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ALL IN THE GAME ***

FRANK MERRIWELL'S CHAMPIONS

OR

All in the Game

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of the famous MERRIWELL STORIES.

STREET & SMITH CORPORATION

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Frank Merriwell's Champions

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Frank Merriwell's Champions

CHAPTER I—FRANK AND HIS FRIENDS

Ping! pang! crash!

Frank Merriwell, making a sharp turn in a narrow mountain path, felt his bicycle strike something which gave under his weight with a snapping, musical sound, and almost precipitated him over the handle bars of his machine.

Bart Hodge, who was close behind, checked himself with difficulty, and sang out:

"What's wrong, Frank?"

"Smashed a music box, I guess," answered Frank, leaping down and coming back.

In single file behind Frank Merriwell and his chum, Bart Hodge, came the other members of the bicycle party—fat and lazy Bruce Browning; the gallant Virginian, Jack Diamond; merry-hearted Harry Rattleton; the Yankee youth, Ephraim Gallup; the Dutch boy, Hans Dunnerwust; the lad with Irish blood in his veins and a brogue to boot, Barney Mulloy, and Toots, the colored boy, who when at home worked around the Merriwell homestead.

In the previous volumes of this series we have related how Frank and his Yale chums started out from college for a tour on wheels to San Francisco. This great journey was safely accomplished, and now the boys were on their way to the East once more. They had journeyed in various ways through California, Texas, Missouri, Kentucky and other States, and had now reached the mountain region in the southwestern part of Virginia. They had left the railroad at the entrance to the valley, and were now journeying by a little-used path to the pretty little summer resort of Glendale, situated by the side of a lake near the top of the Blue Ridge range.

A view of Glendale and the lake, which was known as Lake Lily, had been given them a minute before, at the top of a rise, as they were about to plunge into the bit of woodland, where the path made its short turn and brought to Merriwell the accident just mentioned.

The attractiveness of the view was not lessened to Frank Merriwell and his friends by the rustic cottages stretching along the shores of the lake and the flag that floated above them, proclaiming the place the summer camp of the Lake Lily Athletic Club.

"It's a violin," Frank regretfully announced, picking up the instrument that had been crushed by his wheel and holding it for the others to see. "I don't——"

His words were checked by a movement in the bushes, and a youth of nineteen or twenty pushed himself into view. He wore an outing suit of blue flannel, and a white straw hat that well became him rested on his abundant brown hair. He was tall and straight as a pine, with a dark face that might have been pleasant in repose, but was now distorted by anger.

"You did that!" he cried, facing Merriwell. "That is my violin, and you have crushed and ruined it. What business had you coming up this path, anyhow? This is a private path!"

"If this is your violin, I must confess that I seem to have damaged it pretty badly," returned Merriwell, retaining his composure, in spite of the biting tone in which he was addressed. "As to the path being a private one, I am not so sure of that. At any rate, I did not run into your violin on purpose. It occurs to me that a path such as this, whether it is public or private, is not a place where one expects to come on musical instruments, and that you are somewhat to blame for placing it there. However, I assure you I am——"

"You will pay for the violin, and a good round sum, too!" asserted the youth, doubling up his fists and advancing toward Frank, who stood beside his wheel, holding the broken instrument. "This woodland belongs to my father, and no one has a right to come up the path except members of our club. If you hadn't been trespassing, you wouldn't have run into the violin!"

"I was going to assure you of my regret at having damaged the instrument, and of course I

am willing to do whatever is right to make good your loss," Merriwell continued, smiling lightly and deceptively. "But I still insist that a place like this is no spot for you or any one else to leave a violin. I presume you speak of the athletic club down by the lake?"

The youth's face showed scorn now, as well as anger.

"Those Lilywhites? Not on your life I don't! I was speaking of the Blue Mountain Athletic Club. Our cottages are right back here among the trees. You can see them from that bend. As for the violin, I was playing it a while ago, and jumped and left it here when one of the boys called me, expecting to come back in a minute——"

Again there was a movement in the bushes, with the sound of hurrying feet, and a voice shouted:

"Hello, Hammond! What's the matter out there?"

Then half a dozen boys, attired like the owner of the violin, hurried into view.

Merriwell's friends crowded closer to him when they saw this array of force, and Rattleton was heard to mutter something about Frank's punching the violinist's head.

"I don't think there is any need of a quarrel here," declared Jack Diamond, pushing forward. "Here, you fellows! I've been bragging all day to Merriwell and my other friends about the big-heartedness of the people of Virginia. I'm a Virginian myself, and I believed what I said. I hope you won't insist on doing anything that will make me want to eat my words!"

The statement was not without effect.

"He must pay me for the violin!" growled Hammond. "I can't afford to have an instrument like that smashed into kindling, and just let it go at that. As for this land, it is my father's, and very few people besides members of our club go along the path."

"Then the path is not wholly private?" queried Frank. "I am glad to know that."

"And he as good as said he was to blame for leaving the thing where he did!" exclaimed Harry Rattleton. "I don't think he is entitled to a cent."

"Come, come!" begged Diamond, again assuming the part of peacemaker, though he was raging inwardly at the belligerent Virginia boys. "We expect to stop a few days in Glendale, and we can't afford to be anything but your friends, you know. What is the violin worth?"

"A hundred dollars!" Hammond announced, though in reality the instrument had cost him only twenty. "I doubt if I could get another as good for double that sum."

"I don't want to quarrel with you," said Merriwell, "and I won't, unless I'm driven to it. I'm willing to settle this thing in one way, and in one way only. We will pick three disinterested persons who know something about violins. Let them set a value on the instrument. You stand half the loss for carelessly leaving it in a path which, by your admission, is not wholly private, and I will stand the other half for what I did."

"That's talk, Merry, me b'y!" shouted Barney Mulloy, who was itching for a "scrap" with these campers.

Hammond gave Barney a quick glance of hate.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," he asserted, turning again to Frank. "You pay me a hundred dollars, or I'll have it out of your hide!"

"Oh, you will, will you?" said Merriwell, facing him, and laughing lightly. "Jump right in, whenever you are ready to begin!"

One of Hammond's followers, seeing that, in spite of the lightness of his manner, Frank Merriwell meant to fight, caught Hammond by the shoulders and drew him back.

"Let me at him!" cried Hammond, becoming furious in an instant, and making a seeming attempt to break away from his friend. "Let me go, I tell you! I'll pound the face off him!"

"Let him go, as he is so anxious!" laughed Merriwell. "I'm willing he shall begin the pounding at once."

At this, another of Hammond's friends took hold of him, not liking the looks of Merriwell's backers, and the two began to force the enraged lad through the screen of bushes in the direction of the invisible camp.

"Here is his violin," said Merriwell, tossing it after them. "I am sorry I ran into it, and am willing to do whatever is fair. When he is in the same frame of mind, let him come down to the hotel at the village, and we will try to talk the thing over amicably. I will be his friend, if he will let me; or his enemy, if he prefers it that way!"

CHAPTER II—THE LAKELILY ATHLETIC CLUB

Frank Merriwell's party was scarcely installed in the Blue Ridge Hotel when two visitors were announced. They proved to be a delegation from the Lake Lily Athletic Club.

"We heard of your arrival only a little while ago, and we came straight up," said one, speaking to Merriwell, who had risen from his piazza chair to greet them. "My name is Septimus Colson—Sep for short—and this is my friend, Philip Tetlow."

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Colson—and you, Mr. Tetlow," answered Merriwell, who then proceeded to introduce himself and his friends to the callers.

Colson and Tetlow were sunburned youths of seventeen or eighteen—keen-looking, intelligent fellows, attired in outing suits.

"You'll excuse us for the call," begged Colson, "but you see it's this way: We've got those cottages down there, with the flag flying over them, and hardly anybody in them. The cottages aren't much to brag of in the way of looks, but they are comfortable."

"And you want us to help you occupy them?" laughed Merriwell.

"Yes, and help us do up the Blue Mountain fellows!"

Barney Mulloy and Harry Rattleton hitched their chairs nearer.

"Do you be afther m'anin' thim chumps in the woods up on the mountain?" asked Barney. "Begorra! av yez say yis to thot, Oi'm wid yez."

"I mean the fellows of the Blue Mountain Athletic Club," said Colson. "A week ago they sent us challenges, which we accepted, but which we must back down from unless your party is willing to join in and aid us. You see, we had sixteen boys in the camp at that time. Now we have only five. The others, who came from the same town down by the coast, had to leave because of sickness in their homes."

"How many boys are in the Blue Mountain Club?" inquired Jack Diamond.

"Well, there are fourteen besides Ward Hammond, who is their leader. They are already crowing over us in a way we don't like, because they think we can't meet them."

"Are they summer visitors?" asked Rattleton.

"Some of them are. The others belong here in the village. Hammond was brought up here, and his father owns a good deal of land in these mountains. He hasn't a very good name, though, and is not well liked. I've been told that he's related by blood to some of these fighting mountaineers, but I don't know how true that is. When you meet him, you will notice that he has the tall, lank appearance of a mountaineer."

"We've met him!" grunted Browning.

"About challenges. What is their character?" questioned Merriwell.

"The arrangements were for an archery shoot, day after to-morrow, with a swimming match on the lake the next day, and that to be followed by a mountain-climbing contest."

Colson looked hopefully at Merriwell and his companions.

"You must not say 'no' to our invitation," he insisted. "You'll find it much pleasanter in our cottages down by the lake than in this hotel, and we need you! We want you to join our club. It is perfectly legitimate, for we're allowed to recruit from anywhere. As I said, a number of the Blue Mountain boys—more than half of them, I think—do not have their homes in Glendale."

"What do you say, fellows?" questioned Merriwell, turning toward his companions.

"Av it's thim chumps upon the hill!" exclaimed Barney Mulloy.

Merriwell nodded.

"I think I'd like that, by thutter!" declared Ephraim Gallup.

"You pets my poots, dot voutl pe a bicnic!" asserted Hans Dunnerwust, the jolly-looking Dutch boy.

The others assented, each after his own peculiar manner.

"When do you want us to come down?" asked Frank.

"Right now, this minute, if you will!" cried Colson's companion, who had hitherto maintained a grave silence. "It's lonesome as a graveyard down there. And you'll want to do some practicing! Can you handle the bow and arrow?"

Philip Tetlow's face lighted up with such fine enthusiasm, and his delight was so manifest, that Frank could hardly restrain a laugh.

"We must see the landlord of the hotel first," said Merriwell, "for we have already registered here, and he may interpose objections to our summary leave-taking. But you may count on it that

we will be with you without much delay.”

Two hours later, Merriwell and the entire Yale Combine were snugly installed in the cottages of the Lake Lily Athletic Club.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have another one of those infernal chills,” grumbled Browning, as, with a blanket drawn over him, he reclined in a hammock and looked across the water toward the village. “I guess I shall never get that Arkansas malaria out of my system, though I’ve taken enough quinine to start a drug store.”

Rattleton cast a look of mock anxiety at the rather flimsy walls.

“I say, Browning, when you get to shaking right good, as you did that other time, you’ll have your cot put out under the trees, won’t you? Just for the safety of the rest of us, you know.”

“No, I won’t!” Browning growled. “If I bring the house down on myself, like old Samson, it will delight me to bury all the rest of you in the ruins.”

“Say, fellows,” cried the irrepressible Rattleton, “why is Browning like a member of a certain well-known religious organization?”

“Oh, go chase yourself out of here!” begged Bruce. “I’m already sick, and your weak jokes make me sicker.”

“It’s because he’s a Shaker.”

Browning groaned and turned his face toward the wall.

“Won’t some one kindly kill that idiot for me?” he pleaded.

Frank Merriwell came into the room, holding a handsome lancewood bow and a sheaf of arrows.

“If we are going to meet Ward Hammond and his Blue Mountain boys day after to-morrow,” he said, surveying the lounging group, “it strikes me that it would be well for the new members of Lake Lily Athletic Club to get in a little archery practice.”

To this there was a general assent, and the entire party prepared to leave the room, with the exception of Bruce Browning, who shivered and drew the blanket closer about him as they got up to go.

Out by the lake there was a level stretch of greensward. Here a target had been set up, and the members of the club had practiced at archery.

Both the new and the old members of the Lake Lily Athletic Club practiced with the bow so faithfully in the limited time given them that when they climbed to the archery ground on the wooded crest of Blue Mountain they felt that they would be able to give Ward Hammond and his friends a hard contest, if nothing more, though Hammond had been heard publicly to declare that the Lilywhites’ new members would add nothing to the strength of the club.

The spot was an ideal one, and commanded a view of the lake and the town. A glade, covered with short grass, opened on the side toward the village, being flanked by wooded slopes. Near at hand were the cottages of the Blue Mountain Club. They were handsomer and more expensive than those of the other club, but not more comfortable. Across one corner of the glade, and dipping down into the dark woods, ran the path on which Merriwell’s bicycle had collided with and crushed the violin.

Ward Hammond and his companions were already on the ground, and Hammond was looking at his watch as Merriwell’s party came up.

“I didn’t know but you fellows had backed out,” he declared, with a sneer, snapping the gold case together and dropping the watch into his pocket.

Jack Diamond flushed and pulled out his own timepiece.

“We’ve ten minutes to spare, if my watch is right!” he asserted.

“Of course your watch is right!” was the suggestive retort.

“I hope you don’t mean to insinuate that I turned my watch back for any reason,” said Diamond, gulping down his growing anger.

“You ought to know that I wouldn’t insinuate such a thing against any member of the Lilywhites?” Hammond sarcastically purred, but in softer tones.

Frank Merriwell was stringing his bow and glancing off toward the target. It was a thirty-pound lancewood bow, with horn notches at the tips, a handsome bow, and a good one, as he had reason to know.

The target was set at a supposed distance of sixty yards from the archers. It was a flat, circular pad of twisted straw, four feet in diameter, and it was faced with cloth, on which was painted a central yellow disk, called the gold. Around this disk was drawn a band of red, and next to it a band of blue, then one of black, and finally one of white.

“I suppose you understand how the scores are to be counted?” inquired Hammond, glad to

change the subject, for he did not like the look that had come into Diamond's dark face. "A hit in the gold counts nine, in the red seven, in the blue five, in the black three, and in the white one."

"And if you miss the gol darned thing altogether?" drawled the boy from Vermont.

"You'll likely lose an arrow somewhere down there in the woods," Hammond laughed.

Craig Carter, a sinewy lad of about seventeen, Hammond's most intimate friend and admirer, stepped forward with drawn bow and placed himself in readiness to shoot, as his name came first on the list.

"We're not ready yet," objected Merriwell, noting the action and again glancing toward the target. "The distance hasn't been measured."

"We measured it before you came," said Hammond, with an uneasy look.

"It is only fair that it should be measured in our presence," continued Frank. "Errors can happen, you know, and as the rules call for sixty yards and we have been practicing for that we don't want to run any risks by shooting at any other distance."

No one knew better than Ward Hammond how essential it is in archery shooting to know the exact distance that is to be shot over.

Hammond's uneasiness seemed to communicate itself to other members of the Blue Mountain Athletic Club.

"Get the tape measure," Hammond commanded, addressing Craig Carter.

Carter gave his bow and arrows to another member of the club and hurried into one of the cottages. From this cottage he was seen to rush into another and then another, and came back in a few moments with the announcement that the distance would have to be stepped, as somehow the tape measure had been mislaid and he could not find it.

Harry Rattleton promptly drew a tape measure from one of his pockets.

"You will find that this is as true as a die," he asserted, smilingly passing it to Hammond. "Stretch it across the ground there, and I'll help you do the measuring, if you're willing."

"Certainly," said Hammond, critically eyeing the tape. "You will do as well as any one."

Rattleton took one end of the line and ran with it out toward the target, and Hammond put the other on the ground. Rattleton marked the point, and Hammond moved up to it.

"The distance is five yards too short," Rattleton announced, when the measurement had been made.

"This line is not right," declared Hammond, white with inward rage.

"Send to the village and get another, then," said Merriwell. "A dozen if you like. Or take another look for your own."

"Of course we'll set the target where you say it ought to be," fumed Hammond, who had hoped to take a mean advantage, which had been prevented by the true eye of Frank Merriwell.

What made the discovery so bitter to Hammond was the knowledge that he had injured the chances of himself and his friends in the contest, for they had done nearly all of their practicing at the false distance. His attempted cheating had recoiled on his own head.

Craig Carter again took his bow and stepped forward to shoot. He held himself easily and gracefully and drew the arrow to the head with a steady hand.

Whir-r-r—thud!

The shaft, in its whirring course through the air, arose higher than the top of the target, but dropped lower just before it hit, and struck in the pad of twisted straw with a dull thud.

"Five—in the blue!" called the marker, coming out from behind the tree where he had screened himself, and drawing the arrow from the target.

"Heavens! Can't I do better than that?" Carter growled.

Sep Colson had the lists of the members of the two clubs, and he called Jack Diamond's name next.

Diamond stepped forward confidently and let his arrow fly.

"In the blue—five!" announced the marker.

"Well, it's a tie, anyway!" said Diamond, with a disappointed laugh.

"By chaowder, it ain't so derved easy to hit that air thing as it might be!" drawled Gallup. "I think I'd stand a heap sight better show to strike gold with a shovel an' pick in Alaska."

Dan Matlock, one of the boys of the Blue Mountain Club, came next, and then Hans Dunnerwust's name was called.

"Shoost you vatch me!" cried the roly-poly Dutch boy, as he advanced and spat on his hands before taking up the bow. "I pet you your life I preaks der recort."

There was a howl of derision at this from the Blue Mountain boys, and even the Dutch boy's friends joined in the laugh.

"Vell, you may laugh at dot uf you don't vant to," he exclaimed, "put maybe you don't laugh on der oder side your mouts uf pime-py. Ged away oudt! I vas goin' to shoot der arrow oudt mit dot golt, py shimminy, und don'd you vorgid me!"

He drew the bow slowly up to his face, shut one eye and squinted along the arrow. Then he put the bow down, with a triumphant laugh.

"Who vas id say to me avhile ago dot dis pow veigh dirty pounds, yet alretty? Vy, id can lift me like id vos an infant."

"Go on and shoot," said Merriwell. "The bow doesn't weigh thirty pounds. It takes a thirty-pound pull to bend it. That's why it is called a thirty-pound bow."

"So, dot vos id, eh?" queried Dunnerwust, looking the bow over curiously. "Id dakes dirty pounds to bent me! Vell, here I vos go ag'in. Look oudt eferypoty."

His fingers slipped from the arrow and the bowstring twanged prematurely.

This was followed by a howl from Toots, who dropped to the ground and began to roll over as if in great agony.

CHAPTER III—SHOOTING AT THE DISK OF GOLD

"Oh, mah goodness, I's done killed!" Toots gurgled. "I's done shot clean through de haid. O-oh, Lordy! Oh, mah soul!"

"Poly hoker!" gasped Rattleton, who saw the arrow sticking in the colored boy's cap, which was lying on the ground. "I'm afraid he is hurt this time."

Frank leaped to Toots' side and lifted him to his feet.

Hans Dunnerwust had dropped the bow and stood staring at his work, his round cheeks the color of ashes.

"You're not hurt!" exclaimed Merriwell, after a hasty examination, giving the colored boy a shake to bring him to his senses. "The arrow cut through your cap and scratched the skin on the top of your head, but you are not hurt. Stand up, now, and stop your howling!"

Toots sank to a camp chair, and made a sickly attempt at a grin.

"Wo-oh!" he gasped. "It meks me have de fevah an' chillins jes' lack Mistah Browning to fink about an arrum stickin' frough mah haid. I bet yo' fo' dollars I don't git hit no mo'! I'll git behind dem shooters de nex' time."

"But Dunnerwust is just as liable to shoot backwards as forwards," declared Rattleton, who was ready for a laugh, now that he knew Toots was unhurt. "He's like the cross-eyed man. You can't be sure that he's going to shoot in the direction he looks."

"Handle that bow with a little more care, Hans," Merriwell cautioned. "We don't want to have anybody killed here this afternoon."

Hans reluctantly took up the bow and prepared for another effort, but the mishap seemed to have taken the energy out of him, and the arrow did not fly as far as the target.

Ephraim Gallup came forward in his turn with a queer grin on his thin, homely face.

"Gol darned if I don't feel ez if I could shoot this thing clean through that old tree!" he muttered, as he fitted an arrow to the bow. "Do you shoot at the thing, er over it?"

"Over it," said Merriwell. "In shooting so great a distance you must allow for the trajectory, or curve. If you don't, your arrow will drop below."

Merriwell smiled as he said this, for he had already given Gallup careful instructions and had seen the boy from Vermont make some good shots.

Though Gallup stood in an awkward position, he drew the arrow with care. It was seen to strike near the center of the target, and then the marker called:

"In the red—seven."

"Good for you!" cried Diamond. "That's two better than I did."

"Somebody's got to hustle ef they beat us this day, an' don't yeou fergit it," said Gallup, that queer grin still on his face.

Ward Hammond faced the target with a confident air. He was a good shot with the bow, and

was well aware of the fact.

"In the gold—nine!" cried the marker, as Hammond's arrow struck, and then the Blue Mountain boys sent up a cheer.

Merriwell followed, and let slip the arrow with a steady hand.

"In the gold—nine!" cried the marker, again, almost before Hammond's friends had ceased their cheering, and then it was the turn of Merriwell's followers.

Toots would not shoot, excusing himself by saying he knew he would kill somebody if he did, and when Dunnerwust came again to the scratch there was a cautious widening of the semicircle gathered about the archers.

Hans came near shooting himself, this time, for the arrow slipped, while he was trying to fit it to the string, and flew skyward, past his nose.

"Look oudt!" Hans squawked. "Uf dot comes down your head on, I vill ged hurt!"

It fell near Gallup, who stepped nimbly to one side as it descended.

"Look here, b'jee!" he growled. "If you've got a grutch agin' me, say so, but don't go shootin' arrers at me zif you was an' Injun an' me a Pilgrum Father."

"Oxcuse me!" supplicated the Dutch boy. "Dot string slipped der arrow py ven I dry to fix him. Shust eferypoty stant away off, now, so I vill nod ged hurted."

The semicircle widened this time to a very respectable distance. Hans spat on his hands, grasped the plush handle in the middle of the bow, fitted the arrow and drew it down with exceeding care. When he had sighted with his open right eye till every one was growing impatient, he let the bowstring slip.

"In the white—one!" shouted the marker.

In all his practice Hans had never before struck an arrow in the target, and he was so pleased now that he fairly hugged himself with delight.

"Vot vos id you tolt me?" he cried, in great elation. "We peen goin' to vin dis game so easy as falling a log off!"

"Yes, it's won!" said Hammond, with a perceptible sneer. "There is no doubt, Dutchy, that you're a shooter from Shootville. If you hit the white again, it will count two."

"You pet yourselluf der v'ite vill hid me so many as sixdeen dimes alretty!" cried Hans, stung by the sneer.

