!"

She pointed her finger at Dodge, who started and looked startled, but pretended the utmost amazement.

"He is the villain who planned it all!" declared June. "I know, for I heard them talk it over. But he shall not escape!"

"I hardly think so," said Frank. "Officer, he is a desperate man. Be careful of him."

"This is an outrage!" declared Dodge, as the new city marshal grasped him. "I'll not permit it! I ___"

Frank clutched him on the other side, and, a moment later, the officer had ironed his prisoner.

Mrs. Arlington would have interfered, but Merry declared he had sworn out the warrant for Dodge's arrest, and she saw it was useless.

"Madam," said Frank, "I will leave you alone with your daughter. When she has told you all, you will be ready, I am confident, to prosecute Eliot Dodge. I shall then withdraw my charge and permit you to have him arrested. In the meantime I bid you good day. I shall be in this hotel for the next day or so."

He bowed gracefully to both Mrs. Arlington and June and left the room.

When there was plenty of time, Frank and his friends talked it over. He told them of his experience in the dance-room, and they told him how they had lingered near, ready to rush to his rescue. When they heard the sounds of the quarrel between Cimarron Bill and Handsome Charley they hurried to the door, but there they halted, for they looked in and saw nothing of Frank. Thus it was that they beheld the shooting of Bill as he tried to draw on Charley. He was shot down from behind by Charley's tools, and they fired several bullets into his body as he lay weltering on the floor.

Frank shook his head as he heard this account of Bill's end.

"He was a bad man, a very bad man," he said; "but somehow I'm sorry that he met his end that way. They had to shoot him from the rear. Not one of them dared pull on him face to face."

Frank received a brief letter from Mrs. Arlington, thanking him for what he had done for her daughter. Not one word did she say of her own malevolence toward him, not one word of the manner in which she had wronged him. And the doctor, who brought the letter, told Merry that she was in such a precarious condition that she could not write more, nor could she be seen by any one but June.

Frank smiled grimly, disdainfully, over the letter, then deliberately tore it into shreds.

But he had proved his manhood, and June Arlington, for all of her mother, found time to see him a few moments before he left town. After that brief time with June he rode light-heartedly away, his friends galloping at his side and listening to the cowboy song that came from his lips.

Transcriber's Notes:

Because of extensive use of dialect, all apparent errors within dialogue have been assumed intentional and retained.

Page 5, "Merriell's" changed to "Merriwell's" (Frank Merriwell's Rough Deal)

Page 24, changed erroneous period to comma ("I have no desire or intention of irking you up, sir," he said.)

Page 27, "referring" changed to "referring" (Certain papers referring to the Queen Mystery and San Pablo Mines, which I own.)

Page 93, added missing opening quote ("I think I'll finish you!")

Page 213, "Cimaroon" changed to "Cimarron" (Cimarron Bill watched his tool depart, smiling darkly and muttering to himself)

Page 216, removed extraneous quote after "hurriedly" ("Oh, velly good, velly good!" answered the Celestial hurriedly, backing off a little, his face yellowish white.)

Page 217, "cant" changed to "can't" ("I can't beat him at his own game.")

Page 300, changed single quote to double quote at end of sentence ("In the first place," Frank distinctly heard Dodge say, "Ben File is dead.")

Page 318, "Merriwel" changed to "Merriwell" (He stood and stared at the girl in a sort of blank stupor, failing to observe that just behind Frank Merriwell, who still wore the clothes taken from the intoxicated Mexican, there was the officer newly appointed to fill the place left vacant by the death of Ben File.)

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