Hammond struck the gold again, but Merriwell got only the red. Twice this was repeated; after which Merriwell put his arrow in the gold three times in succession, while Hammond dropped to the red, and once to the blue, which last counted only five.

It quickly developed that there were good archers on both sides, and the contest waxed hot. Diamond, Rattleton and Gallup shot well, as did also Colson and Tetlow. Six times the yellow-haired, big-jointed boy from Vermont put his arrow in the gold, though he faced the target so awkwardly that it did not seem possible he could handle a bow at all.

As for Browning, he had been left at the camp, muffled up in a blanket and in the grip of another chill.

"I didn't learn to knock the sparrers out o' dad's old barn with a bow an' arrer fer nuthin'!" Gallup grinned, when some one praised his marksmanship.

In addition to Ward Hammond, Craig Carter, of the Blue Mountain boys, shot excellently, as did also Dan Matlock and some half dozen others.

The contest grew hotter and hotter. The club scores—the average scores of the combined membership of each club—ran very evenly, and as the shoot drew toward its close, the count of the club scores showed five in favor of the boys of Lake Lily, with Ward Hammond's score three more than Merriwell's, and the best that had been made.

"Don't l'ave him bate yez, Merry, me b'y!" Barney Mulloy whispered.

"You may be sure I'll do my best, Barney," responded Merriwell, compressing his lips as he stepped again to the line and took up the bow.

"Seven—in the red!" cried the marker.

Then, as Ward Hammond followed:

"Nine—in the gold!"

There were only three more rounds, twenty-one of the twenty-four rounds of the contest having been shot.

"Here are the leading scores, as revised after that last shoot," announced the youth who kept the score card, reading from the card, while the excited and anxious lads gathered closely about him. "Ward Hammond, 145; Frank Merriwell, 140."

The Blue Mountain boys swung their caps and sent up a cheer of delight.

Again Frank faced the target and let his arrow fly.

"Nine—in the gold!" came the voice of the marker.

"Good boy!" cried Harry Rattleton. "That gives you one hundred and forty-nine. Do it another time."

Frank Merriwell did it another time; and when the marker called "nine," Ward Hammond became noticeably rattled, for he had made only seven in the previous shot.

Hammond's hands were seen to shake as he drew on the bowstring, and when the marker called, "only five—in the blue," his dark face grew almost colorless.

"One more round," said the score marker. "Frank Merriwell now has 158; Ward Hammond, 157."

The excitement was at fever pitch as Merriwell again went forward to shoot.

He knew that everything depended on this last shot. If he could again hit the gold, it would then be impossible for Hammond to beat him, for he already led Hammond by one and Hammond could do no more than strike the gold. Therefore he went about his preparations with the utmost coolness and care.

Grasping the bow in the middle with his left hand, he placed the notch of the feathered arrow on the middle of the string with his right, resting the shaft across the bow on the left side just above and touching his left hand. Then, with the first three fingers of his right hand, which were covered with leather tips to protect them, he grasped the string and the arrow-neck.

It was an inspiring sight just to look on Merriwell at this supreme moment, as he stood ready to shoot. He seemed to be unconscious that there was another person in the world. His body was gracefully erect, his left side slightly turned toward the target, his left arm rigidly extended, and his right hand drawing steadily on the string of the bow. There was a shining light in his eyes and on his face a slight flush.

The profound silence that had fallen on every one was broken by the twang of the bowstring, by the arrow's whizzing flight and by the audible sighs that went up as it sped on its way.

"Nine—in the gold!" called the marker, with a thrill in his usually monotonous voice.

But there was no cheering, though Rattleton felt like cracking the blue dome of the sky and his throat as well. The excitement was too intense.

"I'll duplicate that or break the bow!" Hammond was heard to mutter.

Merriwell walked down toward the target, anxious to observe the arrow as it struck, a proceeding that was perfectly allowable so long as he kept out of the archer's way.

Diamond, who was watching Hammond, saw the latter's face darken while the pupils of the boy's eyes seemed to contract to the size of pin points.

"That fellow is a regular devil," thought Diamond. "I must warn Frank to look out or he'll be waylaid and shot by him some of these fine evenings."

Hammond drew the arrow to the head with a steady hand, but, just as he released it, his foot slipped back on the grass and the arrow was sharply deviated from the line it should have taken to reach the target. Instead of flying toward the gold, it flew toward Merriwell.

"Look out!" screamed Diamond, jumping to his feet.

Merriwell had reached the narrow path that ran across the grounds and was directly in front of a tree that stood in the path and cut off the view toward the village.

He heard the "whir-r-r" of the arrow, heard Diamond's cry, and dropped to the ground on his face.

At the same instant, the straight, lithe form of a girl of seventeen or eighteen appeared from behind the tree.

She was directly in the line of the arrow's flight. She, too, heard the warning, but she did not understand it. She did not dream of peril.

Then the arrow struck her, and, uttering a cry, she staggered backward and went down in a heap.

CHAPTER IV—BRUCE BROWNING'S ADVENTURE

"Heavens, she is killed!" thought Frank, leaping up and running toward the fallen girl.

There were excited exclamations from the group of archers, and a sound of hurrying footsteps.

Frank saw the girl struggle into a sitting posture and pluck away the arrow, which seemed to have lodged in the upper part of her left arm or in her shoulder. Then she staggered to her feet. When he gained her side she was trembling violently, and her thin face was as white as the face of the dead.

Only a glance was needed to tell him that she was the daughter of one of the poor whites of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her dress was of faded cotton, her shoes heavy and coarse. In one hand she clutched a calico sunbonnet, which had dropped from her head as she fell.

"You are hurt!" gasped Merriwell. "Will you not let me assist you in some way?"

She shivered and gave him a quick glance, then stared toward the lads who were rushing in that direction. The sight galvanized her into activity.

"I dunno ez I've any call ter be helped!" she asserted, starting back and giving a last look at the arrow, which lay on the grass at her feet, where she had flung it as if it were a snake. "Leastways, I 'low ez how I kin make my way home. I war a good 'eal more skeered than hurt."

"But I saw the arrow strike you!" Merriwell persisted.

She put out her hands as if to keep him from coming nearer, then sprang back into the path, and vanished behind the tree and into the depths of the woods before he could do aught to prevent the movement.

"She's gone," said Frank, as the others came up on the run. "There's the arrow. I saw her pluck it out of her arm or shoulder, but she would not stay to explain how badly she was hurt."

"That is Bob Thornton's girl, Nell," said Hammond, in a shaky voice. "I hope she isn't much hurt. That was an awkward slip I made, and if I had killed her I could never have forgiven myself."

Merriwell gave him a quick and comprehensive glance. It was caught by Hammond, and served to increase his agitation.

"It was a very awkward slip, as you say, Mr. Hammond. That arrow might have killed me. It would certainly have struck me, if I hadn't dropped as I did."

"Accidents will happen, you know!" pleaded Hammond. "I hope you don't think I would do such a thing on purpose. It was a slip, just as when Dunnerwust shot the arrow into your nigger's cap."

He was about to say more, but checked himself, in the fear that he was beginning to protest too much.

"Perhaps we'd better gollow the fir—I mean follow the girl," suggested Rattleton. "She may have tumbled down again."

He did not wait for an order, but sprang into the path that led behind the tree, and hurried along it, with a half dozen curious fellows at his heels.

It was soon evident that the girl had not stuck to the path, which would have taken her back toward the village, but had plunged into the woods, which in places was thick with undergrowth.

"It's no use to follow her," said Hammond, joining the searchers. "It is likely she will make a short cut for home, where her father probably is, and where she can have the wound dressed. That is, if she was really wounded, which I doubt, from her actions. Perhaps the arrow only struck in her clothing, and frightened her. When I picked it up and examined the point, I could see no blood on it."

The archery contest was virtually ended, with Merriwell and the Lake Lily Club the winners, and no one was in a hurry to go back to the shooting ground. But it was universally conceded in a little while that no good could be done by trying to follow one who knew the wilderness paths as well as any deer that roamed them, for it would be impossible to overtake her as long as she did not want to be overtaken.

While the boys talked and speculated, Nell Thornton was hastening on through the laurel scrub, unmindful of the stabbing pain in her shoulder; and, at the same time, Bruce Browning, wrapped in a heavy coat and with a handkerchief knotted about his shivering neck, was advancing slowly and languidly up the path in the direction of the archery grounds.

"I'm afraid that confounded chill is coming back," Bruce grumbled, pushing a vine out of his way, "and I suppose I was a fool for leaving the cottage. I wish I had taken that other path, even if it is farther around. The bushes are thick enough here to make a squirrel sick, trying to worm through them. Hello! What does that mean?"

Nell Thornton, who had struck into this path from the woods, came into view, and was seen

to reel and lurch like a boat in a gale.

Browning stopped and stared.

Then he saw her reach out to steady herself by a sapling, and sink down in an unconscious heap.

"By Jove! she's fainted!" he muttered, stirred by the sight. "She must be ill or hurt! I wonder who she is?"

He forgot his lazy lethargy, and scrambled up the path with a nimbleness that would have been surprising to his friends, and which took him to Nell Thornton's side in a very few moments.

"Blood on her hand and running down her arm!" he declared, with a gasp of astonishment. "Here's a mystery for you!"

Nell Thornton lay with eyes closed, motionless, and seemingly without life. To Bruce her condition appeared alarming. He lifted her head, then let it drop back, and stood up and looked dazedly about, wondering what he should do. He recollected that he had seen a small stream of water trickling over the rocks a short distance below.

"Just the thing!" he thought. "I'll carry her down there!"

As if she were a feather weight, he lifted her in his strong arms, and started down the path, moving in a hurry, now that his anxiety was thoroughly aroused.

"If the boys should see me now," he groaned, "I'd never hear the last of it. Luckily, they'll not be apt to see me. No doubt they are whanging away with their bows up on top of the hill. I wonder how she got hurt? Could it have been——"

He stopped, and stared into the thin, pallid face.

"Could she have been hit by a wild arrow that missed the target and flew off into the woods? Heavens! I hope not!"

Down the steep path, slipping, sliding, maintaining his footing with difficulty, went Bruce Browning, with Nell Thornton in his arms, until he came to the rivulet he had seen gurgling over the rocks. There he put her down, as tenderly as if she were a sleeping child, and sought to make her comfortable by rolling up his coat and tucking it under her head and shoulders.

This done, he scooped up some of the water in his cap and began to bathe her hands in it, and to sprinkle it in her face.

But Nell Thornton was so slow to return to consciousness that Bruce was about to rip up the sleeve of her dress to ascertain the nature of the wound from which the blood still trickled, when she stirred uneasily.

Thus encouraged, he renewed his efforts, and a little later had the pleasure of seeing her eyes flutter open.

She stared in a puzzled way up into his face, then tried to get on her feet.

"Let me help you," Bruce begged, slipping an arm beneath her head.

"Whar—whar am I?" she demanded, putting up a hand protestingly.

"You are hurt, and you fell in the path up there, a little while ago," Bruce explained. "I brought you down here by the brook."

She looked at her hand, saw the blood, and made another effort to get on her feet.

She succeeded this time, standing panting and wild-eyed on the rocks.

"I'm not hurt ter speak on!" she asserted. "I 'low ez how I must hev got dizzy-like an' fell, but I ain't hurt ter speak on."

She seemed about to start on down the path, but checked herself, with the feeling that perhaps something in the way of an acknowledgment was due this handsome stranger, and continued:

"I'm 'bleeged to you. 'Twas a acks'dent, the way it happened. I war behint the tree, an' they didn't see me tell I stepped out, an' then the arrer war a-comin', an' it war too late to be holped."

"Then one of the arrows struck you, as I feared!" growled Browning. "Do you think you are much hurt? Perhaps you had better make an examination. The wound seems to be bleeding pretty freely."

She drew the sleeve down, as if to hide the telltale color.

"Plenty time fur that when I git home, which, ef I ever git thar, I'd better be humpin' myself along, too!"

Again she moved as if to start down the path, but was checked by Browning's words:

"You are in no condition to go alone, Miss—Miss——"

"My name's Nell Thornton," she said, coloring slightly, "ef that is what you mean. But these hyar mounting people don't waste no breath a-sayin' of miss an' mister."

Still, Browning could see that she was pleased.

"Miss Thornton," he said, holding the cap, from which the water still dripped, "permit me to introduce myself. My name is Bruce Browning, and I belong with Frank Merriwell's party, which arrived in Glendale only the day before yesterday. We have become members of the Lake Lily Athletic Club since, and it may be that the arrow which struck you was shot by one of my friends, for they are taking part in the archery shoot up on the hill."

It was a very long speech for Bruce Browning, as he himself realized, but it slipped off his tongue very easily, under the circumstances.

"So I more than ever feel that it is my duty to assist you," he continued, "and to see that you reach home without further accident."

"I dunno what dad'll say 'bout that," she observed, shyly. "He allus declar's ez he ain't got no use fur citified people, with thar store clo'es, an' sich. So I reckon it'd be an uncommon good piece o' hoss sense ef you'd track back up the hill."

"No, I can't leave you that way," declared Browning, who, looking into her white face, saw that she was so weak she was again on the point of falling. "You are in no condition to go on alone, Miss Thornton. I can't permit it."

Then he squeezed the water out of his cap, got himself into his coat, and prepared to assist her down the hill and to her home.

Bob Thornton's cabin, the home of Nell Thornton, did not differ materially in its general aspect from other cabins Bruce Browning had seen in the mountains, except that it was larger. A bar of light from the descending sun fell through a wooded notch in the hills and lit up the small panes of its one window with a ruddy fire. A morning-glory, with closed petals, clambered up the rough stick-and-mud chimney, as if trying to hide its unsightliness, and a gourd vine swung its green, pear-shaped bulbs over the door.

Nell Thornton had seemed to gain strength as the journey continued, and had not often needed Bruce's helping hand, even where the way was rough. Now she stopped in the doorway, as if she did not desire him to go further.

"I'm 'bleeged to ye!" she said, apparently at a loss for words with which to express her thanks. "My arm ain't hurtin' so much ez it did, an' dad's a master hand ter fix up a wound like that. I don't doubt it'll be all right by ter-morrer. I'm sorry you los' so much time a-troublin' with me."

"Don't mention it," begged Bruce. "I'm glad to have been of assistance."

Then he lifted his cap, and moved grumblingly away.

"Good-by!" she called, timidly.

Bruce turned and faced her.

"Good-by!" he said, again lifting his cap.

He saw her vanish into the cabin, and once more sought the blind path that led from the cabin up the mountain.

"It will be darker than a stack of black cats before I get back to the cottages," he growled. "What in thunder makes anybody want to live in such an out-of-the-way place as this?"

He had almost forgotten the chill which he feared was coming, but now he again drew the coat collar about his throat, and began to shiver, as he plodded on.

"That everlasting Arkansas malaria will be the death of me yet!" he groaned. "I feel just as if a lot of icicles were chasing up and down my spine. I wonder which one of the fellows it was shot that arrow?"

The sun dropped out of sight, and the shadows gathered quickly in the hollows of the hills. The exertion of climbing warmed Bruce, bringing the perspiration out on his face and body. He pushed back the collar of the coat, and mopped his face. Then went on again, slipping, sliding, grumbling.

"I thought this path ascended all the time," he growled, peering into the thickening gloom. "I don't remember this slope, but of course we crossed it in coming down. These hills and hollows look bewilderingly alike in this light."

Half an hour later, he came to a dead stop, with the unpleasant feeling that he had wandered from the right path and was lost.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish!" he groaned. "I'll take on another cartload of malaria if I have to lie out in these woods to-night. Well, it's no use to turn back. I couldn't find Thornton's cabin if I tried."

When he had stumbled on for another provoking half hour, with the darkness increasing, he came to another halt. A gleam of light, from a lamp or candle, reached him through the trees.

"I can inquire my way there, if nothing else," he reflected, "and perhaps if it seems

impossible for me to get home, I can find a bed for the night.”

Though still in a grumbling humor, he went on again with a decided feeling of relief, which changed to one of surprise and bewilderment when he was near enough the light to make out the manner of house from which it issued.

He had returned to Bob Thornton’s cabin!

CHAPTER V—HAMMOND’S PLOT

“I don’t see how I could have done that,” Bruce Browning growled, unpleasantly mystified. “I don’t suppose Nell will be very glad to see me, and probably she will think I came back purposely. But her ‘dad,’ as she calls him, will have to show me the way out of this place, or give me shelter.”

He walked toward the door, the soft carpet of grass and leaves muffling the sound of his footsteps. But at the corner of the cabin he was brought to as sudden a stop as if struck in the face.

“His name is Frank Merriwell, and I came down to tell you about him!”

These words, given in the voice of Ward Hammond, with the hissing emphasis of intense hate, reached Bruce Browning like a blow, and stayed his feet.

“He’s pretending to be a summer visitor, and is staying with a crowd at the cottages on the lakeside, but I overheard him talking last night, and caught on to the whole thing. He has been sent here by the government to hunt you down and drag you to jail.”

The voice did not come from within the cabin, but from behind it, where, as Bruce recollected, there was a bench under a shade tree.

Bruce put a hand against the cabin wall as a stay, for he found himself unexpectedly weak and violently trembling, and listened for the reply. It came at once in angry, grating tones:

“Then he’s one o’ them thar cussed revnoo fellers! Dad-burn my hide, ef he don’t wisht he’d never set hoof in these hyar mountings, ‘fore he’s a week older! Ef he comes nosin’ ‘round hyar, I won’t hev no more mercy on him’n I would a she-wolf!”

“Ef you recommember, Bob, thar war one hyar ‘bout this time las’ year, too!” another and younger voice put in. “I reckon it air about time ter do a leetle shootin’!”

“That first one must be Nell’s father, for she said his name was Bob,” Browning reflected, straining his ears to catch every word. “I wonder if she is in the house and hears that?”

“It’s for you to say what you’ll do,” Ward Hammond purred. “I thought it my duty to tell you what I had discovered, for I can’t forget that you’re related to me, even though we live so differently. I could not bear the thought of seeing you dragged to jail, without so much as lifting a finger to prevent it.”

“We’re ‘bleeged to you, Ward,” Bob Thornton confessed. “You never did seem like t’other big-bugs up ter ther village, an’ ‘tain’t the fust time ye’ve put yerself out ter gimme a p’inter.”

“Blood is thicker than water, you know!” avowed Ward, “I always stand by those who are related to me. If you go gunning for that fellow, I want to warn you to keep your eyes open. He’s smart, and if you give him half a chance, he’ll strike you before you can strike him.”

“I don’t doubt he is ez sharp ez a steel trap,” Thornton admitted. “The guv’ment don’t send no other kind out ter hunt moonshiners, knowin’ ez how it wouldn’t be no sort o’ use.”

Bob Thornton got on his feet, and Ward Hammond closed the knife with which he had been whittling.

“Air ye goin’ up thar ter-night?” the younger man drawled.

“It air my ‘pinion that it’ll be better,” said Thornton, in a husky tone. “Ef you hev a thing ter do, do it. Them’s my sentiments, an’ I allus acts on ‘em. Ef you hev a thing ter do, do it!”

“I do believe there is to be an attempt to murder Frank this very night,” Bruce Browning inwardly groaned, almost afraid to move an eyelid lest it should bring discovery. “I’ve got to get back to the cottages ahead of these fellows, or break my neck trying.”

Then he almost groaned aloud as he thought of the dark woods and the paths that seemed

little better than squirrel tracks, where he had already lost himself, and could hardly hope to do better in a wild race for the cottages against these miscreants.

Hammond and Thornton moved away. Bruce heard the third man strike a match, and caught the odor of burning tobacco. Then he noticed that the moon was rising behind him over a shoulder of the mountain, and that the night was growing lighter.

"I can get along with that moon," he reflected. "But I'm afraid it's going to puzzle me to get away from this cabin without detection."

He was on the point of making a dash and trusting to his heels for safety, for, though he was large-limbed and heavy, the bicycle trip across the continent had trained him down into fair condition for running, and the malarial trouble that seemed to have fastened on him had not yet materially affected his strength. But he was kept from this by the voice of Nell Thornton, who entered the cabin at this juncture, singing that old, old song of the backwoods:

"Fair Charlotte lived by the mounting side,
In a wild an' lonely spot,
No dwellin' thar fur ten mile 'roun',
Except her father's cot!"

The voice was not unmusical, but it had the piping twang of the mountaineers.

"She has been away somewhere, and heard none of that talk," thought Browning, with a sigh of relief. "I guess her arm was not so badly hurt by that arrow as I fancied. Anyway, she doesn't seem to be suffering much now, judging by the way she sings."

He inclined his head toward the cabin wall, expecting to catch the voice of the younger man from the bench under the tree and Nell's answer to his words. But he heard only Nell singing of that other mountain girl who went sleighing to a dance in defiance of parental authority and was punished for her disobedience by being frozen to death in the sleigh.

Had Browning looked behind him, his thoughts would have been given another turn, for he was never in more peril in his life than at that moment.

The man on the bench, chancing to glance around the corner of the cabin toward the increasing light, had seen Bruce clearly outlined against the moon's silver rim. His instant thought was that Bruce was the man against whom he and Bob Thornton had been warned—that here was the officer of the revenue service, with head pressed close to the cabin wall, having already spotted Bob Thornton as a moonshiner and tracked him to his home.

The man was a muscular giant of a fellow, as big and as strong in every way as Bruce. He was smoking and nursing a heavy stick, almost a club, which he habitually carried as a cane, but which, in his hands, was a weapon to fell an ox.

He quickly and stealthily slipped out of his shoes, then stole with catlike steps around the building, and approached Browning from the rear.

Step by step he moved forward, as silent as a shadow and as merciless as a red Indian. His face, revealed by the faint moonlight, was distorted with rage and hate, and his grip on the deadly club was so tense that the muscles on his right arm stood out in a knotted mass under the sleeve of his thin, cotton shirt.

Bruce still stood, with head inclined toward the cabin wall, listening for the words he was not to hear, wholly unaware of his peril.

Lifting himself slowly erect, the man poised the club for a brief instant, then brought it down with an inarticulate cry.

That cry saved Bruce's life, but it did not ward off the terrible blow. Bruce straightened his head and tried to leap back, instinctively throwing up an arm as a shield.

But the club descended, beating down the arm and striking the head a glancing blow, under which Bruce sank down with a hollow groan.

The blow, the groan, the man's fierce curse as Browning fell, reached the ears of Nell Thornton, stilling the words of the song.

She was out of the cabin in a flash.

"What hev ye done, Sam Turner?" she demanded, as she hurried around the corner of the cabin, and saw the man standing over the senseless form, with the murderous club still in his hands. "Who hev ye killed, hyar, I'd like ter know?"

"Shet yer yawp, Nell Thornton, an' go back inter the house!" Turner harshly commanded. "Go back inter the house, whar ye belong, stiddy botherin' with bizness that don't consarn ye!"

"But it do consarn me, ef murder is bein' done!" she asserted.

Then her voice rose in a shriek, as she bent over Browning, and recognized in him the youth who had been so kind to her that afternoon.

Browning lay as he had fallen, without movement or sign of life.

"Ye've killed him, Sam Turner!" she cried, facing the mountaineer, with white face and flashing eyes. "Ye've killed him!"

"That thar's what I meant ter do!" Turner declared. "An' I'll kill ever' other revnoo spy that the guv'ment sends down hyar ter 'rest me an' yer dad!"

Nell turned from him, with hot, dry eyes and choking words, and again bent over Browning, even as he had bent over her when she lay in a faint in the wild mountain path.

Then she grasped him by the shoulders and tried to lift him.

"Help me ter git him inter the cabin!" she wildly commanded. "He ain't no revnoo, Sam Turner! If he's dead, you'll hatter answer fur killin' a man that never harmed ye. You'll hatter answer fur it 'fore God, and that'll be wuss'n the judge at the co'tehouse down in the valley. Holp me ter git him inter the cabin, I tell ye!"

She gave another surging lift at the shoulders, and Bruce groaned.

Sam Turner raised the club again.

"Put that down!" she shrieked, flying at him with the ferocity of an enraged panther.

Turner staggered back under the force of her rush, and she tore the club from his hands and sent it whirling far out into the bushes.

"If ye won't holp me, I'll drag him in myself," she declared, again seeking to lift Browning by the shoulders.

There was another groan from Browning's lips, and then Sam Turner, moved by curiosity rather than pity, consented to assist Nell in getting the unfortunate lad into the house.

By the light of the kerosene lamp, Turner inspected Bruce's injuries, while Nell stood by, with clasped hands, in an agony of suspense.

She broke the silence.

"'Fore God, Sam Turner, I tell ye you hev made a mistake! That man hev never hed nuthin ter do with the revnoo. He belongs up ter the village with them thar summer folks. It's bloody murder ef ye hev killed him!"

"What do you know 'bout him?" Turner asked, suspiciously, irritated by her reproof. "I hev never said he didn't b'long up ter the village. I reckon, now, you must hev thought 'cause he air a revnoo spy that he'd be goin' 'roun' through the mountings a-hollerin' out his bizness ter the owls. I reckon you must hev thought that. Ef he ain't a revnoo, why war he standin' with his head agin' the cabin a-listenin'?"

Browning groaned again, and moved.

"He ain't so much killed ez he mout be!" Turner declared. "That club didn't ketch him squar'. He dodged, an' his shoulder got most o' it."

"You're not goin' ter strike him ag'in!" Nell screamed, clutching Turner by the arm.

"Who said ez how I war goin' ter?" he growled, shaking her off. "Yer ole dad'll do that quick ernuff when he gits back. He's out now a-aimin' an' a-contrivin' fer a safe plan ter git at this feller, an' when he gits back, an' finds that I've got him hyar, he'll be plum tickled out o' one fit inter fifty!"

He stooped toward Bruce.

"What air you a-goin' ter do to him, Sam Turner?" Nell demanded, her eyes blazing with a dangerous light.

Turner caught her and hurled her from him.

"Will you quit a-naggin' of me, Nell Thornton? I'm a-goin' ter drag him inter t'other room, an' tie him up fer yer ole dad ter look at when he gits back. I 'low I'll hev ter tell him, too, that you've acted clean crazy over the feller."

There was no answer to this fling, and Turner, lifting Bruce by the shoulders, dragged him into the adjoining room, the only remaining room of the cabin, with the exception of the garret.

When he had done this, he hunted up a piece of rope, with which he securely tied Browning's hands and feet. Then he deliberately relighted his pipe, took down a long rifle from its rack, and, seating himself in the doorway in a rude, hickory-bottomed chair, he rested the rifle across his knees, and stared moodily off over the ridges, on which the moonlight now fell with silvery radiance.

CHAPTER VI—NELL RETURNS A KINDNESS

In the little room where Sam Turner had dragged him, Bruce came back at last to the land of sentient things. The moonlight, streaming through a crack in the chinked wall, fell on his white face. His head was racked with splitting pains, and a dull ache made itself unpleasantly felt in his shoulder.

When he sought to move his hands and feet, he found that they were tied. Then memory awakened, and he stared about at the cabin walls, trying to determine where he was, and just what had befallen him.

A heavy snore drew his attention, and he beheld the form of a man stretched across the doorway of his room. There was a rifle by the man's side, and he had evidently placed himself there to guard against any attempt at escape.

All this was startling enough to Bruce Browning.

"And Merriwell! I was not able to get to him to warn him of his danger! I wonder what has befallen him?"

Almost his first clear thought was of Frank, and the peril which he believed threatened his friend.

He would have groaned aloud in the very agony of mental torture, if a wholesome fear had not restrained him.

"I wonder what has become of Nell?" was his next mental query.

As if in answer, when he looked again he saw her tip-toeing in shoeless feet toward the man who lay in front of the door of his prison. Her thin face seemed unnaturally white and bloodless in the dim light. Her widely distended eyes gleamed like those of some wild animal. In her right hand she held something, which he soon made out to be a knife.

A sense of bewildered fascination fell on Bruce. He forgot the thumping pain in his head and the ache in his shoulder.

"She is going to kill him as he sleeps!" was the horrible thought that seized him.

He moved uneasily, and put out his bound hands, as if to beg her not to do a thing so dreadful. He might have done more, but at that moment her eyes met his. She saw that he was conscious, and put a finger to her lips to enjoin silence.

Browning lay back and stared at her. His mind was not yet entirely clear.

Again she put her fingers across her lips, and took another catlike step toward the sleeping man.

She made no more sound than a gliding shadow. Browning readily might have believed her a ghost, and it is quite certain that Toots, if similarly placed, would have shrieked like a maniac from sheer fright.

With the stealthy silence of a panther creeping on its prey, Nell Thornton advanced toward the open door.

Then Browning saw that her gaze was not fixed so much on the sleeping man as on him, and awoke to a realization of the fact that Nell was trying to come to his rescue, and that the knife was to sever the ropes that held him, and was not intended as a weapon with which to do murder.

He could not restrain the sigh of relief and hope that welled from his heart.

Nell Thornton's keen ears caught it, and again her finger went to her lips, and she stopped, looking anxiously at the sleeper.

For several seemingly interminable seconds she stood thus, and when Turner did not move, she took another cautious step.

With her eyes fixed on Turner's upturned face, she stepped warily over his body, and stood in the room at Browning's side.

The knife gleamed in the moonlight. It was her father's keen-bladed hunting knife.

"I hev come ter git ye out o' hyar," she whispered, laying her lips against Browning's ear. "Don't ye so much ez whimper a sound, er——"

She pointed significantly with the knife toward the sleeping form of Turner.

Then she pressed the blade against the rope that held Browning's wrists. It was almost as sharp as a razor, and ate through the tough strands with noiseless ease.

She worked quickly, but silently; then stood erect, and pointed toward the door.

Browning moved his head to show that he understood.

"Do ye need ter hev me help ye?" she whispered, stooping till her lips again touched his ear.

For reply, Browning lifted himself cautiously and struggled slowly to his feet.

She smiled encouragingly, and stepped through the doorway, Bruce following close after her, as silently as he could. Thus he passed over the sleeping form of Sam Turner, and moved toward the outer air.

He scarcely ventured to breathe till they were both outside, under the flooding moonlight.

Here she took him by the hand, without speaking, and hurried him away from the cabin, into a path that led toward the hills and in the direction of the village.

"Hev you a knife?" she anxiously asked, stopping when they had gained the friendly shelter of the trees.

"Yes. Why?" inquired Browning, venturing to speak for the first time.

"Case, ef you hev, I'll slip back inter that thar room with it an' lay it open on the floor, so that when Sam Turner hev come ter himself he'll 'low ez how you cut them ropes an' got away 'thout anybody holping ye."

Browning took out his pocketknife, opened the biggest blade, and placed it in her hand.

"I'm 'bleeged ter ye!" she said.

"And I'm obliged to you, Nell—Miss Thornton!" declared Browning, with an uncommon warmth of feeling. "Likely I should have been killed if you hadn't come to my assistance. And at such a fearful risk! I owe you my life!"

She was about to turn away, but faced around abruptly and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"You ain't nary revnoo spy, air ye, come hyar ter hunt down the moonshiners?"

"No!" said Browning, with sturdy emphasis. "I am not! Nor are any of my friends. I came back to your house because I was lost."

Her lips parted in a smile.

"I knowed you warn't," she asserted.

Then, before Bruce could say anything more, or even bid her good-by, she leaped away and hastened back toward the cabin.

The racking pains, which Bruce had temporarily forgotten, shot again through his head and shoulder as he saw her vanish, and he turned toward the mountain with a groan.

But ever, as he toiled on over the wild path, slipping, sliding, groaning, he thought of Nell Thornton, going back into that room, over the body of the slumbering rifleman, to place the pocketknife on the floor by the side of the cut ropes, and his heart throbbed in sympathy with her great peril.

CHAPTER VII—BY THE WATERS OF LAKE LILY

"It's a trick to enable them to get out of the match!" asserted Ward Hammond, with a stinging sneer. "All this pretense of making a search is the veriest humbug! The idea that one of their number would wander away into the woods, or drown himself in the lake while out of his head from a little fever, is the greatest rot that any one ever tried to foist on the public."

A considerable concourse of people had gathered on the margin of Lake Lily to witness the swimming match announced to come off that morning at nine o'clock sharp. They were seated on camp stools, on wooden benches, and on the rocks and grass. The boathouse of the Lake Lily Athletic Club was filled with them.

And now the rumor had gone forth that Frank Merriwell and his friends of the Lake Lily Club would not enter the contest because they were organizing to search for one of their number who had been strangely missing since the previous afternoon.

"It's a clear backdown," declared Hammond, walking up to a group of his Glendale friends. "They know they dare not meet us, and they're simply making that an excuse. I'll bet big money that, if the truth were known, the fellow they say is lost is hidden away somewhere in one of their cottages."

Merriwell's party, with Colson, Tetlow and others, came out of a cottage at that moment. They wore a sober, serious air. They had been talking the thing over, and were intending to

institute another search through the woods and along the shores of the lake, though they had already made a number of such searches. Merriwell was to speak to the people, and explain why it was they could not enter the swimming match, and was to announce that if nothing was heard of Browning by noon, the lake would then be dragged for his body.

But scarcely were they out of the cottage, when Harry Rattleton swung his cap and gave a great cheer.

"There he is!" he whooped. "Just in sight, coming over that rise!"

He broke away from the crowd and ran swiftly to meet Browning, who had lost his way again, in spite of the moonlight, and had been forced to remain in the woods all night.

The story that Browning had strolled across the mountains for a walk, and had been assaulted and robbed by highwaymen, spread like wildfire.

It was not started by Browning's friends, but when they found it current, they did not try to correct it, choosing to let it go at that, instead of giving the true account of his experiences.

Ward Hammond's boasting came to a sudden termination when he saw Browning return, and knew that he would have to swim against the youths he had been so maliciously maligning.

It was ten o'clock, an hour later than the time fixed, when Frank Merriwell and Sep Colson, who had been selected by the members of the Lake Lily Club to uphold the club honors in the swimming match, came out of their dressing-room in the boathouse.

Ward Hammond and Dan Matlock, the chosen champions of the other club, were already at the starting point, and the spectators, who had been kept so long in waiting, were growing impatient at the delay.

"Oi'm bettin' thot yez kin bate thim fellies out av soight, Frankie, me b'y!" cried Barney, jubilantly. "Thot Hommond sint up his rooster crowin' a bit too soon, so he did, as he'll be foindin' out moighty quick, now!"

"I'm sure we'll do our best, Barney," promised Merriwell, touched by the Irish lad's loyalty.

"We can always depend on you for that, Merry!" said Rattleton. "We want you to beat Hammond worse than you did in the shooting. And you can do it, too!"

"I don't doubt he's safe enough to do that," grumbled Bruce, who had come down to the boathouse in spite of his aching head and generally used-up condition. "But as for me! Ugh! I wouldn't leap into that water for wages. It makes me shiver to look at it!"

Rattleton gave a wink and thrust his hands into his pockets. Gallup and Mulloy imitated his example, and when their hands came out, they were seen to contain each a number of white capsules.

"Take another dose of quineen, and keep off that chill," said Rattleton, extending the capsules toward Bruce.

"Gullup daown another dost of quinine an' keep off that gol darn chill!" cried Ephraim, pushing the capsules into Browning's face.

"Swally anither dose av quoinin an' kape aff thot ager," advised Barney, doing the same.

Browning arose to his feet and shook his fist at them in mock rage, whereupon they dodged backward and made a feint of swallowing the capsules themselves.

"Mistah Browning'll make you have wuss dan de fevah an' chilluns," warned Toots. "I's su'mised dat Mistah Browning ain't feelin' berry good dis mawnin—no, sar!"

Suddenly Browning was seen to straighten up and stare toward the slope where the benches had been placed.

"There she is," he whispered, nodding his head in that direction.

"She! Who? What are you talking about?" demanded Jack Diamond.

"Nell Thornton! Don't look at her right now, and all at once. But you can see her on the end of that farthest bench. The slim girl, with the cotton dress and calico sunbonnet. Heavens! I'm glad to see her, for I know now that she succeeded in pulling the wool over the eyes of that villain, Sam Turner!"

"And she has come here for no other purpose than to let you see her, so that you may know that she is safe," observed Diamond.

"I believe you are right," assented Browning.

Then the entire party went out to the edge of the boat landing, from which point the swimmers were to dive and begin the race.

"Are you all ready?" asked the starter, as Merriwell and Colson, Hammond and Matlock stood up side by side, and faced the deep-blue water in which they were to contest for the supremacy.

"Ready!" ran along the line.

"One, two, three—go!"

At the word, four trim, muscular forms flashed in the air, shot downward, and slipped into the depths with scarcely a splash.

"They're off!" some one yelled.

With a waving of handkerchiefs and a fluttering of fans and umbrellas, the spectators began to cheer.

Ward Hammond and Frank Merriwell came to the surface first, with Colson and Matlock close after them. Hammond was a full yard ahead of Frank, and the latter's friends saw that Merriwell would not have an easy task if he defeated the Glendale youth, who seemed to be able to dive and swim like a fish.

But Merriwell was not worrying over the outcome of the race. He knew that a race is not always won by a brilliant start, and that the final stretch is what tests the strength of the swimmer. So while Ward Hammond spurted and increased his lead, Merriwell swam low and easily, with his head well back on his shoulders, and without any unnecessary expenditure of muscle.

Craig Carter, who had been seated in a boat beside the landing, now pushed the boat off, and dropping the oars into the rowlocks, prepared to follow the swimmers leisurely, that a boat might be at hand in case of accident. Of course, he was one of Hammond's most fiery henchmen, and he did not hesitate to show his partiality by shouting encouraging cries to him.

"That's right, Ward! Give full spread to your hands and feet. Gather a little quicker, frog fashion. That's right! Go it, old man! They can't any of them beat you! Hurrah for the Blue Mountain boys!"

"I hope he'll fall out of that boat and drown himself," was Rattleton's uncharitable wish. "He actually makes me sick!"

"His friend hasn't won the race yet," said Diamond, studying the swimmers with a critical eye. "Colson is a good swimmer, too, isn't he? He's coming right up alongside of Merriwell."

The race was to a stake, set far enough from the shore to test the strength and wind of the swimmers, thence back to the point of starting.

Up to this stake and around it Ward Hammond led, with Merriwell second, Colson third, and Matlock closely crowding Colson.

When the stake was turned and the swimmers headed shoreward, it was seen that Hammond was fully six yards in the lead.

Craig Carter was standing up in his boat, alternately sculling and swinging the oar aloft to give emphasis to his Indian-like yells, and the excitement among the spectators perceptibly increased.

"By Jove! I'm afraid Hammond is going to beat Merry!" confessed Bart Hodge, with an uneasy shifting of his feet. "See him spurt! He goes through the water like a torpedo boat!"

"I'll het you my bat—I mean I'll bet you my hat—that he doesn't!" averred Rattleton, whose faith in Merriwell's ability was always supreme. "Now look, will you? Hurrah for Merry! Talk about your torpedo boats! That's the stuff, Frank! Hooray! hooray! hooray!"

Rattleton crowded so near the edge of the landing that he was in danger of tumbling into the water, and there, standing on tiptoe and swinging his cap, he sent his shrill cries ringing across the surface of the lake.

Merriwell seemed still to be swimming easily, with his body well under and his head poised lightly on his shoulders, but it was observed that he was greatly increasing his speed. Not in the spurting, jerky manner of Hammond, but with a steady pull, that was bound to tell in the outcome.

The spectators noticed this, and their clamor increased. One solemn-looking man jumped to the top of a tall stump and capered like a schoolboy, while a couple of Glendale's severest old maids, whom nobody supposed could be moved to any show of emotion by such a scene, were actually seen to hug each other and shed tears.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, and yard by yard, Frank gained on his opponent and bitter enemy. His head drew alongside of Hammond's thrashing heels, forged up to Hammond's side, came up to Hammond's shoulder and neck, then passed him.

Hammond gave his antagonist a frightened glance, and tried to swim faster, seeking to regain his lost ground by another spurt. But he had seriously winded himself, and he found the feat impossible.

And still the crowd yelled, and whooped, and fluttered handkerchiefs, and thumped the benches.

Craig Carter had long ceased his insane antics. His face wore a look of anxiety.

Suddenly, as the swimmers were drawing past a point that jutted out into the lake, a dog sprang into the water and paddled toward them. It was Craig Carter's spaniel. It recognized him as he sat in the boat, and was anxious to join him. The boat was beyond the swimmers, and the dog, in attempting to reach it, swam against Merriwell, and almost lost him his position. Frank lifted himself and gave the spaniel a heavy shove, which caused it to sink beneath the surface.

The sight threw Craig Carter into a rage. He was already in a desperate mood, and now he seemed to become furiously insane.

Merriwell was still in the lead, and again swimming. White and panting, Carter rose to his feet, lifted an oar with both hands and struck at Frank.

It was a cowardly blow, and brought cries of "Shame!" from those who witnessed it.

But it did not reach Frank. He dived like a flash, and the oar struck harmlessly on the water.

When Frank came up, he was seen to be swimming neck and neck with Ward Hammond, and the goal not a dozen yards away.

Then pandemonium again broke loose on the shore.

Inch by inch, and foot by foot, Frank again drew ahead of his antagonist. The crowd yelled like mad. A dozen men crowded to the water's edge to take him by the hand, for they saw that he was to be the winner.

In vain Ward Hammond threshed and flailed. His wind and strength were gone.

Merriwell reached the landing three yards in the lead, and was immediately drawn out on the boards.

Then, all wet as he was, he was hoisted to the shoulders of his admirers—to the shoulders of men who loved pluck and fair play—and borne around the boathouse, while they bellowed at the top of their lungs:

"See, the conquering hero comes!"

After that there were exhibitions of fancy diving and swimming by Frank Merriwell and others, which were not taken part in by the disgruntled Hammond, however, and by only a few of his intimate friends.

Thus the swimming ended, to the entire satisfaction of those who had waited so long and so patiently for its beginning.

"And to-morrow comes that mountain climb," said Merriwell, speaking to Colson, when they were again in the dressing-room. "I wonder if Hammond will be as palpitatingly anxious for that as he was for this swim?"

CHAPTER VIII—A FAIR GUIDE

The mountain chosen for the climb was one of the wildest and ruggedest of the Blue Ridge range. It rose just beyond Blue Mountain, whereon Hammond and his friends had their summer camp, and its dark shadows fell afternoons into the hollows and dells where clung the cabins of the poor whites who recognized the leadership of Bob Thornton.

"It's not a pleasant feat to contemplate," grumbled Bruce Browning, looking from the door of the cottage he occupied in company with others, and staring up at the half-naked heights that thrust themselves skyward. "It's much prettier at a distance. I haven't any sympathy for these fellows who form Alpine clubs, to bury themselves in snowdrifts and break their necks in crevices, when they might be staying at home, sensibly enjoying themselves."

"I don't doubt you're really wishing for a rattling good chill," laughed Sep Colson. "It would be such an excellent excuse to laze all day in that hammock."

"Hardly that," grunted Bruce. "A fellow might as well wish he'd break an arm to get out of the job of sawing a little wood. But, seriously, doesn't it seem to you a great waste of energy for a mighty little return to go panting up that mountain, trying to beat a lot of other fellows who haven't any more sense than you?"

"No more of that," cried Rattleton, coming up at that moment, and overhearing the question. "You're the worst grumbler on the face of the footstool, Browning. I should think you'd be just

dancing with joy this morning to think how you slipped through that scrape down at Thornton's. And if there is anything prettier than that mountain, with the morning mists creeping around it, I don't know what it is."

"Oh, it's pretty enough—at a distance!" growled Bruce. "And, of course, I'm going with you, even if I haven't got over that headache yet. You couldn't get along without me."

"Roight yez are in thot!" declared Barney Mulloy, coming, with a shining face, from a dip in the lake. "Indade, we couldn't git on widout yez, an' it's moighty bad we filt whin we thought ye wur dead."

After solemn consultation over the matter, it had been determined to keep Browning's adventure a close secret. It would be difficult to prove anything against either Sam Turner, Ward Hammond or Bob Thornton, and the effort would necessarily involve Nell Thornton, whom they naturally wished to protect, and not injure.

Bob Thornton had not been seen, and it was reasonable to suppose that, Turner's attempt having failed he was keeping himself out of sight, and would continue to do so until the supposed revenue officers had disappeared from the neighborhood.

The starting point of the climb was a glade at the foot of Bald Mountain, and the goal a flat rock beyond the mountain's outthrust shoulder, both the shoulder and the rock being well-known landmarks.

A score of men from the summer cottages in the village were at the starting point when Merriwell's party arrived, and two had been sent on some time before to station themselves at the rock, that the time occupied in the ascent and the victors in the contest might be accurately determined.

"Hammond's fellows don't seem to be here," declared Rattleton, stabbing his alpinestock in the ground, and looking about.

"I don't doubt they will come all right," Merriwell hastened to say.

"Meebe dey ain' got ober shoutin' 'bout dat swim yit!" observed Toots, a smile of pleasurable recollection lighting his ebony face.

"Here they come, just the same," announced Bart Hodge. "They've got sand, and that's something to praise them for. It's my opinion, too, that they'll give us a hard climb, for most of them are familiar with these mountains and hardened to such work."

Ward Hammond was diplomatic enough on his arrival to try to conceal the intense hatred he felt for Frank Merriwell. He recognized that Craig Carter had made a sad mess of it by striking at Frank with the oar. Even Hammond's friends had denounced this as a criminal and cowardly piece of work.

As for Craig, he held himself aloof from the joking and conversation, and was not without a fear that Merriwell would seek to punish him yet for his contemptible conduct.

But Merriwell's victory in the swimming match had been so complete that he chose to pass the matter by without comment, instead of dealing blow for blow.

The starter looked at his watch.

"The party, or any member of either party, that reaches the rock first is to be counted winner. The object is to reach the rock in the shortest possible time."

Browning glanced up at the mountain, and groaned, as Merriwell grouped his party, and the boys broke into a hearty laugh.

"It is now nine o'clock," said the starter, when all were ready. "You ought to do it in two hours, or less. I won't attempt to give you any advice. You know what's before you. Go!"

Ward Hammond led off at a sharp run, swinging his alpinestock and taking the path that led toward the right, while Sep Colson, who had been chosen to lead the Lake Lily Club, because of his greater familiarity with the ground to be covered, swung into the path that wound around the mountain on the left.

"It's a little farther," he said, "but the traveling is easier, and we'll make better time."

Frank Merriwell crowded close to Colson's heels, and others fell in behind him, with Hans Dunnerwust bringing up the rear.

"Yes, this is what I call fun!" grunted Browning, as a boulder slipped under him and he half fell.

"Be aafter takin' a little more quoinin' to roise yer spairts," advised Barney Mulloy, with a grin.

When more than half a mile had been passed over, and they were jogging down a declivity at a lively pace, Colson stopped so suddenly that Merriwell fairly tumbled over him.

"What is it?" Frank questioned.

"Look there! There's Nell Thornton waving to us."

"She wants to speak to us," said Rattleton, looking in the direction indicated by Colson's pointing finger.

Bruce straightened up and forgot to grumble, when he saw the slim form of the girl descending the rocks.

She was letting herself down a precipitous bluff, clinging to the vines and bushes.

"She can get over places I shouldn't care to try," declared Bruce, with an admiration that was akin to enthusiasm. "I wonder what she wants?"

"We shall find out very soon now," said Merriwell. "It won't take her long to reach us."

Dropping to the level ground, Nell came shyly toward the party, with evident embarrassment.

"Do you uns want ter beat them thar other fellows bad?" she asked.

"The worst kind," declared Rattleton.

"Thar's a way it kin be done," she said, with kindling glance, "ef so be ez you uns air good climbers. Thar's a path which the mounting men foller when they air in a hurry, sech o' them ez knows 'bout it. I kin show it ter ye, though ef dad knowed I done it he'd jes' nacherly kill me!"

"You may show it to us with perfect safety," promised Merriwell.

She gave a quick glance toward Browning, as if for confirmation of the promise.

Browning flushed.

"As Mr. Merriwell says, the secret will be perfectly safe with us, Miss Thornton," touching his cap. "You may rely on it!"

"I kinder sorter wanted you uns ter beat 'em," she confessed, "an' it'll pleasure me ter help you ter do it. You uns'll hev ter shin up that thar bluff somehow er 'nuther ter git a start."

She pointed to the precipice down which she had swung, and Browning gave an inward groan.

"Heavens!" he inaudibly grumbled. "She must want to see me killed. Those vines will come down like cotton strings when I put my weight on them."

Merriwell nodded, and the girl led the way to the bluff.

"Take holt o' that thar saplin' an' that'll help you ter reach the cedar. Then grab them vines an' git along ez best ye kin. Them vines'll bear a good heft, an' ye needn't be skeered uv 'em."

Having said this, with pointing finger, she stepped aside. Frank Merriwell grasped the slim hickory and drew himself up to the scrubby cedar that here thrust its roots into a crack in the ledge.

He was followed by Colson and Rattleton. Then came Bart Hodge and Jack Diamond.

The climb was not so difficult as it looked. Some of the smaller vines broke under the weight of Browning, and of Ephraim Gallup, but in a comparatively short time all were at the top of the bluff.

The girl swung herself up after them, and pointed to a dim path leading through a thicket of laurel straight toward the frowning cap of the mountain.

"Thar's yer way!" she whispered. "I see ye've got a rope fer ther bad places. Two or three uv 'em'll maybe hump ye, but I'm sure you uns, by holpin' each other, kin make it. An' it'll save ye nigh about half the distance."

"Thank you," said Frank, as she turned away. "You have placed us under great obligations."

This time Merriwell took the lead, plunging into the laurel, for the route was an unknown one to all. He hurried forward as rapidly as the ground would admit.

A number of hogs of the razorback variety leaped up in front of him and scurried out of sight.

"Look out that you don't get bitten," shouted Rattleton, with a laugh. "Those are wild hogs, you must understand, and you'd better not crowd them."

The hogs looked fierce enough to justify Rattleton's assertion.

"A boar hunt in these hills wouldn't be bad," said Hodge. "One of those fellows had tusks like razors."

They soon found abundant use for the rope, of which Nell Thornton had spoken, and for the stout alpinestocks they had provided as well. The way was rough and steep, and they quickly came to a series of benches, where the rope was found invaluable.

"This is what I call tough," grunted Browning, mopping his heated face at the end of one of these climbs.

"Cyant hab no chillins, an' fevah, dough, Mistah Browning, when you sweat dat way," laughed Toots. "Dis clamb is gwan ter cure yeh."

"Or kill me!" Bruce growled.

"I wonder how these other fellows are getting on?" said Hodge.

"I don't doubt they're going faster than we are," answered Merriwell. "But I'm depending on the judgment of that girl, and you know that we have the best of authority for believing that the race is not always to the swift."

"Or the battle to the strong!" chimed in Diamond, completing the quotation.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Rattleton.

"Mr. Rattleton, what are you grinning about now?" queried Hodge.

"I was just thinking that if the battle were always to the strong, what a fight a polecat would put up!" answered Rattleton, with another shout.

"I believe, by chaowder, they air the strongest things on earth," declared the boy from Vermont, with a smile. "I tried to poke one out of dad's old barn once, an' I thought it would lift the roof, b'gosh!"

Higher and higher the dim path led, zigzagging at times, crossing perilous crevices, which they were forced to leap, dipping into narrow gorges, through which ran icy streams of water from hidden springs.

"I tell you we're nearing the top!" cried Rattleton, with a burst of enthusiasm.

Merriwell looked at his watch.

"We've already been an hour on the way," he declared. "That starter thought the climb could be made in two hours. We may have to cross that rocky shoulder yet."

"No, we shall not have to cross it," said Hodge. "I caught a view of the path from that other slope a while ago, and it swings under the point instead of over it."

"Hello! I don't know about this!" cried Merriwell, coming to a full stop at another bend.

The path ended at the foot of a flat rock that rose upward like the wall.

"We've got to get up there somehow," asserted Diamond. "The path will be found again at the top."

Browning stepped forward.

"There's only one way, fellows. I understand now just what Nell meant when she said we'd have to help each other. Climb up on my shoulders here, Gallup. You're the longest and can reach that notch with your hands. Perhaps Hans had better go next."

"By gum! he ain't here!" snorted Gallup, staring around.

"He must have got tired and stopped," said Merriwell. "We can't wait for him. We may lose the race if we do. And it will punish him right, when he comes to this place and finds he can't get up."

"We'll come back and lower the rope for him," said Browning, putting himself in position against the wall of rock. "As Merriwell says, we haven't any time to lose."

Gallup glanced quizzically upward, then gave his hand to Merriwell, and was assisted to Browning's broad shoulders.

"No fooling," grunted Browning. "If I've got to play the strong man in this game of high and lofty tumbling, I want you fellows to get a move on you. Gallup alone feels as if he weighs a ton."

Barney climbed to Gallup's shoulders, and Merriwell came next, carrying the rope.

Standing on Barney's shoulders, he was able to grasp the branches of a tree that hung down at that point, and scrambled quickly on to the top of the bluff.

"Yes, the path is up here," he shouted back, letting down an end of the rope. "Put that loop around your waist, Diamond, and I'll pull as you climb. You'll find it will be a good deal easier."

"You'd better hurry on without me," advised Browning, when all were at the top but himself. "You'll lose valuable time trying to get me up there, and it's not necessary."

"We'll have you up in just a moment," promised Merriwell. "Take a seat in that loop. You won't need to do much, only keep yourself from scratching scales off the rock. There's enough of us up here to lift you, and the rope is strong. Bring up the alpinestocks that were dropped, too. We may need them again."

"Well, if I must, I must!" grumbled Browning, who would not have been sorry if they had gone on without him. "Haul away. And remember that my life isn't insured."

It was no easy task to lift him to the top, but it was accomplished without mishap.

"No Hans in sight yet," said Merriwell.

Rattleton, who was running up the path, was heard to give a whoop.

"Fellows, we're right there!" he announced, hastening back to bear the glad tidings. "I took a peep through the bushes, and the rock isn't a hundred yards away. I saw the men who were sent up here standing by it, and there wasn't another soul in sight."

Merriwell looked at his watch again.

"An hour and twenty minutes since we started. Lead on, Rattleton. If you've seen the rock,

you may act as guide. We're after you."

Rattleton dived into the bushes again with a whoop, closely followed by Merriwell, who saw in a few moments that Harry was right.

The goal was just before them, with only the timekeepers there, and they had won the race!

CHAPTER IX—THE VALIANT DUTCH BOY

Where was Hans?

The Dutch boy, who by reason of his roly-poly body and fat, short legs, was not well adapted to mountain climbing, was much fatigued by the headlong haste with which his friends proceeded.

"Some volks peen plame vools enough to call dos sbort," he secretly grumbled, panting along at the heels of the procession. "Maype it vos sbort vor me, alretty, py shimminy! put don't you pelief me! Ven I vos caught py a voolishness like dot again, I hope I vill gick someboty."

He was stumping along in this manner, dropping gradually behind, when at a short turn in the path his friends vanished. At the same moment a pebble that had found its way into one of his shoes began to cut his foot so that he could hardly walk.

"Wa-ow!" he gurgled. "Dot feel shust like I pit a snake by. Dunder and blitzens! Dot toe vos cud off, I pelief me!"

He stared along at the dim path and at the bushes beyond which he heard the voices of his friends, then plumped himself down on a rock and began hastily to unloose the shoe lace.

"Uf I get oudt uf dis scrabe, anudder vun von't go into me right away, I dell you!" he muttered. "I haf to haf a boultice vor dot toe, I pelief me, der vay id veels. Waow!"

He pulled off the shoe with a jerk, felt of the injured toe, and gave the shoe a shake to remove the pebble.

It rolled out, a tiny thing, not larger than a small shot, but with a cutting edge almost as hard as a diamond.

"Some liddle dhings make a pigger vuss dan——"

He cocked an ear around, and listened for the voices, but they were no longer to be heard.

"Shimminy Ghristmas! Dose vellers gid along like shain lighdnings. I vos half to hurry uf dey gacht me oop, I tolt you!"

He crowded his foot back into the shoe, hurriedly laced and tied it, then picked up his alpinstock and set his short legs in motion.

But it was a hopeless chase. They were swinging on at a swift pace, and had gained so much that it was quite impossible for the Dutch boy to come up with them.

Discovering this, he became terrified.

"Vot uf dose shiner moons shoul't pe hiding dese pushes behint, und kilt myselluf mit a club der head ofer?" he panted, staring about in wild-eyed expectancy.

He heard a movement in the bushes, which almost raised the hair on his head. The brush cracked. The sound came toward him.

He dropped his alpinstock and turned to run, but his short, fat legs became so weak they would not sustain him.

He dropped to his knees with a bellow of fright, and pleadingly threw up his hands.

The brush cracked again, sending cold shivers up the Dutch boy's back, and a lean sow, followed by three or four thin, sharp-backed pigs, came into view.

Hans scrambled up, with a screech of fear.

"Vilt hocks!" he squawked. "Shimminy Ghristmas! I vos deat alretty yet!"

The sow ridged the rough bristles along her spine and made a sound which Hans thought her battle cry.

He gave another squawk and dived for the nearest tree. Into its low branches he scrambled, throwing his feet across a bough and pulling himself by his hands.

As it chanced, the tree was in the direct line of the sow's flight. She dashed toward it,

bringing another squeal of fear from Hans, and the pigs scampered at her heels.

While hanging in this inverted position, with his cap gone and his pockets upside down, some peanuts that Hans had thrust into a pocket to munch on the mountain climb, dropped out to the ground.

One of the pigs saw and scented them. Its chronic hunger overcame its fright, and, while its mother and the other members of the porcine family bounded on into the depths of the laurel it stopped and began to munch the peanuts.

"I vos a deat mans!" gurgled Hans, fairly paralyzed by terror. "He vos going to ead up dose beanuds und my gap, und den he vill glimb dese dree ub und I vill ead heem! Hel-lup! hel-lup!"

Now and then a peanut spilled out of the pocket, and when the pig had devoured all, it looked up at the peanut fountain for more, placing itself directly under Hans with its mouth expectantly open.

"Oh, I vos deat! I vos kilt!" he howled. "Someboty gome quick und shood me, so dot I von't ead mineselluf ub!"

It was impossible for him to climb higher, both on account of his weakness, and the springy nature of the bough, and he was dimly conscious of the fact that he could not hold on much longer.

Ordinarily, the pig would have fled from him, but its hunger now caused it to half lift itself on its hind legs and stretch its long nose up toward him.

In that moment of supreme terror the Dutch boy's strength entirely deserted him, and he fell from the bough, striking the pig directly in the center of the back.

It went down, with a squeal. Hans rolled quickly over and tried to scramble to his feet. He could do nothing, however, but thresh his heel in the air and bellow for assistance.

After a while it began to dawn on him that the dreaded monster was not devouring him alive, as he had fully expected, and that, since his fall, he had not heard a sound, except such as he made himself.

"Id vos skeert me away," he thought, stopping his flailing heels and turning his head slowly to the point where the ravenous beast might be expected to be seen.

He lifted himself slowly on his hands and stared, his eyes rounding out in astonishment.

The pig lay on the ground as if dead.

"Id vos maging a vool uf me, maype," he reflected. "It vos shust agting like I vos deat. Id shust vant to play mit me, like I vos a gat und id vos a mouses."

Still, when the pig maintained that strange silence, Dunnerwust's courage began to come back.

He lifted himself still higher, ready to drop down and play the game of "'possum" for all it was worth if the pig showed signs of life and pugnacity. Still, the pig did not move.

Hans rolled over, and slowly got on his hands and knees, then lifted himself to a standing position, ready to run if the pig so much as moved.

"It maype is sdill voolin' me, alretty yet!" he gurgled. "Dere vos no tepending on me somedimes. I haf heert apout dose vilt peasts dot blay sleeby to vool demselves like dot!"

But the pig was dead. There could be no doubt of it, and if Hans had not been insane from fright, he must have discovered the fact sooner. He had struck with all his weight, and that was not small, in the middle of the pig's curved spine, and had snapped it as if it were a pipestem.

"Whoop!" he yelled, as soon as he was sure the pig was dead. "Dot vos a recklar knock-oud, you pet me! He vos kilt me der virst lick!"

Then, to make sure that the pig could not by any possibility come back to life to frighten him again, he picked up an enormous club, and proceeded to belabor it to such an extent that if there had been any life remaining in the pig's body, it would have been beaten out.

Having done this, Hans walked around his fallen foe with the victorious air of a conquering hero, uttering exclamations of delight, and figuratively patting himself on the back for his valor.

"Who vos a cowart?" he demanded, squaring his shoulders and striking out at imaginary foes. "I vould bunch mine heat uf you sait nottings like dot, Hans Dunnerwust, you vos der pinking uf vighting mans dis moindain on, und don'd let dot vorget me! I pet him you vos der beacherino uf der Lilywhites!"

Then, still strutting like a peacock, he threw the dead pig over his shoulders, picked up his alpinstock, and marched along the path like a high-stepping horse.

From the top of the bluff, where his friends had found their way seemingly blocked, he heard voices calling to him—the voices of Harry Rattleton and Jack Diamond, who had turned back to search for him.

Hans answered, with a squeak of delight.

"See dot!" he cried, taking the pig from his shoulders and holding it above his head. "Dot vos a vilt hock vot kilt me ven I dried to ead him ub! I vos a fighder, I tolt you, ven I ged him starded!"

It was with the utmost difficulty that Ward Hammond concealed his intense chagrin and bitter hate when he arrived with his companions at the goal of the mountain-climbing race and found that Frank Merriwell's party had beaten them by more than thirty minutes.

"It's all right," he said, with a sickly smile. "Though I do think you fellows must have had wings hidden about you to get here so soon. But wings weren't barred. Of course, we wanted to win, but we didn't, and that's all there is to it."

While he was talking, old Bob Thornton, carrying the long rifle that Sam Turner had taken from its peg in the cabin, was creeping through the laurel and over the vines toward a point of rocks that commanded a view of the path by which he was sure Merriwell and his friends would descend from the mountains.

He did not try to conceal his bitter hate, as Hammond was doing. His mind was inflamed with the angriest of passions, for Hammond had made him believe that the mountain climb was an excuse on the part of Merriwell to get into these hills, where Thornton's little copper still, for making liquor, lay hidden.

The ravine that held it was less than a mile from the top of Bald Mountain, in a wild and almost inaccessible gorge, and he was fairly shaking with the fear that Merriwell had spotted the gorge from the mountain's top, and would try to enter it later in the day.

"He'll never hunt another still ef I git a good crack at him!" the mountaineer growled. "The guv'ment's got ter be larnt that it jes' ain't ary bit o' use to send revnoo spies peekin' 'roun' hyar. We uns o' Bald Mounting won't stan' it!"

Ward Hammond dissembled with considerable skill. He laughed, joked and praised the climbing of the members of the Lake Lily Club, all the while wondering if Bob Thornton would try the shot he threatened, and hoping that the bullet would at least maim Merriwell for life.

Hammond held by inheritance from these rude mountaineers the fierce hate that made them such a terror to their foes, and caused among them such bloody feuds. In him Frank Merriwell had an enemy to be feared.

He had a purpose in playing a friendly part that day, and in staying with Frank's party. He fancied that if Merriwell should be killed by a shot sent from the woods by an unseen hand, he might be suspected as the shooter, which could not be the case if he remained at Merriwell's side.

"Hammond doesn't seem so bitter as we've been led to believe," declared Rattleton, speaking to Bart Hodge. "Perhaps he's been painted a good deal blacker than he really is."

"I hope so," said Hodge, who more than once had been made uneasy by the accounts given by Colson and others of Hammond's fire-eating and unforgiving spirit. "He seems pleasant enough to-day, at any rate."

Without a thought of danger, Frank descended the mountain path, laughing and joking.

Bob Thornton was still stealing through the bushes, with the long rifle in the hollow of his arm.

But there was another stealing after him, with bated breath and shining eyes. Nell Thornton, his daughter, who, having observed his movements, suspected his evil intentions, and was now following to thwart them if she could.

When he reached the rocky point, from which he expected to send the shot, and from which he could dive into a jungly growth that would protect him from view and pursuit, Nell was close at his heels, though he was still unaware of it.

His face darkened as he dropped the rifle out of the hollow of his arm and inspected the percussion cap, when Merriwell and the others came into view around a bend in the path.

"He'll never hunt another moonshiner!" Thornton grated, through his set teeth. "He'd better be a-sayin' of his prayers when I pull down on him with this ole Bet!"

Nell heard the grated threat, and shivered, but the look of determination grew in her white, thin face and shone brighter in her glittering eyes.

Thornton waited until the party was near enough to make the shot safe, but still far enough off to enable him to plunge into the undergrowth and lose himself to pursuit before any one could reach him.

Then he threw the long rifle to his cheek, ran his eyes down the brown barrel, and covered Frank Merriwell's heart with the sights. Though his eyes were blazing, his muscles seemed as

steady as iron.

The finger pressed the trigger, and there was a whip-like report.

But the bullet did not reach Frank Merriwell!

Just as Thornton's finger pressed on the trigger, Nell leaped from the bushes that screened her and caught at his arm, thrusting the rifle aside.

With a shriek, Ward Hammond threw up his arms and dropped to the ground.

The bullet intended for Merriwell had lodged in the body of his enemy.

CHAPTER X—NELL'S LETTER

"How is Hammond this morning?" Frank anxiously asked of Browning, whom he joined near the boathouse. "Have the doctors found the bullet yet?"

Bruce had just come from the village, whither he had gone to make inquiry concerning Hammond's condition.

"Yes," he answered, as they walked together toward the cottage. "They extracted it this morning. It struck a rib, and the wound isn't as bad as it might be. He'll be laid up for a time, they say. There is no question but that he'll get well."

"I'm glad to hear it," was Frank's sincere rejoinder. "I thought he was a goner when I saw him drop near me at the crack of that gun."

"Hello! what's this?" Bruce exclaimed, a moment later, as they entered his room.

He stepped quickly to the little table, and took up a bunch of flowers, to which was tied a note, oddly scrawled and spelled.

It was from Nell Thornton, and this is what it said:

"I am ergoin' ter slip in an' put these on yer table, 'ca'se I hav' heern that grand folks like 'em, an' leeve this letter 'bout dad, 'ca'se I thot mebbe ez how you uns would want ter knowl. He hez knocked a hole in his ole still, an' is ergoin' ter leeve these mountings, he sez, an' try ter be 'spectable. So good-by. I node frum the fust thet you warnt no revnoo.

"Frum your fr'end furever,

"NELL THORNTON."

"She's an all-right girl," said Bruce, after a pause, "even if she is rather awkward."

"Bedad, we had better be gittin' out av the mountains before some more shootin' takes place," put in Barney.

"That's right," came from Harry. "One shot like that is enough."

But the boys lingered for several days, and during that time their newly made friends did all possible to make the stay a pleasant one.

"We won't forget you Yale boys!" cried one, on parting. "Let us hear from you, by all means."

"Ve vill," said Hans. "Put don't neffer oxbect me to kill some more piks py mineselluf again alretty!"

There was a gay time at the parting, for a crowd had come to see them off as far as the railroad station.

It had been decided to make their way eastward to the Potomac River, for Diamond wanted to show his friends that beautiful stream of water.

"I've sailed on the Potomac many times when at home," said the Virginian. "And I want to give you boys a sail, too."

"All right—anything to take it easy," sighed Bruce. "That mountain climbing was work enough to last a month."

The ride in the train was enjoyed by all, and as they passed eastward, mile after mile, Diamond pointed out many objects of interest.

At last they reached the station to which their wheels had been sent, and here they left the

train.

"There is an easy road along here," said Jack. "I know you will all delight in a spin."

Bruce groaned.

"More work—and just as I was getting so comfortably settled in that car seat, too."

"Oh, brace up, Bruce!" cried Frank, cheerfully. "You've done well ever since we left New York. Don't collapse on the last lap."

"All right; I'll brace up," sighed the big fellow, and followed the others.

Toots had seen to it that the bicycles were polished to the last degree, so that they shone like silver in the bright sunshine.

For over an hour the crowd spun along over the road.

Then unlucky Hans ran into a hollow, throwing himself over the handle bars and twisting one of the pedals of his machine.

Luckily, there was a repair shop not very far off, and to this they took their way, where a machinist went to work on the wheel without delay.

While the others were waiting for Hans' bicycle to be mended, Diamond called Frank to one side.

"Come down to the river with me," he said. "I want to show you a particularly fine view."

"How far?" asked Frank.

"Only about half a mile."

"All right, I'll go with you."

And the two set off, never dreaming of the tremendous surprise in store for them.

CHAPTER XI—A TRAITOR AND A SPY

"Steady! steady!" roared a commanding voice. "Stroke, keep at it, and pick it up quicker on the beginning."

The eight oarsmen in the boat were doing their level best, their oars flashing in the sunlight as they came dripping from the water to disappear again, sending the light craft flying along.

On the shore, which at this point was a high bank, the coach watched them as they skimmed past, and shouted his commands.

"Drive your legs at it, four! What are you in the boat for? Carry it through all the way. Up, now! Long swing! Great Scott! don't think you've got to break your neck to recover because you pull hard on the stroke."

He was a young fellow with a beardless face that plainly indicated his firm conviction that what he did not know was not worth finding out. His lips were red and full, and his entire bearing plainly betokened unlimited self-conceit.

He was dressed in a flannel outing suit, and wore a straw hat, about which was a bright red ribbon. His necktie, also, was bright red. On his feet were well-polished russet shoes. There was a diamond in his tie, and diamonds set in the rings on his fingers.

It seemed at a glance that this lad had "money to burn." His swell appearance was enough to make almost any ordinary boy regard him with envy and admiration. And his manner would impress an ordinary boy with his astonishing knowledge and importance in the world.

"Oh, say!" he shouted; "what do you chaps think you are doing? Feel for the water. Be delicate and gentle when you are coming forward. This is not a question of bull strength. If it was, a crew of longshoremen and freight handlers could row all around you."

Not a word from the sturdy, sun-browned young fellows in the boat. They were there to obey, and to stand such abuse as this insolent, overbearing coach saw fit to heap upon them.

"Great Scott!" cried the coach, once more. "You chaps make me sick! Will you never get onto yourselves? There you go, five! Can't you see what you're doing? You're pulling out, and you are wasting the end of your stroke. You are finishing ahead of four every time. It would take a club to beat anything into your head! Vast, turn around, coxswain."

Then this important person fell back a step, and spoke to another lad, who was concealed by

some bushes, from which he was peering at the crew in the boat.

"A lot of lubbers," said the coach, contemptuously. "You fellows needn't worry about them. You'll show them clear water from the start."

These words were uttered in a low tone, so they could not be heard by the rowers.

The boy hidden in the bushes laughed softly.

"You are playing them for suckers, all right, Harlow," he said; "but it does seem to me that they are improving under your coaching. Look out and not make them so good that they will stand a show of winning over A. A. C."

"If they didn't improve, they wouldn't keep me as coach," returned the other; "but I'll knock the stuffing out of them at the last moment by advising the removal of a good man and the substitution of a poor one. I want them to have enough confidence in me by that time so they will do exactly as I say."

Two other lads, in bicycle suits, unseen by the treacherous coach and the spy in the bushes, having left their wheels near the highway that ran some distance from the river, had come down and stopped near enough to hear all this conversation.

They were Diamond and Frank.

Diamond had brought Merriwell to that point in order to show him the pretty view of the Potomac River, and not till they had advanced more than two-thirds the distance from the road did they hear the shouted cries of the coach, and see him standing on the bluff.

The curiosity of the boys was aroused, and they came forward quietly to see what was taking place.

The coach, and the spy in the bushes, were so absorbed in the movements of the crew that neither saw Merriwell and Diamond, and so, without thinking of playing eavesdroppers, the Yale lads heard something that was not intended for their ears.

Jack clutched Frank's arm.

"What do you think of that?" he hissed, his dark face growing still darker.

"Think," said Frank, scornfully. "I think that coach should be ducked in the river!"

"And I think the spy should be ducked with him!" came fiercely from the lips of the young Virginian.

"Look here, Jack!" said Frank, "there is something familiar about that fellow in flannels. I've seen him before."

"His voice sounded familiar to me," nodded Diamond.

At this moment, as if he had heard their voices, the coach looked in their direction, and saw them. He gave a violent start, seemed a bit confused, and then cried:

"What are you doing there—playing the spy? Don't you know you have no right there?"

In another instant Frank was bounding toward the spot, followed by Jack.

"No, we are not spying," said Merriwell, "but we know a chap that is! Here he is!"

Then he pounced on the startled youth in the bushes and dragged him forth, for all of his resistance.

"Let me go, hang you!" came from the fellow Frank had exposed. "If you don't let me go, you will be sorry!"

"I'll let you go when I have shown you to the gentlemen in that boat down there," declared Frank. "I have dealt with sneaks like you before."

The spy struggled desperately, furious at the thought of exposure and disgrace.

"You shall suffer for this!" he grated.

Then the coach advanced quickly on Merriwell, speaking in a low tone, although his voice quivered with passion:

"Let him go—let him go! If you don't—"

"What then?" said Jack Diamond, placing himself in the path of the treacherous coach. "What do you think you will do about it, my fine fellow?"

"I will— Great Scott! It is Jack Diamond!"

The coach staggered from the shock of the discovery, for up to that moment he had been too excited to recognize either of the boys. Now he looked at the other, adding, hoarsely:

"And that's Frank Merriwell! Satan take the luck!"

This attracted Frank's attention, so he turned and took a square look at the coach, in whose appearance he had fancied there was something familiar from the very first.

"Great Jove!" he cried. "Rolf Harlow!"

The name and the sight of its owner awakened a host of unpleasant memories in Frank's heart.

Harlow, expelled from Harvard for gambling and cheating at cards, had come to New Haven in search of "suckers" among the Yale students. He had been introduced by a student by the name of Harris, and Frank, whose one great failing was his strong inclination to play cards for a stake, had been drawn into the game in his endeavor to pull Rattleton out of it.

In the end it had proved fortunate that Frank was led into the game, for he had detected Harlow in his crooked dealing and exposed him, compelling him to give up certain of Diamond's promises to pay, and thus saving Jack from disgrace.

Harlow was revengeful, and he had tried to "get square" with Frank, but each attempt had rebounded disastrously upon him. When last seen, Rolf was following a circus through the State of Missouri, and working a shell game on the country people.

Now he was in Virginia, coaching a crew of oarsmen who were practicing for a race!

And, as usual, he was playing a crooked game.

The crew in the boat saw the struggle on the shore, and wondered what it meant. There was a landing near, and toward it the coxswain directed the boat, saying:

"Pull, fellows! We must go up there and investigate this affair. We have been watched."

Harlow turned very pale when he recognized Frank, for he had learned to fear our hero. He had not dreamed they would meet in Virginia.

As soon as Diamond could recover from the astonishment of the discovery, he scornfully cried:

"Harlow it is, and he is up to his old tricks!"

The spy, whom Frank had captured, made a savage attempt to thrust Merriwell from the edge of the bluff into the river, seeing the crew was coming, and he soon would be face to face with a lot of angry lads who might not have any mercy on him.

"Easy, my fine chap!" laughed the Yale athlete. "What's the use! You can't do it, you know!"

"Help, Harlow!" appealed the spy. "The Blue Cove fellows are coming, and they'll be awfully mad!"

Harlow hesitated, and then a desperate light came into his eyes. Young ruffian that he was, he always went armed, and now he decided to make an attempt to bluff Frank.

With a quick movement, Rolf produced a revolver, which he pointed straight at Merriwell, crying:

"Let him go—let him go, or I'll shoot!"

The expression on his face seemed to indicate that he really meant it, and Diamond shivered a bit, knowing Harlow as he did, and thinking him desperate and reckless enough to do almost anything in a burst of passion.

Jack crouched to move aside, so he could spring at Rolf, but Harlow saw the movement, and hissed:

"Stand still there, or I'll shoot you first!"

"You don't dare——" began Jack.

"Don't I?" interrupted the desperate lad with the revolver. "You'll find I do! I've been jumped on by you fellows till I can't stand any more of it! This is a case of self-defense, and I can prove it so. You attacked us! I have a right to defend my life!"

It was plain that Harlow was trying to convince himself that he was in the right, and, could he do so, hating Frank Merriwell as he did, it was certain that he might shoot on the slightest provocation.

Jack stood still; for the moment he knew not what to do.

"Come here, Diamond," called Frank, sharply. "Come quick! Don't mind that fellow! If he does any shooting, I won't leave much of a job for the lynchers! I believe they string people up down in this State in a hurry!"

"Stand where you are, Diamond!" shouted Harlow.

But Jack obeyed Frank, and Harlow did not shoot.

"Now, hold this spy, and I will deal with that crook," said Frank, turning the lad he had captured over to Jack.

As soon as he had done this, Merriwell started to walk straight toward Harlow, who still had him covered with the revolver.

"Stop!" shouted Rolf, fiercely; "stop! or by the Lord Harry, I will shoot!"

"Oh, no, you won't," answered Merriwell, with the utmost confidence, as he calmly continued to advance, apparently as unconcerned as if it were a toy pistol in the hand of his enemy.

Harlow hesitated, and gasped. Reckless though he was, intensely though he hated Frank, he had not the nerve to shoot the cool lad down.

Through Harlow's head flashed a thought. What if he should pull the trigger, and the revolver failed to go off? He knew Merriwell would be on him like a furious tiger. He knew Merriwell would have no mercy.

He dared not try to shoot. The eyes of the Yale athlete were fastened steadily upon him, and there was something in their depths that made him falter.

One, two, three seconds, and then Frank's hand grasped the revolver and firmly turned it aside. Harlow seemed incapable of resistance, and, to his own astonishment, as well as to the unutterable amazement of the witnesses of the act, Frank took the revolver away without being resisted.

Diamond was paralyzed by the nerve of his friend. Although he had known Frank long, and thought he knew him fully, this act was a revelation to him.

Then it was, while Diamond was staring and muttering, that the spy suddenly struck him a terrific blow behind the ear, sending Jack to grass.

For an instant Diamond was stunned, and when he recovered, the spy was far away, running as if his very life depended on it.

Jack scrambled up as quickly as he could, and would have followed, but Frank called:

"Let him go! It's useless to chase him."

"Well, that was a fool trick of mine!" growled the Virginian, disgusted with himself. "I ought to have a leather medal!"

The boat's crew had made a landing, and now they came toward the spot on a run. Handsome, manly young chaps, from sixteen to nineteen, they were.

"Genuine Virginians, they are!" muttered Jack, admiringly. "They don't grow anything better anywhere!"

Harlow seemed cowed by what had taken place.

Since being disarmed without a struggle, all the spirit seemed to have left him. He stood still, looking sullen and uncertain, as if not quite sure what to do.

Up came the oarsmen, a solid-looking, brown-eyed lad in the lead.

"What's all this about, anyway?" he sharply asked, addressing Rolf. "Who are these chaps, and what are they doing?"

An idea came to Harlow; he grasped at it.

"They are spies—enemies!" he quickly declared. "They were watching here in the bushes. They must be connected with the Alexandria fellows."

Then the rowers, sunburned and brawny appearing, gathered about Frank and Jack, regarding them with anything but pleasant looks.

"Give it to 'em!" shouted Harlow, hoping to set the boys on Frank and Jack before any explanation could be made. "See here—don't you see one of them threatening me with a revolver? They are desperadoes!"

"In that case, gentlemen, perhaps it would be well enough not to push us too hard," coolly observed Frank, as he moved the muzzle of the revolver about in a careless manner. "Just give us time to say something for ourselves."

"Don't listen!" cried Rolf, wildly. "They will try to lie out of it, but I saw them spying!"

"Who was the chap that ran away?" asked the leader of the oarsmen, the stroke, whose name was Kent Spencer.

"He was one of them," asserted Harlow.

"In that case, it is odd we didn't run away with him," smiled Frank. "We might have done so, you know."

"Well, why didn't you?" asked Spencer.

"Because there was no reason why we should run, and several reasons why we should stay. We can tell you a few things that may surprise you."

"Don't listen to their lies!" shouted Harlow. "Pitch them into the river! It's what they deserve!"

For a moment it seemed that the young oarsmen would obey him. They seemed about to precipitate themselves on the strangers. Again Frank's coolness caused a delay.

"If you want to souse us in the river after we have made our explanation, you can do so," he smiled; "but isn't it well enough to hear what we have to say first?"

"I don't see that it can do any harm," admitted Spencer. "Give the fellows a show, boys, but don't let 'em get away."

This did not suit Rolf Harlow at all, but he saw it was useless to try to urge the oarsmen on. They were inclined to obey Spencer.

"All right!" he grated; "listen to their lies, if you like. You'll be disgusted when you hear what they have to say."

Spencer eyed Harlow closely, wondering why he should be so eager to keep the strangers from speaking. He seemed to fear something that he knew would be said.

"As for lies," said Frank, "if I am not mistaken, I fancy you will hear a few from this fine gentleman who has been coaching you, but who is a traitor to you at the same time."

"A traitor!" cried Spencer. "Be careful! Mr. Harlow is a gentleman and a student of Yale College."

"A what?" shouted Diamond.

"A what?" echoed Merriwell. "Why, the nearest this fellow ever came to the inside of Yale College was Jackson's poker joint in New Haven. If he has represented himself as a student of Yale, it shows he began by lying to you right off the reel. This fellow was expelled from Harvard, and was drummed out of New Haven for cheating at cards! That's the kind of a bird he is!"

CHAPTER XII—HARLOW'S DISCOMFITURE

Something like a grating imprecation escaped Harlow's lips, and it seemed that he would leap for Frank's throat.

But the revolver was still in Merriwell's hand, and, somehow, its muzzle wandered around, and stopped when it covered Rolf.

The accused lad literally gnashed his teeth.

The others were aghast for a moment, and then Kent Spencer seriously said:

"Look here, sir, you will have to prove that charge. Otherwise, you will find you have made a big mistake in accusing a gentleman of being a blackguard."

"I can prove it without a struggle," assured Frank.

"How?"

"In several ways. To begin with, I am a student at Yale myself. It was in New Haven I first met this crook. I exposed him when he was bleeding some of my friends by playing poker with them and using marked cards."

"A lie!" Harlow almost screamed; "a vile lie!"

"It is the truth," asserted Jack Diamond. "I was in that game. Harlow beat me, and he would have beaten me worse but for Mr. Merriwell."

"Mr. Who?" Spencer shouted.

"Merriwell."

"Who is Mr. Merriwell?"

"That is Mr. Merriwell right there," said Jack, nodding toward Frank.

"Frank Merriwell—Frank Merriwell, the ball player and all-around athlete?" questioned Spencer, excitedly.

"That's who he is," assured the Virginian.

"Then Mr. Harlow should be very well acquainted with him," said the stroke of the crew, "for he has said that Frank Merriwell is his particular friend."

"Yes," spoke up another, "he referred us to Frank Merriwell when he applied for the position to coach our crew."

"My eyes! what a crust!" shouted Diamond. "I never heard of such cheek! He referred you to Merry because he thought you could not reach him by letter as he knew Merry was somewhere out West on a bicycle tour."

"All of us had heard of Mr. Merriwell," said Spencer. "We saw his name in the papers often. A sporting magazine spoke of him as the destined leader in baseball and football at Yale. Besides that, I know a person who is personally acquainted with him. Naturally, when Mr. Harlow declared that Frank Merriwell was a particular friend of his we were inclined to regard him with favor, and I am greatly astonished to discover that he has been deceiving us."

Harlow looked disgusted.

"I presume you are ready to take the word of these strangers against me!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think that of you, but——"

"If this is Frank Merriwell, why shouldn't we take his word?"

"How do you know he is Frank Merriwell?" demanded Rolf.

"I can prove that with ease," smiled Frank, thrusting his hand into his pocket and pulling forth some letters. "Here is some of my correspondence, here is my card, and here is my name and address on this key check. If you want further proof, gentlemen, I can show you my name marked upon my clothes."

"That is quite enough," assured Spencer. "We are satisfied that you are what you represent yourself to be. And now will you be good enough to tell us the meaning of this struggle here on the bank?"

"With pleasure," bowed Frank. "My friend here, Jack Diamond, a Virginian born and bred, asked me to leave the road over yonder and come here, where he could show me a pretty view of the Potomac. We locked our bicycles to a tree, where it was not likely they would be seen, and came this way. As we approached, we saw this chap in flannels standing on the bank and shouting his orders to your crew. Curiosity brought us nearer, and then we heard him talking with another chap who was hidden in the bushes where he could watch your work. From what we overheard——"

It was getting too hot for Harlow, and he interrupted Frank.

"It is plain to me," he cried, "that you are ready to take the word of a stranger instead of mine, and that is too much for me to stand. That being the case, I'll leave you with your new friends."

He was about to hurry from the spot, but Frank checked him.

"Hold on, Harlow," he said, suavely. "I have your revolver, you know."

"Then give it to me!"

"Come take it."

Although thus invited, Rolf did not hasten to obey, for the muzzle of the weapon was looking straight at him.

"I thought you would wait a while," nodded Frank. "You shall have the gun directly."

Then he continued his story:

"From what we overheard, we learned that your coach and the spy in the bushes were in league with each other. Evidently, the spy belongs to a rival crew, and he was watching to get points from your work."

Exclamations of anger broke from the rowers, and it was plain they were greatly incensed.

Harlow fidgeted uneasily. A short time before, he had been very popular among these fellows, but now they regarded him with distrust and positive contempt.

All through Frank Merriwell! How he hated Merriwell!

"It was one of the A. A. C. fellows!" cried a red-headed fellow, whose name was Fred Dobbs. "I thought I recognized him from the river."

It was plain that Spencer was loath to believe such a thing about any person.

"Why should Mr. Harlow betray us?" he asked, in an undecided way.

"That's it!" cried Rolf, catching at this as a drowning person might catch at a floating chip. "Why should I do such a thing?"

"He'll do anything for money!" scornfully exclaimed Jack Diamond.

"And the Alexandria fellows have money to burn," came from Fred Dobbs. "They are furious because we won the championship of the Potomac last year, and they mean to win it back this year by fair means or foul. I can understand why they should buy up our coach."

"But Harlow has seemed to work for our interest thus far," said another. "Surely we have improved under his coaching."

"If you hadn't you would not have confidence in him as a coach, would you?" asked Jack.

"No, of course not."

"Well, that's just where he has been playing his card shrewdly. He wanted you to have enough confidence so you would make up your crew at the last minute just as he directed. That would settle it."

Harlow saw the case had gone against him.

"Settle it to suit yourselves!" he cried. "This is the first time ever I was treated like this! I fancied they raised gentlemen down here in Virginia!"

"And so they do!" came sternly from Kent Spencer; "but we have found they are not always all gentlemen who come down here from the North. Mr. Harlow, you shall be given a fair show. A

meeting of the Blue Cove Academy Athletic Club shall be called, and the charges against you shall be impartially investigated. If they are proven, we shall publicly proclaim you a scoundrel. But you will be given a good opportunity to disprove them. You can ask for nothing more."

Rolf braced up.

"I do not ask for anything more," he declared. "I will be on hand at the meeting, and I will prove that I have been defamed and lied about by these fellows. I did think Frank Merriwell was my friend; but he is never a friend to a rival in athletics and sports, so he has turned against me, and is trying to down me."

This came near being too much for Jack Diamond to stand. Knowing Frank as he did, and thinking how generous Merriwell always was in dealing with a rival, Jack felt like slapping Rolf across the mouth.

Frank seemed to divine the feelings and thoughts of his comrade, for he caught Jack's arm, saying, swiftly but quietly:

"Never mind that, my boy. If it's a lie, these fellows will find it out in time, and it will harm nobody but the one who told it."

Jack growled a bit, but he always obeyed Frank, so Rolf escaped.

"Here, Mr. Harlow," said Merriwell, reversing the revolver and handing it to its owner, "here is the gun you pulled on me. I have no further use for it."

Sourly, the exposed rascal accepted the weapon, and put it in his pocket. Then he said:

"I am going now, and I leave you fellows to listen to the lies these chaps may tell about me. I don't care! They don't cut any ice. I'll be on hand at the investigation, and I'll show you what monumental liars they both are."

Then he walked away, not a hand being lifted to stop him.

"Mr. Merriwell," said Kent Spencer, when Rolf had vanished, "I am pleased to meet you, but sorry that the meeting should be under such unpleasant circumstances."

"Don't mention it," smiled Frank. "I am glad to be of service to you in helping expose a rascal like Harlow."

"If the charges against Harlow stand, we'll need a new coach," quickly put in Fred Dobbs.

"That's right," nodded Spencer; "and I don't know where we will get one, unless we can induce Mr. Merriwell to serve us."

"He'll make a dandy for you!" cried Diamond. "The first year he was in Yale he coached the freshmen so that we beat the sophomores without a struggle, and we had the poorer boat, too. Oh, Frank can put you in shape all right."

"We may not need a coach," said a slender chap by the name of Bob Dean. "If Alexandria has resorted to such dirty tricks as putting spies on us and bribing our coach, I am for refusing to row with them."

"And I!"

"Same here!"

"I'm another!"

The boys of Blue Cove Academy were aroused.

"Easy, fellows," advised Spencer. "We must row with Alexandria. If not, with whom can we row?"

"Bristol Academy," suggested one.

Kent shook his head.

"It won't do," he declared. "Bristol is not in our class. And everybody would say we were afraid to meet Alexandria. If there was another crew——"

Diamond struck Frank a slap on the shoulder.

"By Jove, Merry!" he cried; "we can turn out a crew ourselves. If we can get into this race, why not do so? Blue Cove Academy against the Yale Combine. That should be a better race than the other. It would attract more attention."

The Blue Cove boys were interested immediately.

"What do you mean?" asked Bob Dean. "How could you row against us? Where is your crew?"

"The rest of them are stopping at a bicycle repair shop near Brooke," Jack explained. "Merry and I rode out by ourselves for a spin, and that is how we happened to be here. Say, fellows, this is a great idea! Let us into this race, anyway. We are on a regular athletic tour, and have taken part in every event we could get into since leaving San Francisco. We've left a trail of glory all the way from California to Virginia."

The Blue Cove boys looked at each other doubtfully. Bob Dean was the only one who seemed to snap at the scheme with eagerness.

"Let's do it, fellows!" he cried. "Let's leave Alexandria out and race with the Yale crowd!"

"I do not think we can leave Alexandria out now," said Spencer, gravely. "We have agreed to meet them, and the time is set."

"But think of the sneaking trick they have played on us! That ought to be enough to queer them."

"It ought to, but we can't be hasty in this matter. We'll consider it at the special meeting that will be called to investigate the charges against Harlow. Mr. Merriwell, you and your friend must be present at that meeting."

"If necessary, we'll be there."

"And if we were to decide to let you into the race, have you a boat?"

"If you decide to let us in, we'll soon provide ourselves with a boat," declared Frank.

"Anyway, you must come to Blue Cove Academy—all of you. The boys will make you welcome. Will you come?"

"Where is the academy?"

"Up the river about four miles."

"Yes, we will come."

"Good!" shouted the oarsmen. "We'll give you a jolly reception."

Then Kent Spencer drew Frank aside.

"Mr. Merriwell," he said, "my knowledge of you has not been obtained entirely from the papers."

"Indeed?" smiled Frank, lifting his eyebrows.

"No; I have heard much of you from a personal friend and admirer who is stopping at the Cove."

"That is pleasant news. I shall be pleased to meet him. I am always glad to meet my friends. Is it a Yale man?"

"No," said Kent, "it is not a Yale man. It is some one you have not seen in a long time. There is a little hotel down at the Cove, and you must bring your party there. This friend of yours is stopping at the cottage of a retired sea captain who lives at the Cove. My sister is also stopping at the same place."

In vain Frank urged Spencer to tell the name of the mysterious person of whom he spoke. He declared that it was some one Merriwell would be delighted to see, and that was all Frank could get out of him.

"Well," laughed Merry, "you have aroused my curiosity so that I am going down to Blue Cove immediately. I shall send Jack back to Brooke for the rest of the fellows, but I shall continue on to Blue Cove."

This pleased Spencer.

"Do it!" he cried. "You won't be sorry."

Then Frank went back and told Jack of his decision.

"I will go on to Blue Cove and make arrangements for our party at the hotel," he said, "while you are to go back for the fellows."

Jack was not quite pleased with the idea of wheeling back to the others all alone, but he did not murmur much.

CHAPTER XIII—AGAINST ODDS

A short time later, the Blue Cove boys were pulling up the river in their boat, while Diamond was riding in one direction and Merriwell in another.

Frank arrived at the Cove ahead of the crew. He found a pretty little spot, with a hotel set back on an elevation from the water, while the academy was surrounded by well-kept grounds and tall trees.

It was the vacation season at the academy, but two of the professors lived in the building the year around, and by the rule of the institution, the annual boat race on the Potomac was not

allowed during the spring term. For some years it had been a midsummer event, a number of students remaining at the academy and getting into trim after the spring term was over.

As the Cove was something of a summer resort, where there were often many pretty girls, this was a pleasure instead of a hardship, and the rivalry for the crew was intense.

Often from six to a dozen students besides the crew remained at Blue Cove during the summer, and at the time of the race every student who could get there was on hand.

There were nearly a dozen cottages at the Cove, and Frank's first view of the place brought a cry of delight from his lips.

Amid the trees, hammocks were swung, and in them could be seen several girls in light dresses, idly perusing paper-covered novels or chatting with the young fellows who lingered near.

There were two large tennis courts, and upon one of these, despite the warm sun, a party of four, two fellows and two girls, were engaged in a most exciting game.

Above the Blue Cove Academy boathouse flew a beautiful flag, and several pleasure boats lay beside a float, or were moored at a distance from the shore.

"Great stuff!" exclaimed Frank, with satisfaction. "And to think we might have missed this place but for the little adventure down the river. We won't do a thing here but have sport!"

Straight to the hotel he rode, attracting some attention. Soon he had disposed of his wheel, and made arrangements for the accommodation of his party, fortunately being on hand in time to take some rooms left vacant by some visitors who had departed that morning.

Having settled this matter, Frank went out to look for Kent Spencer and the crew. He found they were not yet in sight, and he was devoured by curiosity to learn without delay what friend of his was stopping at the Cove.

Being thus impatient, Frank made inquiries about a retired sea captain who lived in the neighborhood.

He was told that an old sea captain by the name of Tobias Barnaby lived about half a mile away. Barnaby was said to be queer, having considerable money, but being rather close-fisted and mean.

Frank was shown a path that led over a rise and through some timber to Barnaby's home, and he immediately set off in that direction.

Merry's curiosity seemed to increase as he hurried along the path. What friend of his could be stopping with this queer old sea captain? It was some one who had spoken well of him to Kent Spencer.

The timber through which the path passed was rather thick, and Frank did not obtain a sight of the old sailor's home till he came out suddenly and saw the wood-colored roof of the old house showing amid the trees in a little hollow at his feet.

"Well, that's a cozy nest!" he muttered, as he paused to admire the picture; "and the last place in the world where I should expect to find any one who knows me."

At that moment he was startled by a sound that came from the midst of the trees near the back of the house.

"Go away and let me alone!" sounded the voice of a girl. "If you don't— Help! he-e-e-lp!"

The cry for help was uttered in a smothered, frightened manner, and it stirred Frank Merriwell's blood from his crown to his toes.

"I think I am needed down there!" he muttered.

With that, he went leaping down the steep path at breakneck speed.

"Stop your screaming!" roughly commanded a voice. "I won't hurt you, you little fool! But I am going to kiss you, and you can't stop me, for I know old Barnaby is away. I saw him row off in his boat."

"Help—help! Kate!" cried the appealing voice of the girl from the midst of the trees back of the old house.

These voices served to guide Frank. He left the path and rushed toward the spot from whence the frightened appeal came, his feet making very little noise on the grass.

In a moment he came upon a spectacle that fired his heart with the greatest rage.

A girl with golden hair was struggling in the arms of a young fellow, who was doing his best to hold her while he pressed a kiss upon her unwilling lips.

And that young fellow was Rolf Harlow!

Frank recognized his enemy at a glance, and the sight of the fellow added to the consuming fury burning in his breast.

By brute strength, Harlow overcame the girl, and, as he held her helpless in his arms, he

laughed triumphantly, crying:

"What's the use to make so much fuss! I won't hurt you. I was stuck on you the first time I saw you, my little peach, and I made a bet that I'd kiss you within two days. I must do the job now, or lose my bet."

"Then you will lose your bet!"

Rolf heard the words, but he had no time to turn and meet Frank, who was right upon him.

In a moment, Frank had torn the girl from Harlow's arms, and planted a hammer-like blow under the fellow's ear.

Merry's knuckles cracked on the neck of the young ruffian, and Harlow went down as if he had been struck by a club.

With the girl on his arm, his fist clinched, Frank stood over Rolf, ready to give him another if he tried to get up.

But Harlow lay gasping and quivering on the ground, knocked out for the moment.

The girl, who was almost swooning, slipped her soft arm about Frank's neck, and then, to his astonishment, he heard her whisper:

"Frank! Frank! is it you—can it be?"

Then he looked at her, and, to his unbounded astonishment and joy, he saw resting against his shoulder the sweet, flower-like face of Elsie Bellwood.

Was he dreaming? For a moment it seemed that he must be. He doubted the evidence of his eyes.

Was this Elsie, his old-time girl, of whom he had thought so often and so tenderly—Elsie, of whom he had dreamed, and whom he longed to see—Elsie, blue-eyed, golden-haired, trusting and true!

How his heart leaped and fluttered! How the love-light leaped into his eyes! How his stern face softened!

It was Elsie—dear little Elsie—the old sea captain's daughter, and, if possible, she was sweeter, prettier, more attractive than when last he had seen her.

She was pale when he first looked at her, but as she saw the joyous light of recognition in his eyes, the warm color stole into her cheeks, and she gasped with a delight that was almost childish.

"It is!" she panted; "it is Frank—my Frank!"

He drew her close to him, forgetting the scoundrel he had knocked down. Both his arms were about her, and for the moment the joy of his heart was too deep for words.

She lay in his strong arms, laughing, almost crying, half hysterical, wholly happy. From the terror and despair of a few moments before to relief and joy of the present was so great a revulsion of emotions that she felt herself incapable of any movement or act.

It was the same noble fellow she knew so well, only it seemed that he was handsomer and nobler in appearance than ever before. He was older, and there was more than a hint of dawning manhood in his face.

For the time, wrapped about with the unbounded delight of their unexpected meeting, they were utterly oblivious to their surroundings. They did not see Rolf Harlow struggle to a sitting posture, rubbing the spot where Frank's fist had been planted. They did not see him glaring at Merriwell with deadly hate, while he felt to make sure that his revolver was where his hand could find it quickly.

Harlow arose quietly to his feet, assuming a crouching posture, ready to leap upon Frank, whose back was toward him.

At that instant, a handsome, black-eyed girl came running around the corner of the house, closely followed by another lad, the latter being the spy Merriwell and Diamond had detected in the bushes farther down the river.

A cry from the lips of the girl warned Frank, and caused him to whirl quickly about. As he did this, Harlow leaped and struck out with all his strength.

Frank was able to dodge slightly and avoid the full force of the blow. However, he did not escape it entirely, and it staggered him. He released his hold upon Elsie immediately, for Harlow was closely following up the attack, and Merriwell saw he was in for a fight with the furious young scoundrel.

That would have not alarmed Frank, but Harlow called to the other lad:

"Here, Radford, jump in here and help me thump the stuffing out of him! He's alone! It's the chap who caught you down the river, and he just hit me a thump when I wasn't looking. Come on!"

"I'm with you!" shouted Radford. "We'll lick him till he can't stand! This is our chance to get square!"

He hastened to join Harlow in the attack upon Frank.

Merriwell laughed. It was his old, dangerous laugh, which came from his lips when he was most aroused in time of peril.

"Come, on!" he invited, promptly. "Sail right in and lick me! I'll watch and see how you do it! The way I feel now, it would take four or five more such chaps as you to do that little job! There is one for you, Radford!"

Harlow had struck at Frank. Merry dodged under his arm, came up behind him, and struck Radford a stinging blow before Rolf could turn about.

Then a furious struggle began, while the two girls, clasped in each other's arms, looked on in terror, fearing the dauntless fellow who was battling against such odds would be severely punished.

"Who is he, Elsie?" gasped the other girl. "Isn't he brave! Isn't he smart! Oh, I never saw a fellow who could fight like that! I do admire a fellow who can fight!"

"It's terrible!" whispered timid little Elsie, her hands clasped in distress. "A fight always terrifies me! But they can't whip him!" she declared, with the utmost confidence. "I know they can't!"

"Who is he? You must know him, and you have not told me who he is."

"That is Frank Merriwell, of whom I have told you so much, Kate," said Elsie, proudly. "He is the bravest fellow in the whole world!"

"Frank Merriwell?" cried Kate Spencer, for it was Kent Spencer's sister. "How can that be? How comes he here?"

"I don't know yet, but he came just in time to save me from that Rolf Harlow, whom I fear and detest. He knocked Harlow down."

"And Berlin Radford was holding me so I could not come to your assistance when you were crying for help. They knew Aunt Hannah had gone to the store, and they saw Uncle Tobias row away in his boat. That was how they dared do it."

"Look!" gasped Elsie; "see how they are fighting now: It is dreadful!"

She covered her face with her hands, but the other girl continued to watch the fighting lads, her heart beating in sympathy for Frank Merriwell.

Radford was a savage fighter, and Merry found him even more formidable than Rolf Harlow. Radford was a member of the Alexandria Athletic Club, although he had been stopping in Blue Cove a few days.

Frank did not escape some punishment, but he skillfully managed to cause his enemies to interfere with each other to a certain extent, and when he did strike a blow they were certain to feel it.

Three times was Harlow sent to grass, and Radford was knocked down twice, the second blow causing blood to spurt from his nose, on which Merriwell's hard fist had landed.

Still, encouraging each other, they pressed Frank hard. Finally, Radford got in a blow that brought Merriwell to his knees.

Elsie, who had uncovered her eyes, screamed with fear, and held her hands over her face once more.

Kate quivered with excitement and fear.

"Oh, the cowards!" she exclaimed. "He could whip either one of them alone!"

"And I can whip them both together!" panted Frank, who caught her words.

"On him—on him!" shouted Harlow. "Now is our time to do him up! We can finish him in a hurry!"

Both boys rushed at Frank. Radford was in advance. Merriwell ducked and arose. He had grasped Radford about the ankles, and he lifted the fellow into the air, flinging him clean over his head!

Radford fell and struck on his back, while Frank was barely in time to grapple with Harlow. Rolf's rush swept Merriwell back, and both fell over Radford's prostrate form.

Then the latter made a scramble, and the two pinned Frank to the ground!

They had him foul at last!

CHAPTER XIV—FRANK AND ELSIE

As well might they have tried to hold an eel. With a squirming twist, Frank managed to writhe from beneath them, somehow thumping their heads together till they were dazed by the stars that seemed to flash before their eyes. While they were in this condition, he got upon his feet, breathing heavily, but laughing as if it were a matter of sport.

Harlow and Radford sprang up quickly. They located Frank, and, though amazed by the manner in which he had escaped them, renewed the attack.

Now all three were fighting somewhat slower, as if the strain upon them was telling on their wind.

The struggle was still raging when a stout, motherly-looking woman, with a basket in her hand, came around the corner, and stopped, staring in amazement at the scene.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed.

The girls heard her, saw her, flew to her.

"Oh, Mrs. Barnaby!" cried Elsie.

"Oh, Aunt Hannah!" exclaimed Kate.

"Stop them!" palpitated the girl with the blue eyes and golden hair.

"Drive away those horrid fellows who are trying to whip the one in the bicycle suit!" urged the other girl.

"What's all the row about, anyhow?" asked the woman.

Then, hurriedly and brokenly, the two girls told her what had happened. Her kindly face grew stern and her eyes flashed as she listened.

"The rascals!" she exploded. "They oughter be hoss-whipped! I'd like to do it, too! Hey! you git out!"

She flourished her hands and swung the basket about, but the fighting lads did not heed her command.

Then Aunt Hannah hastened forward boldly and resolutely struck Rolf Harlow over the head with the basket.

Smash—spatter!

The basket contained eggs, and they were broken and smashed over Harlow's head. Out flew the sticky, yellow mass, spattering all over Rolf.

A howl of astonishment and dismay broke from the lips of the rascal, and then, taking one look at the angry woman, he turned and fled, while Kate Spencer screamed with laughter.

Seeing he was deserted, Berlin Radford did not delay about following his friend, and the two were hard scrambling up the path, and uttering cries of impotent rage.

There was a hammock near, in which Elsie Bellwood had been reclining when Rolf Harlow came upon her and into it Kate Spencer dropped, holding her handkerchief to her face and laughing as if she would lose her breath.

"Oh, goodness!" she cried. "Oh, Aunt Hannah! didn't you do it that time! Ha! ha! ha! How astonished and disgusted that chap looked! And what a spectacle he made as he stood there, with those broken eggs dripping down his face and neck! Oh! oh! oh! Brother Kent will die when I tell him about this!"

"The rascals!" burst forth the woman, as she stood with her smashed and dripping basket in her hand, regarding it in dismay. "All them good eggs broke to pieces, and I jest bought 'em over at the store! Who's goin' to pay for them eggs?"

"I will be happy to pay for them," laughed Frank. "It was worth the price of a bushel of eggs to see Rolf Harlow after you struck him with the basket. I have to thank you for saving me the trouble of finishing both those chaps."

Elsie ran to Frank.

"Oh, are you hurt much?" she fluttered. "I am afraid you are hurt!"

"Not a bit, dear little girl," smiled Merry, tenderly. "They did thump me a few times, but all that thumping did not damage me at all."

It was nearly ten minutes before Kate Spencer could stop laughing, and for an hour afterward she would break out occasionally when she remembered how Harlow had looked after being struck by the basket.

The whole affair was explained to Mrs. Barnaby, and Frank was introduced. He promised to send her over another basket of eggs from the store, which eased her feelings greatly.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Merriwell, sir," said the good woman. "Elsie has told us lots about ye, but I never expected to see you here."

Frank explained how, by accident, he came to be there, telling of the treacherous work in which he had detected Harlow not long before.

"The fellow must have come directly here after returning to Blue Cove," he said. "And that other chap was the spy."

"That other chap has been stopping at the Cove a few days," said Kate Spencer. "He thinks he is a masher, and he was determined to force his attentions upon me."

After they had talked a short time, Mrs. Barnaby went into the house, and Kate, seeing Frank and Elsie wished to be alone, soon excused herself and left them seated in the hammock.

"Oh, Frank," whispered Elsie, looking up at him with her innocent blue eyes, "I am so glad to see you again! I had begun to fear we'd never see each other any more."

"And I had begun to fear so myself, dear little girl," he confessed. "I did not know where you were, for you were sailing over the world with your father, and you did not have any permanent address."

"You did not answer the last two letters I wrote you."

"I answered every letter I received from you, Elsie. It must be they did not reach me."

A look of relief added to the happiness of her sweet face.

"And I thought you were getting so far above the sea captain's poor little daughter that you did not wish to answer. I heard that you were in college, and that you had become famous, and—and all that. Oh, Frank! you cannot know how I waited, and watched, and longed for an answer to my letters!"

"It was a shame, little girl! But you should have known me better than to think I would forget you. You should have known that, no matter what fortune might befall me, I could not forget you. I have thought of you a hundred—a thousand—a million times! I have longed to see you more than I can tell!"

His arm was about her waist, and he drew her close. Her golden head fell on his shoulder, and she smiled up into his eyes.

"How does it happen that I find you here?" he asked.

"Capt. Barnaby is one of father's old sailor friends. He has told father many times that I could have a home with him, and at last, when I was tired of going to sea, father sent me here. Here I met Kate Spencer. Mrs. Barnaby is her own aunt."

"And you are not going to sea any more?"

"No; I am tired of it. I have tried to induce father to leave the sea and settle down, but he always says: 'After one more voyage.' I'm afraid he'll never give it up. He was rich once, you know, but he put all his money in ships, and his ships met with bad fortune, so he lost everything. It is his dream to wrest fortune from the sea once more."

"I am glad you are going to sea no more, for now I shall know where to find you, and you will receive all my letters."

"Oh, Frank!" she murmured; "I believe you are braver and nobler than you used to be—if possible."

"And you, Elsie—why, I didn't dream you could become prettier than you were, but you have!"

Light-hearted, whistling on his way, Frank returned to the hotel at Blue Cove.

Kent Spencer, who was seated in a bamboo chair on the veranda, smiled on him as he approached.

"Well, Mr. Merriwell," he called, "I should say by your face that you have found the friend I told you about?"

Frank laughed and nodded, blushing a bit.

"You are right," he confessed; "and it was the surprise of my life. But it was lucky I went over, for I was just in time to protect her from Rolf Harlow. By the way, have you seen Harlow within a short time?"

"I have," nodded Spencer; "and I rather fancy I know the spy you saw with him. Something had happened to Harlow when he showed up at the hotel a short time ago, for his clothes were very wet, and he looked wretched and disgusted. A fellow by the name of Berlin Radford was with him."

Frank laughed heartily.

"I'll tell you what happened to Harlow," he said, and then proceeded to describe the fight, and the climax when Mrs. Barnaby struck Rolf over the head with the basket of eggs.

Spencer joined in Frank's merriment.

"He had washed the broken eggs from his clothes, and that is why they were so wet," declared Kent.

"Where are those fellows now?"

"They're gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"I don't know where, but they ordered a carriage as soon as they reached the hotel, and it did not take them long to pack up and get out. I am inclined to think they are gone for good."

"Which may prove a lucky thing for them."

"I rather fancy so, as I should have called Radford to account for annoying my sister. Wasn't he the spy you caught?"

"He was," nodded Frank.

"I fancied as much when I saw him with Harlow. You have done Blue Cove Academy a great service to-day, Mr. Merriwell. We did not suspect Harlow. As for Radford, he has been here but a few days. It must be that he is a member of the Alexandria Athletic Club, although we did not know it. I didn't think those fellows up there would resort to such low tricks; but they are bound to beat us this year and win back the title of champions, which they lost last year. They have money, and I understand they are betting heavily that they will win."

"I hope you will let our crew into this race," said Frank. "It will add to the sport, even if you row Alexandria, which I think you had better do."

"I will see that a meeting of the association is called immediately, and the matter shall be considered. I am for taking you in. If Alexandria kicks, let them stay out."

Frank expressed his satisfaction if such arrangement could be made, and then went up to his room.

An hour later, the others of the Yale Combine arrived at the hotel, Diamond in the lead, and Hans Dunnerwust bringing up the rear, as usual.

At least a dozen of the Blue Cove Academy boys were on hand to greet the young bicyclists, who gave a cheer when they saw Frank come out of the hotel.

"Hurro!" shouted Barney. "Here we are Frankie, me b'y!"

"Yaw!" cried Hans; "here you vos, Vrankie, mein poy! You peen glat to seen us, ain't id?"

"Gol darn my punkins!" drawled Ephraim Gallup; "but this here is a slick place, I snum!"

"Diamond tells us there is a chance for some sport here," said Rattleton. "That's what we're looking for, you bet!"

Bruce groaned.

"I'm looking for quinine, blankets, hot water, pepper tea, any old thing to warm me up!" he said. "I feel another of those confounded Arkansas chills coming on."

Then Frank introduced his friends to Kent Spencer, and there followed a general case of introducing. The Blue Cove lads seemed a rather pleasant set of fellows, reminding Frank and his friends of the Lake Lily boys.

Browning did not stop for introductions, but hustled into the hotel, and lost no time in beginning the battle to ward off a chill. Browning's chills were unpleasant for him, but they were the subject of much joking on the part of his comrades.

Frank had been certain that the boys would be hungry when they arrived, and he had ordered a square meal served for them all, so that the table was ready for them shortly after they appeared and washed up in their rooms.

Browning was on the bed, covered with quilts and blankets, which he had pilfered from the beds of the other fellows, gulping down quinine in huge doses and groaning dismally.

"Aren't you coming down to get something to eat, old fellow?" asked Hodge.

"Oh, yes, I'm cuc-cuc-cuc-coming down to eat!" chattered Bruce, sarcastically. "I'd enjoy eating, wouldn't I?"

"We'll have something good," grinned Rattleton. "We'll have posen frudding—I mean frozen pudding."

"Boo!" gasped the big fellow. "Dud—dud—don't speak of it!"

"And ice cream—good, cold ice cream."

"Gug-gug-get out bub-bub-bub-before I tut-tut-throw you out!" roared Browning, in exasperation. "You are tut-tut-taking your life in your hand when you cuc-cuc-come around me talking about ice cuc-cuc-cuc— Confound it! get out!"

Then the laughing lads left him alone in his misery.

It was a jolly meal in the cool dining-room of the little hotel. The boys cracked jokes, told

stories, laughed and enjoyed themselves fully.

In the midst of it all, Browning stalked into the room, bundled to his ears in blankets.

"Say," he called, "is there any good, hot tea or coffee?"

"Plenty of it," assured Merriwell.

"Gimme a cup—quick!"

Bruce found a seat at the table, and Frank ordered a cup of tea to be brought. Then, while Rattleton and Mulloy were condoling with Browning over his misfortune, Merriwell gave the waiter a tip to bring a cup of cracked ice with the tea, but to place it beside Frank's plate.

The waiter obeyed the order, and soon the tea, boiling hot, was before Browning. Bruce was so eager to swallow something hot that he caught it up and gulped down nearly half of it. Then he uttered a roar of dismay.

"Confound it!" he cried, as soon as he could speak. "That tea has taken the skin off all the way down! I'm parboiled inside! Oh, great Cæsar!"

"You wanted it hot," said Rattleton. "The waiter brought it hot, so you could cool it to suit yourself."

"That ought to break up your chill," laughed Frank.

Browning groaned.

"I wish I'd never seen Arkansas!" he declared. "We'd been all right if Merriwell hadn't tried to carry out his scheme of riding through the eastern part of the State. I caught the ague in those howling swamps, and goodness knows when I'll get rid of it!"

"Vot you wants to done," said Hans, "is to froze dot ague oudt. Uf you sot yourselluf down mit an ice-houses in und stayed there elefen or nine hours, you shook all der ague away britty queek. Yaw!"

"Oh, yes!" grunted the afflicted lad. "That is a fine scheme! All you need is a pill box and a few brains to become a first-class doctor. I don't think!"

He tried to cool his tea so that he could drink it. After a time, he was able to sip it. Then Frank caught Harry's eye, and made a signal that Rattleton understood. Immediately Harry engaged Browning's attention. Bruce sat the cup of tea down a moment, and Frank quickly exchanged it for the cup of cracked ice.

After a bit, the big fellow took the cup by the handle, and, feeling sure the tea must be cool enough for him to drink with impunity, lifted it and took a mouthful of the fine cracked ice.

If possible, that gave Bruce a greater shock than he had received from the scalding tea. Some of the ice slipped down his throat, and with a shout of rage, the big fellow sprang up from the table and rushed from the room, his blankets flopping about his heels.

And all those jolly, heartless jokers at the table shouted with laughter once more.

CHAPTER XV—A BOXING MATCH

That afternoon, the Yale lads were invited down to the combined clubhouse and boathouse of the Blue Cove boys. They went along in a body, Browning having recovered sufficiently to make one of the party.

The boathouse was built over the edge of the water, and a wing of it served as a clubroom. The regular eight-oar racing boat lay high and dry on her brackets, and the visitors inspected her with interest.

"What do you think of her, Merriwell?" asked Kent Spencer, rather anxiously.

"She's all right," nodded Frank. "It is plain she is a new boat, and made from an up-to-date model."

"We bought her last season. She is the first really good boat we ever owned, and that is how we happened to win the championship from Alexandria. She cost us a pretty sum, but we more than made it up on the race."

The final words were murmured into Frank's ear, and Merriwell understood that, although betting on the races was forbidden, the Blue Cove lads had found a way to win some of the money

Alexandria was so willing to stake on her crew.

"Our old boat was too wide in the waist," Spencer explained. "She could not slip through the water as easily as this one. I presume this may be improved upon, but I can't see how."

"Nor can I," confessed Frank. "If you do not win the race this season, it is certain the boat will not be the cause of your defeat."

Besides the large boat, there was a four-oared shell, also new and handsome. This attracted no little attention and admiration from the Yale lads.

When the boats had been inspected, the visitors were invited into the clubroom, which they found comfortably furnished, with large windows, which could be opened to let the cool air sweep through the place. Everything about the place was clean and in perfect order.

"It is an ideal summer clubhouse," declared Frank, as he looked about admiringly.

There were two large tables, upon which were papers and sporting magazines. About the tables were strong but cheap hardwood or rattan chairs. All around the room ran a stationary settee against the wall. On the walls were pictures, nearly all of a sporting character. There was a picture of a yacht race, besides imaginative pictures of a football match and a game of baseball. A prominent picture was that of a great single-scuttler. There were also pictures of bicycle races.

One thing Frank noticed with intense satisfaction. There were no pictures of professional sports and prize fighters.

"Now, fellows," cried Jack Diamond, "what do you think of Virginia and Virginia boys?"

And from the Yale crowd came a shout of:

"They're all right!"

The Blue Cove boys did what they could to make the visitors comfortable, and a general jolly afternoon was spent. For amusement, Hans and Ephraim were induced to don the gloves and have a bout.

"Vot you pet you don'd knocked me out der first roundt in, Efy?" grinned the jolly Dutch lad. "You expect I peen a holy derror der cloves mit, eh?"

"Gol darned ef I know anything abaout ye!" answered the Vermonter, as he stuffed his long fingers down into the gloves. "All I want is plenty of room, an' there ain't enough in here, b'gosh!"

"Yaw, you gif me blenty uf rooms," urged Hans. "Vy you don'd come der odder part uf der puiliding indo, hey?"

"That'll suit me. Come on."

So out they went into the room where the boats were kept.

"You want to look out for the slip," said Spencer. "You might fall into the water, and——"

He did not say more, for he saw Frank violently shaking his head, and tumbled to the fact that Merriwell did not want the boxers warned against the opening by which a boat could be rowed into that very room.

Ephraim seemed to feel lively and belligerent as soon as he pulled on the gloves, for he pranced around Hans, making furious feints and chuckling:

"Oh, jeewhiskers! ain't this goin' to be a reg'lar darn picnic! We'll have heaps of fun thumpin' an' punchin' each other, Dutchy."

"Yaw," grinned Hans, but with a sudden expression of dubiousness, "it peen goin' to be so much fun as nefer vas. Vot you pet on der game? Vot you pet you don'd lick me? I know I can let you done dot, und I pet von tollars on him. Uf you got der nerfe, you pet me dot."

"Don't talk about betting, but come an' see me!" cried Ephraim, still prancing about and flourishing his arms.

"Oh, you peen in a pig hurry, don'd id," cried Hans. "Vale, look away outd!"

Then he made a rush at Ephraim, who simply straightened out one of his long arms, permitting the Dutch boy to run against his glove.

With a terrific thump, Hans sat down on the floor.

"Yow!" he cried. "Oxcuse me for dot! I didn't know you vas lookin'! Uf you hurted mein nose, I didn't meant to done id."

The witnesses laughed, and Hans got upon his feet.

"Come on!" invited Ephraim. "Come right at me!"

"I peen goin' to done dot britty queek, you pets my poots!" declared Hans, as he bounced around the Yankee boy, keeping at a safe distance. "Der nexd dime you hit me, id vill pe mit you faces mein fist on. Yaw!"

"Brace up to him, ye Dutch chaze!" urged Barney, who began to itch all over at the sight of

anything resembling a "scrap." "Don't let th' long-legged farmer be afther frightenin' yez."

"Who vos frightened?" demanded Hans. "He don'd peen afraidt uf me. I vas goin' to shown him a trick vot I nefer seen. Here id vas, py shimminy!"

Then he made another rush at Ephraim, who thrust out his fist once more, expecting the Dutch lad to run against it. But Hans had not forgotten what happened the first time, and he dodged under Ephraim's glove, and gave the Yankee lad a terrific thump just below the belt.

With a howl, Ephraim doubled up like a jackknife, holding both hands to his abdomen and turning purple in the face.

"Yah!" shouted Hans, triumphantly. "Vot you toldt me a minute ago, ain'd id? I know I peen goin' to done dot! Oh, I vas a holy derror somedimes!"

"Gol—darn—yeou!" gasped Ephraim. "Yeou hit—me—below—the—belt!"

"Yaw," nodded Hans; "you pet I done dot. I known der blace vot takes uf you der vindt oudt, und I don'd haf a latter to climb higher up mit."

Ephraim was mad. As soon as he could straighten up, he sailed into Hans in earnest, and the spectators shouted with delight at the spectacle.

To the surprise of all, the fat little Dutchman proved a rather stiff antagonist for the Vermonter. It made no difference to Hans where he struck Ephraim, and he managed to duck under the Yankee lad's wicked blows.

In their excitement, the boxers did not observe that they were working toward the open slip, assisted by Frank and his friends, who pressed upon them from the opposite side.

Suddenly, as he was being pressed close, Hans dodged under Ephraim's guard and clutched the country lad about the waist. Gallup wound his long arms around Hans' neck, and they swayed and strained in each other's grasp.

It was uncertain whether they staggered of their own accord or were given a slight push, but all at once they reeled and went over into the slip.

Them was a great splash as they struck the water, and they vanished from view, still locked in each other's arms.

In a moment they came up, having broken apart.

"Hellup!" squawked Hans.

"Help!" howled Ephraim.

They splashed about wildly, clutched each other again, and sank once more, while the boys in the boat-house screamed with laughter.

"They are frightened enough to hang onto each other and drown right there," said Frank. "We must help them out."

So Merriwell and Rattleton each secured a boathook, and as soon as possible hooked it into the clothes of the boys, who were floundering about in the water.

"Pull, Harry!" Frank shouted.

They were on opposite sides of the slip, and so they succeeded in dragging Hans and Ephraim apart, for all that the Dutch boy made a frantic effort to hang fast to the Vermonter.

Harry had fastened into a convenient part of the Dutch lad's trousers, while Frank had hooked onto Ephraim's belt. The latter was pulled out easily, but the fat boy's head and feet hung down, and Rattleton was forced to call for assistance. Fortunately, Hans' pants were stout in that particular spot, and did not give way.

When the boxers were brought out, they sat on opposite sides of the slip, water running in streams from their clothes, and stared across at each other in ludicrous disgust and rage.

"Gol darn ye!" Ephraim gurgled, weakly shaking his fist at Hans. "Yeou was to blame fer that! Ef I could reach ye, I'd swat ye right plumb on the smeller, b'gosh!"

"Yah!" sneered Hans, shaking his fist in turn, "uf I peen so near to you as you vos to me, I would gif you somedings dot I wouldn't like, und don't you remember dot!"

Then the spectators shouted with merriment once more.

CHAPTER XVI—THE CLUB MEETING

That evening a meeting of the Blue Cove Academy Athletic Club was called in the clubroom of the boat-house, and every member in the vicinity was present.

Frank and Jack were asked to attend the meeting, and they were on hand.

When the meeting had been formally opened, Kent Spencer arose and explained that it had been called for two reasons, the first matter for consideration being the charge of double dealing and treachery which he should make against their late coach, Rolf Harlow.

Then the red-haired boy, Fred Dobbs, who was secretary of the club, said he had a brief communication from Harlow, which would render it quite unnecessary for them to go through a regular investigation, and call the two witnesses, Merriwell and Diamond, who were present.

"This note," Dobbs explained, "was left at the hotel by Harlow when he suddenly decided to get out of Blue Cove to-day. The clerk forgot it, and did not hand it to me till a short time ago, which explains how it happens that I have not spoken of it."

He then proceeded to read it aloud. It ran as follows:

"MR. FRED DOBBS, Secretary B. C. A. A. C.

"DEAR SIR: AS I am about to leave Blue Cove, I write this to let you know that your entire club, and yourself and Kent Spencer in particular, are a lot of chumps. You are easy stuff, and if it hadn't been for Frank Merriwell, with whom I will yet get square, I would have worked you for a jolly good haul in cold cash. You must have thought me a fool to waste my time coaching you for the paltry sum you agreed to pay me. I am out for dust, and I generally get it. I intended to fix things so you could not win against Alexandria, and I should have had a good sum bet against you, being certain of winning. That was my game, and now that it is spoiled, I don't care who knows it. I think the Alexandria boys will win anyhow. As for Merriwell's charge that Mr. Radford was sent here by Alexandria as a spy, there is nothing in it. The Alexandria fellows knew nothing about his being here. He is a friend of mine, and, as I had advised him to bet against Blue Cove, he wished to see you in practice. That is all. Yours derisively,

"ROLF HARLOW."

This insolent and insulting note brought cries of anger from the listening lads, and when Dobbs finished reading, the entire club was in an uproar. On all sides fierce denunciations of Harlow were to be heard. The things said about Rolf were far from complimentary.

Spencer, who was president of the club, found some difficulty in calling the excited and enraged boys to order. A dozen times he hammered on the table before him with his gavel, sharply commanding them to sit down and be still. At last they subsided, grumblingly, scowling and muttering to each other.

Kent then arose and said:

"Gentlemen, we should thank Mr. Rolf Harlow for saving us the trouble of an investigation by frankly acknowledging himself the contemptible and pusillanimous scoundrel which he is. A fellow who could make such a confession without shame—indeed, a fellow who could make it boastingly, as this fellow did, is not worthy an instant's consideration from gentlemen!"

"Right! right!" cried the boys.

"All there is to be considered in connection with this matter, then, is whether Alexandria was concerned in this dirty game or not."

"But he says Alexandria was not," quickly said a boy by the name of Anson Addison.

"And I would not believe him under any circumstances!" cried Fred Dobbs.

Then arose another discussion, which ended in the appointment of a committee to discover, if possible, if the Alexandria Club had resorted to such a sneaking and ungentlemanly trick.

The committee listened to what Frank and Jack had to tell of the conversation they had overheard between Harlow and the spy. They looked serious, and were of the opinion that a further investigation seemed certain to prove beyond a doubt that Alexandria, enraged by their defeat of the previous season, had resorted to unfair means to win back the title of "champions."

The next matter that came before the meeting was the consideration of Frank Merriwell's proposal to enter the race with his Yale Combine.

As soon as this matter was called up, Anson Addison jumped to his feet and protested against considering it while two members of the Yale Combine were present.

Frank and Jack immediately arose to withdraw. Spencer urged them to stay, saying he did

not see why they should not remain, but they excused themselves and left the room.

Then followed a red-hot discussion as to the advisability of letting Merriwell and his friends row in the race. Addison argued against it, and he made many strong points. He claimed that the Yale Combine was a temporary organization, which would not be in existence long, and might not last another year. If it won the championship, there was no certainty that Blue Cove would get another opportunity to row against the combine. Alexandria might object to rowing a three-cornered race; in fact, it was almost certain Alexandria would object. There was no proof that Alexandria had not dealt fairly with Blue Cove, and if the Yale Combine won the race, and failed to row next season, Alexandria could claim Blue Cove had lost the championship, which would give them an opportunity to row against some other organization and bar Blue Cove.

Fred Dobbs, hot-headed as usual, made a spirited reply to this, but was checked by Spencer, who used better judgment, talking quietly and calmly, and showing that the things Addison pretended to fear were not likely to happen. He also showed that in case the charge of double dealing was proven against Alexandria, Blue Cove might bar them, and give them no chance to make any claim to the championship, or a right to win it back. In case this charge was proven, and Alexandria was barred, where was there another crew to row against Blue Cove on the date set for the event? The Yale Combine was the only one, as a race with another organization could not be arranged in such a short time.

Addison was neither silenced nor convinced, but the question was put to the test, and but two votes were cast against admitting the Yale Combine to the race.

Then the meeting adjourned, and several of the Blue Cove boys hastened to notify Merriwell and his friends of their decision.

Frank's party was delighted, for here was fresh sport for them, and of a sort they had not encountered on their tour.

"I shall take a train for Washington to-morrow," said Merriwell, "and see what I can do about securing an eight-oar shell."

"An' it's oursilves will be afther gettin' inther thrainin' immediately afther ye return wid it, me b'y!" cried Barney.

Frank remembered the Irish lad had been handy with an oar in the old days at Fardale, while Ephraim, at one time a genuine lubber, had been to sea and could pull like a sailor. Hans was the one Frank feared would cause trouble, but he said nothing of his fears. It would take some time and hard work to hammer his crew into any sort of shape, but he was out for sport, and to him work of such a nature seemed sport.

On the following morning Frank left Blue Cove for the nearest railway station, where he boarded a train bound for Washington. He was gone more than twenty-four hours, but when he returned he announced that a boat would follow him shortly.

That very afternoon a handsome eight-oar shell was brought to Blue Cove, and the boys received it with cheers of delight and admiration, the Blue Cove lads cheering as loudly as the others.

"Look at them!" exclaimed Diamond, his eyes shining. "True sons of Old Virginia, every one of them! Hearts as big as buckets and souls as large as their entire bodies! Virginia, Virginia! mother of presidents and fairest spot of all our glorious country! Who would not be proud to call you home!"

The Blue Cove boys permitted the Yale Combine to put their shell in the boathouse, and for more than an hour the place was filled with boys who were making comparisons between the two boats. The final decision of nearly all was that, although the new boat showed it was new, there was no perceptible difference between them.

Being doubtful about Hans, Frank decided to take his trial trip under cover of darkness, and the time was set for that evening.

It was nearly nine o'clock when, with his crew in their allotted positions and himself as stroke, Merriwell gave the word, and the light shell slipped out from beneath the shadow of the boathouse and glided away upon the calm waters of Blue Cove.

To Frank's surprise, Hans could row far better than he had expected, and the trial was fairly satisfactory, although it was apparent that the boys would need no small amount of coaching to get them into a uniform and even stroke.

How this coaching was to be done puzzled Merriwell not a little, for he knew he must be out of the boat and in position to watch every man in order to give them points.

"I'll have to borrow a stroke of the Blue Cove chaps," he thought. "Spencer's work is all right, but it would overwork him to take my place occasionally."

When they returned to the boathouse, they found Spencer and Dobbs awaiting them.

"Well," called Kent, "how does it pan out?"

"The boat is all right," said Frank, "but my crew is rather rocky, and I am puzzled to know how I am going to coach it. I can't do it in the boat, but I don't know where I'll find a substitute to take my place occasionally. That's what's wanted."

"Noel Spudd is the very man!" exclaimed Dobbs.

"Sure!" nodded Spencer.

"Who is Noel Spudd?" asked Frank.

"Fellow who was going to be on our crew, but his father would not let him stay and train," explained Kent. "He came to the Cove this morning, and will stay after the race."

"Can he row?"

"Can he? He's a daisy!"

"Then he'll do—if I can get him. See if you can fix it for me, Mr. Spencer."

Kent promised to do so, if possible, and then the new boat was lifted out of the water for the night.

The following morning Spencer brought Noel Spudd to see Frank. Spudd proved to be a pleasant-looking, freckle-faced chap, good-natured and obliging, and he agreed to help Merriwell out, if possible, although he was anxious that his father should not find it out.

"You see, the governor is a crank," he explained. "He has a theory that violent exercise is injurious to anybody, and he talks about enlargement of the heart and other evils that follow racing. I had to promise that I would not take part in the race before he'd let me come to the Cove to see it. I'll keep my promise, but that will not prevent me from helping the thing along by aiding in the practice."

So it was arranged, and Frank lost little time in getting the boys together and putting them to work.

Browning grumbled, as usual, and Rattleton declared he was praying for a chill, that he might get out of taking part in the work of training.

Spudd took Frank's place in the boat, and Merry watched his crew row down the river, after which he mounted his wheel and followed.

For an hour Frank stood in a favorable position, watching the work of the boys in the boat and giving directions. He told each one of his faults, and how to correct them, and by the end of the hour he was well pleased with the progress made.

Of course, Merriwell did not expect to have a perfectly trained crew, capable of rowing against first-class college crews, but he believed his boys could be whipped into such shape that they would stand a fair chance of winning over Blue Cove and Alexandria.

A great surprise to him was the remarkable manner in which Hans Dunnerwust showed up at an oar. On the land, the Dutch boy was a perfect clown, but his whole manner and appearance changed the moment he got into a boat. He could row nearly as well as the best of them.

Frank felt generous in the matter of the race, for certainly Blue Cove had been most generous in its dealings with the strangers. He offered to take Harlow's place as coach till another coach could be secured.

Spencer appreciated this, and the offer was accepted, so that afternoon found Merriwell on the river's bank once more, shouting his commands to the Blue Cove crew.

That night Kent Spencer publicly declared that it was his conviction that the crew had improved more in one hour under Merriwell than during the entire time Harlow had coached it.

Anson Addison was the only one who was not enthusiastic. He remained silent and sulky, saying nothing, but thinking a great deal.

Addison was not well liked at Blue Cove, but he was something of an all-around athlete, and without doubt as good a man with an oar as could be found among the academy students. He was considered of great value to the academy crew.

Since his defeat in the attempt to bar the Yale Combine from the race, Addison had sulked and held himself aloof, refusing to speak to Frank and his friends, whom he pronounced "a lot of plebes, not fit associates for any gentleman."

Addison's friends had seen him sulky before, and Spencer advised them to let him alone, saying he would get over it after a while if he was not troubled.

CHAPTER XVII—THE EIGHT-OAR SHELL

After their work on the river, the boys enjoyed themselves lolling about in hammocks, playing tennis and strolling and talking with the pretty girls they found at the Cove.

The girls seemed to take readily to the newcomers, which added to Addison's hostility, as a young lady on whom he had bestowed a great deal of attention was quickly appropriated by Bart Hodge.

It was a remarkable thing that, although Bart was a serious fellow, with a rather moody face, he was a great favorite with the girls. There was some sort of magnetism about him that attracted them.

Rattleton, on the other hand, although he could crack jokes and keep a party shouting with laughter, did not seem to have much success with the opposite sex. They all pronounced him a splendid fellow, but it was seldom one cared to take a stroll with him or swing with him in a hammock on the hotel veranda of a moonlight evening.

Frank and Jack often were seen taking the path that led over to the little hollow in which stood the home of Capt. Barnaby.

Elsie Bellwood was there, and no other girl could make an impression on Merriwell, although not a few of them tried.

Frank had introduced Diamond to Kate Spencer, and Jack was smitten with her immediately. It proved to be a case of mutual admiration, for Elsie told Frank that Kate had "raved" over Jack the night after her first meeting with him.

"Frank," said Jack, as they were returning to the hotel the evening of his first meeting with Kate, "I believe Blue Cove is the place for me. I could stay here the rest of my life."

Merriwell chuckled softly.

"How long have you felt that way?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. But this, Merriwell, is Old Virginia, and I am on my native soil. I feel like myself once more."

"I am glad of that," declared Merriwell, "for you were like anything but yourself by the time we reached California. I never saw anything make such a change in a fellow as that trip across the continent did in you. You began to grumble a little by the time we had passed through Jersey, and you grew worse and worse till San Francisco was reached. By that time there was no getting along with you in peace. But when we turned toward the East again, you grumbled less and less till Virginia was reached. When you knew you were in Virginia once more, you were so supremely happy that it was utterly impossible to ruffle your temper. Even Ward Hammond and his gang did not seem to stir you up as you would have been ordinarily. And now—now— What do you think of Kate Spencer, old fellow?"

"She's a darling!"

Frank had sprung the question so suddenly that the answer came from Jack before the latter realized what he was saying. When Frank shouted with laughter, Jack felt the hot blood rush to his face, but he doggedly said:

"She is that! Laugh if you want to! I don't care!"

"It's plain it's not so much Blue Cove as what you have found at Blue Cove that is attracting you and making you feel as if you could stay here the rest of your life."

"I don't know but you are right," confessed Jack, honestly.

"Well, I don't blame you," declared Frank. "Kate is a fine girl—not quite like Elsie, but a fine girl, all the same."

While Frank and his friends were enjoying themselves and getting ready for the race, Blue Cove was keeping up a hot correspondence with Alexandria, the club of the latter place having protested against admitting the Yale Combine to the race.

Blue Cove insisted, and the mail bore letters each way. At last Dobbs, who as secretary was carrying on the correspondence with Alexandria, plainly hinted that the eight of the latter club could row in a three-cornered race or not at all.

That brought a proposal from Alexandria that the Yale Combine be admitted with the understanding that it was to row for honors only. If it won over both Blue Cove and Alexandria, it was not to claim the championship of the Potomac. In that case, the championship remained with Blue Cove. But if Alexandria led at the finish, the championship was to go to the latter place.

This was more liberal than the boys of Blue Cove had expected, and they readily accepted the

terms, so that an agreement was made without delay.

From this proposal from Alexandria, however, it was plain she expected to win over both her rivals. Otherwise she would not have been so liberal.

"She'll have to hustle if she does that trick," said Frank, when he had heard of the final settlement of terms, to which he had acceded readily enough, as he and his friends were out for the sport of the race, and did not wish to carry away the title of champions.

"Marruk me worrud," said Barney Mulloy, "it's some sort av a thrick Alixandry is up to, ur it's niver a bit she'd make such a proposal. Look out fer her!"

One thing in connection with the regular training for the race proved somewhat unpleasant for all the boys. They possessed hearty appetites, and Merriwell laid down a course of diet to which he insisted that they should adhere. For Browning and Dunnerwust, this was particularly hard, as each possessed an enormous appetite, and was in the habit of satisfying it to the fullest extent whenever possible.

"When I have a chill, I can't eat, and when I don't have a chill, Merry won't let me eat," grumbled the big fellow. "Sport! Is that what you call it? Well, when I get back to Old Yale I'll forever forswear taking part in anything that resembles sport."

"Yaw," grunted Hans, in deep disgust, "dese may pe fun vor me, put don't you pelief me! Mein stomach veels shust like a raw tog could ead me. You don'd peen vell ven mein stomach veels dot vay, eh, Prowning?"

"Say, yeou fellers make me tired, b'gosh!" burst forth Ephraim. "I ruther guess I've got jest as big appertite as any other critter livin', but I don't growl an' kick all ther time. It ain't goin' ter be forever."

"You don'd know apout dot," squawked Hans, growing excited. "Ven you peen done dese race mit, maypie Vrankie got someding else indo you. Firginia peen a long tistance py Yale Goallege. I veel shust like takin' a drain und valkin' all der vay to New York."

"Yeou make yerselves miserbul by thinkin' an' talkin' about it so much. Why don't ye try ter fergit it?"

"I don'd peen unaple to done dot. Dot eadin' dinks apout me all der dime. Id peen awful ven you felt your packpone efry dime you put your handt mein stomach on."

The Dutch boy finished with a lugubrious groan, which was faintly echoed by Bruce, while Ephraim went away laughing.

Each day Dunnerwust seemed to grow more wild-eyed and desperate. Frank had given strict orders at the hotel, so it was impossible for any of his crew to get food between meals, and only certain kinds of food could be found on the table at regular meals.

Hans became so ravenous that he was seen to stand glaring at a cow for an hour at a time, his mouth watering as he tried to estimate how many steaks could be obtained from her; and he often went across the Cove to the house of a settler who kept pigs. When asked why he stood staring at the pigs so much, he answered:

"I peen tried to vigger oudt how much bork und peans dose bigs vould made uf dey peen gooked dot vay. I veel shust like one uf dose bigs could ead der whole uf me. Id vos dreatful ven you haf dot gone veeling py der mittle my stomach uf. Dunder und blitzens! uf I don'd got nottings to ead britty soon, you vill starf to death!"

The owner of the pigs became suspicious of the Dutch lad, and fearing Hans would try to steal one of the animals, he drove him away.

Three days before the time set for the great race, there was a "hop" at the little hotel. The dining-room floor had been cleared and polished, and an orchestra of musicians formed from the musical lads of Blue Cove Academy.

It was a happy night for Blue Cove. All the young folks stopping in the vicinity assembled at the hotel, and when the music struck up, the floor quickly swarmed with smiling lads and pretty lassies.

Elsie Bellwood was there, and of course Frank claimed her for the first waltz. As they glided over the floor to the soothing strains of music, Elsie felt that were she to live thousands of years, never could she be happier than she was at that moment. Frank's strong arm was about her, her hand was in his, and she gave herself up to his guiding will on the floor, as she had sometimes dreamed of giving herself up to be guided by him through life.

Never had Elsie waltzed so well before, and never had Frank waltzed better, so it was not strange that they attracted attention and were universally admired.

Next to Frank and Elsie, the most graceful dancers on the floor were Bart Hodge and his partner, the pretty girl whom Anson Addison so much admired.

Addison had claimed the first waltz with her, and great was his rage when Hodge appeared and reminded her that she had promised him that dance. As they whirled away, leaving Addison standing alone, the latter ground his teeth and vowed vengeance.

When the dance was over, Addison found an opportunity to speak to Hodge.

"Come out," he said; "come out alone and fight me—if you dare!"

"I'll do it—with pleasure," nodded Hodge, promptly. "Lead the way."

Then he followed at Addison's heels.

Kent Spencer had heard Addison muttering threats, and he was watching the fellow. When he saw him speak to Bart, the manner of the two lads was enough to betray what was coming, so Spencer hastened to find Diamond.

"Come on!" he excitedly whispered. "There's a scrap in the air!"

That was enough for Jack. If a fight was going to take place, he wanted to see it; if it was possible, he would wish to take a hand in it.

"Go ahead," he said; "I'm after you."

When they reached the outer air, they saw two figures moving away in the direction of the academy ground, one following the other.

"They are going to fight over on the ball ground," said Spencer. "Come ahead, and we'll get there another way."

Jack followed, and they made a half circle, coming around to the ground on the side opposite the hotel.

By the time they arrived there, Hodge and Addison were hard at it, having stripped off their coats and vests. They were striking, grappling, struggling, falling, getting up, breaking away and going at it again. Spencer and Diamond heard the sound of their blows and panting breaths before the fighting lads were seen.

"Let's keep away," said Diamond. "I'll risk Hodge. I haven't known him long, but he strikes me as a terror."

The fight lasted some time, and it was fast and furious. At last, it was seen that Hodge was getting the best of it. He would not take a mean advantage of his enemy, but he pressed Addison, who began to weaken. Bart got in some heavy blows, occasionally knocking Addison off his feet.

"Will you give up?" he demanded. "I don't want to use you too rough. Give up, old fellow—give up!"

Addison made a last spurt of rage, but he was knocked down, and Hodge stood over him, ready to thump him again if he tried to rise.

"Will you give up now?" Bart demanded.

"Yes," came the reluctant reply. "Don't strike me again! You are too much for me."

"That settles it. Get up and we'll shake hands."

But Addison refused to shake hands after he got upon his feet.

"You have won the fight," he confessed, wiping the blood from his face with a handkerchief, "but I hate you just as much as I did before. I won't shake hands with anybody I hate."

"I don't blame you a bit," said Bart, at once. "I wouldn't do it if I were in your place; but I don't hold any hard feelings, though, to tell the truth, I might if you had licked me. I'm going to my room, and see if I can get myself in shape to dance again. So long."

Then, tossing on his coat and vest, he sauntered away toward the hotel, leaving the defeated Blue Cove lad on the ball ground.

Addison put on his coat, muttering to himself:

"Oh, I hate all of that Yale crowd! I can't wait any longer! I don't believe they'll have time to get another boat before the race. I'll do the job now!"

As he started away, Diamond whispered to Spencer:

"That fellow is up to something crooked. Let's watch him."

"All right," nodded Kent.

They followed Addison, and saw him go down back of the boathouse, where he stripped off all his clothing and prepared to go into the water.

"I think I know what he is up to," declared Kent. "Come with me."

Taking care not to be seen by Addison, the two boys made their way to the door of the boathouse, where Spencer produced a key and hastily admitted them, closing the door cautiously when they were inside.

"Here," whispered the Blue Cove stroke, "we'll hide in this corner. If I am right, Addison is coming in here for something."

They crouched in a corner and waited. Before long there was a splash of water in the slip and

a blowing sound, as if a diver had just come to the surface.

With his lips close to Diamond's ear, Spencer gently whispered:

"Just as I thought! He dived from the outside and came under the door, which is closed."

Then the intruder was heard pulling himself out of the water, and the eyes of the crouching lads, having become accustomed to the darkness of the place, saw a form moving about.

Addison went into the clubroom, soon returning. Then he struck a match and lighted a lamp.

"There are no windows in this part," he muttered. "The light won't be seen."

The light shone on his wet and dripping body. The watching boys, hushing their breathing, for fear they would be detected, watched his every movement.

"There's the boat," Addison grated, glaring at the handsome new shell of the visitors. "I'll soon spoil its beauty!"

Then he went to the wall and took down from some brackets an ax, with which he approached the boat. There was a glare in his eyes, and his pale face was contorted with rage.

"Now! he cried, I'll do the job!"

He raised the ax.

"Stop!"

Out leaped Spencer and Diamond, and the ax was torn from Addison's hand before he could carry out his dastardly design.

CHAPTER XVIII—THE RACE

The race was on at last. At the crack of the pistol, the three boats had jumped away, Alexandria taking a lead of half a length by a quick start. The course was straightaway down the river, but against the tide.

A large crowd had assembled near the start and the finish to watch the race. Those at the starting point cheered wildly as the boats shot away.

Alexandria rowed with short, snappy strokes that made the boat jump, jump, jump all the time. The strokes of the Blue Cove crew and the Yale Combine were much alike.

Toots was coxswain in the Yale boat, and proud indeed he was of the position. His black face shone with delight.

On the river was a small steam launch that was loaded with admirers of the Alexandria crew. They waved hand and hats and shouted like a lot of wild Indians when they saw the Alexandria boat increase its lead so that clear water could be seen between it and the other boats.

With a regular, long swinging stroke, the other boats kept side by side for a time. Then Frank's crew began to gain slightly on the Blue Cove lads.

Steadily Merriwell drove them on. He did not attempt a stiff spurt so soon, but forced them gradually, drawing away from Blue Cove. Soon the Yale boat was close behind that of Alexandria. The latter spurted, and then it was that Frank held close, like a leech, determined not to permit the crew from up the river any further advantage.

The stroke of the Yale crew was strong and steady, sending the boat through the water at high speed. Before a mile had been made the short stroke of the Alexandria men was beginning to tell on them.

And Blue Cove was clinging in a remarkable manner, for all of the fact that it had lost one of its best men at the last moment. Anson Addison, caught in the dastardly attempt to ruin Merriwell's boat, had been dropped from the crew and expelled from the club.

In vain Spencer had urged Noel Spudd to take Addison's place in the boat. Spudd longed to do so, but did not dare disobey his father to such an extent.

So another and far less valuable man was substituted, and Blue Cove felt that it had very little show of winning the race.

"You must save us, Merriwell," said Kent Spencer, a few moments before the start was made.

"I am sure we'll do our best," nodded Frank.

The shouts of the Alexandria crowd on the launch became less and less confident as the Yale

boat was seen to creep up on the leader. At last it lapped Alexandria. Then, despite the most desperate efforts of the crew from up the river, the Yale boat crept alongside and gradually took the lead.

On an elevated bank near the finishing point a crowd was seen. The ones assembled there were all aflutter with excitement.

Blue Cove was doing good work. Up beside Alexandria the boat was stealing, and it was plain that a most exciting finish would be made.

The cheering on the launch had ceased. It was keeping near the Yale boat, and, in the midst of his work, Frank heard a familiar voice declaring:

"They can't win to-day—not much! The race is not over yet!"

Harlow was on the launch.

But it seemed plain enough to everybody that the Yale boat would cross the finish more than two lengths ahead of the others, for it was gaining rapidly now.

The crowd on shore was cheering, and it was a scene of wild excitement.

Suddenly something whizzed through the air and struck the water. Then there was an explosion, and the entire forward end of the Yale boat was blown to pieces!

The boat filled immediately, and the crew was in the water, while the other boats shot past and crossed the line together, it being difficult to tell which was leading.

"One of the greatest races ever rowed on the river," declared Kent Spencer in the boathouse that evening. "You Yale chaps would have won easily if it hadn't been for that bomb that ruined your boat. As it was, that put you out of the race, and we got over the finish a little in advance of Alexandria. Blue Cove still holds the championship."

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the delighted lads.

"It's lucky there were boats ready to give us a lift," said Jack Diamond. "Hans was floundering about like a maniac, and——"

"Who told me so?" cried the Dutch boy. "Dot Bodomac Rifer vater vos der thinnest sduff dot efer tried to valk on me. Id don'd seem unaple to subbort me ven I tried to svim oudt der shore to. I sunk der pottom to shust like you vos von sdick uf vood."

"Where is Browning?" asked Fred Dobbs.

"Oh, he's in the hotel, having a chill," laughed Rattleton. "The plunge in the river brought on the ague again."

"I don't suppose there is any doubt as to the identity of the fellow who threw the bomb?" said Noel Spudd, questioningly.

"Not a bit of it!" exclaimed Bart Hodge. "Miss Bellwood and Miss Spencer both saw him when he did the trick. He was on the steam launch. Miss Bellwood was looking at him through field glasses, and she is ready to swear it was Rolf Harlow."

"In that case," said Spudd, "I presume Mr. Merriwell will see that the fellow is punished, if he is arrested?"

"Bet your life on it!" cried Diamond. "Merry means to put Harlow where the birds won't peck him. That chap has given Merry trouble enough."

"Anyway," said Kent Spencer, "we want you fellows to stay at Blue Cove a while longer. We've had more sport since you struck the Cove than ever before."

"Had to glear it—I mean glad to hear it," said Rattleton. "But you haven't had any more sport than we have. It's been the jolliest time of the whole trip for me, and as for Merriwell, Diamond and Hodge—well, there are attractions enough to keep them here the rest of their lives."

"The only gal I ever was able to ketch was away aout in Forth Wuth, Taxis," put in Ephraim, grinning. "I kainer knocked the spots aout of a feller that was cuffin' her brother some, an' she stuck to me zif I was kivered all over with mewsledge. She was a peach, too, b'jee! Some time I'm goin' back aout there an' ax her will she splice to me. Ef she'll have me, I'll have her quicker'n a cat kin wink her eye."

"Vale," said Hans, with unusual sadness, "I don't peen aple to had a girl catch me. Vot vos der madder, somehow? Don'd I peen peautiful py my faces?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Rattleton; "you are a perfect chromo! I don't understand why all the girls are not trying to catch you."

"Mebbe you understood dot shust as pad as I did. I sed ub nighds dryin' to haf dot vigger me out vot id vos, but now I don'd knew so much apoud id as you did pefore."

Frank Merriwell came bounding into the room, waving a scrap of yellow paper over his head.

"A dispatch!" he cried. "It was just brought me from the nearest station. Harlow has been

arrested in Alexandria!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the boys.

"Will you appear against him?" asked Harry of Frank.

"I think I ought to."

"Certainly," came from several of the Blue Cove boys.

The matter was talked over for half an hour, and then Frank set off for the jail in which Harlow had been confined.

On the day following the rascal was brought out for a hearing.

He was held for trial and bail was placed at several thousand dollars.

As he could find nobody to go his bondsman he was compelled to remain in jail for the time being.

The boys of the Yale Combine remained with their friends for two days more. During that time Frank saw Elsie twice, and when the pair parted it was with a promise to write every week or oftener.

The combine got a rousing cheer on leaving Blue Cove, the celebration being fully equal to that participated in at Lake Lily.

"Virginia is all right," said Frank to Jack. "I don't wonder that you are proud of your mother State."

The tour now led northward, toward New York, and two days later found the boys in the southeastern portion of Pennsylvania.

Here the roads were found to be fairly good, and they took again to their bicycles, but taking their time, for Bruce and Hans absolutely refused to hurry.

"The boat race nearly killed me," growled the big fellow. "Give me a chance to recover."

As for Hans, he wanted to stop and eat five or six times in every twenty-four hours.

"Dot draining vos make me empty by mine heels up," he declared. "You could eat me mine own head off alretty, ain't it?"

On one occasion Frank felt like spurting ahead and did so. He was quickly joined by Barney, and the two kept it up until they were well out of sight of the rest of the crowd.

"Sure an' this tickles me to death," observed Barney. "Me wheel acts loike grased lightning, bedad!"

"I love a spurt myself," replied Frank. "Especially when my wheel is just in proper trim."

They had passed over a slight rise and were now on a down grade where coasting became a double pleasure. There was a wood on either side of the road, with great trees interlocking their branches high overhead.

"Listen!" cried Frank, presently. "What is that?"

"Sure an' somebody is gettin' a drubbin'," replied Barney. "Come on, we'll see who it is!"

"Confound the beast!" came the cry from a curve ahead. "I will teach the beast how to mind!"

And then followed more blows, mingled with a low cry in a female voice.

Rounding the curve, Frank and Barney saw a man and a girl who were mounted on handsome horses. The man was belaboring with his riding whip the horse he bestrode, while the animal danced about, refusing to go ahead.

At every blow of the whip the horse under the girl started in fear, trembling and snorting. She was obliged to give him much of her attention, but she sharply called to the man:

"Don't whip Firefoot that way, Cousin Stephen! He is not used to your harsh ways, and——"

"I'll make him used to them!" grated the man, his face flushed with anger. "He is a miserable brute anyway!"

"But not half such a brute as the man on his back!" muttered Frank.

"Roight ye are, me b'y," agreed Barney. "It's a foine lookin' crayther he's batin' there."

"And a fine creature it is," declared Frank; "but it will not take long to spoil it in that way. The fellow doesn't know how to ride, and he has confused the horse between yanking and whipping it. It's likely the creature stopped and began to rear and back because it did not know what its rider wanted."

The sight of the approaching bicycles seemed to startle the horse more than ever, and it bolted out of the road with its rider, who was nearly swept from the saddle by an overhanging limb.

Again the man fiercely applied the whip. Then he, too, saw the bicyclists, and cried to them in a snarling voice:

"What do you mean by riding along here like this? You chaps have no right in the road, anyway! Can't you see you have frightened this horse?"

That brought a touch of warm color to the handsome face of our hero, but his voice was calm and steady as he retorted:

"We have as much right on the public highway as you. The trouble with your horse is that you have abused and frightened it. You are not a fit person to ride a horse or have any dealings with one."

That seemed to make the man more frantic than ever. He tried to force the horse at Frank, but the creature shyed at the wheel, so the rider did not accomplish his design of riding Merriwell down.

With a muttered cry of anger, the man struck at Frank with his whip, and the lash fell upon the boy's shoulder, so that he felt the sting through his coat.

Then of a sudden, away leaped the horse, nearly unseating its rider. The girl followed.

"Confound him," muttered Merriwell, watching the retreating figure of the horseman.

"May th' Ould Nick floy away wid him!" cried Barney. "Did he hurrut yez, Frankie?"

"No. If he had, I might be tempted to follow him. Let him go. It is plain he thinks he is a blue blood and owns the earth. What he really needs is a sound thrashing."

"An' ye're th' b'y to give him thot, Frankie!"

"I want no quarrel with him, though it did make me hot to see him lash that horse. Look at him now! See him bob in the saddle and saw at the reins! He will ruin the mouth of that horse, as well as spoil its temper. It's a shame!"

"So it is!" nodded Barney.

The man and girl disappeared from view, and gradually the sound of the galloping horses died out in the distance.

CHAPTER XIX—A RESCUE ON THE ROAD

Frank and Barney rode along leisurely.

"The mouth of a horse, until it is spoiled by bad usage, is a very delicate thing," declared Frank. "As a common thing the mouth of a horse is ruined before the creature is seven years old. In order to preserve its natural delicacy, the right sort of a bit must be used and the reins must be handled gingerly. A heavy hand will ruin a good mouth in a short time, but not one man in fifty can drive with a light hand. The man who saws on the reins has no business in the saddle. If I owned that black horse it would take the price of the animal to induce me to let such a rider mount him for a ten-mile canter."

"But whin a crayther runs away, thin phwat're yez goin' to do?" asked the Irish lad. "Ye've got ter yank him up, me b'y."

"Not at all, Barney. Yanking and sawing are vile practices."

"Thin how do yez be afther holdin' the b'aste?"

"There is a trick in holding a horse with a light hand. Proof of this is that some of the most famous jockeys, although slight and weak, can control and hold horses which would run away with strong men, and could not be sawed or yanked into submission. The best jockeys are never seen leaning back in the saddle, pulling and sawing to hold their horses."

"Oi belave it's roight ye are, me b'y," nodded the Irish youth, after a moment, "although Oi niver thought av it before."

"Take notice of it on race tracks hereafter. Horses are apt to behave better with women, if they are skillful, for women commonly have lighter hands than men. That fellow did not know how to ride, for all that the horse did not throw him when it jumped sideways or started ahead. It's ten to one he thinks himself an expert rider, but he is a bungler, for, besides having a bad hand, he did not sit well in the saddle. When the horse started suddenly he was forced to support himself somewhat by a hard pull on the reins, a thing that never should be done. A good rider has a seat low in the saddle, which he grips with his knees and thighs, keeps his back straight, keeps his elbows, and hands down, and varies the force on the reins only for the purpose of controlling his horse, and not for steadying himself."

Barney gave Frank a glance of wonder. He saw that Merriwell was warming to his subject and growing enthusiastic.

"Oi don't understhand it!" muttered the son of the Emerald Isle.

Frank gave him a quick glance of surprise.

"Don't understand what?" he asked. "I thought I was talking plain enough."

"Ye wur, me b'y—ye wur! It's how ye know so much about iverything thot puzzles Barney Mulloy. If there's iver a thing ye're not posted on Oi dunno pwhat it is. Ye can talk about iverything, an' ye can tell me more in a minute thin Oi iver knew. How do ye foind it all out, Frankie?"

Frank laughed.

"I'll tell you, Barney," he said. "Some years ago I made up my mind that I couldn't know too much, and I resolved to find out all about everything that came beneath my notice. Since then I have practiced the art of observation and investigation. That is the way I have found out about things. It is one way of obtaining an education. Lots of fellows are not able to go to college, but they can keep their eyes and ears open and lay up a store of practical knowledge that will be of the greatest use to them in all probability. Of course many of the things I have investigated and found out about may not be of value to me at any time during my life; but there is no telling what will be of value and what will not. All my life I have taken an interest in horses, and it is but natural that I should find out as much as possible concerning them. If this had not been the case, I could not have astonished the cowboys by my horsemanship during this trip. They regarded me as the most remarkable tenderfoot they had ever seen, and it all came from the fact that I had found and improved an opportunity to ride, shoot and throw the lasso. I didn't learn those things without some trouble, but trouble doesn't cut any ice with me when I set out to do a thing."

"Well, it's not ivery fellow can put hissilf out to learn all about th' things he says."

"He can if he will. The trouble is that he sees things without thinking of learning anything about them. If he begins to cultivate the habit of investigation it will grow on him, and it will not be long before he will discover the value of some of the knowledge thus obtained. Try it, Barney."

"Begobs, Oi will! Oi niver thought av it before, but it's mesilf thot'll be after trying it. Did yez notice th' girrul wid thot horse-bater, Frankie?"

"Yes. Rather pretty, I thought."

"It's a p'ache she wur, me b'y!" enthusiastically declared the Irish lad. "It's not plazed she wur wid th' way th' spalpane wur b'atin' th' poor b'aste."

They came out of the wood to the open country, and a beautiful stretch of country lay before them.

Of a sudden, Barney gave an exclamation:

"Look there, Frankie!" he cried, pointing.

Along the road from a distance, coming toward them at a mad and furious gallop, was a horse, bearing a girl, who was vainly trying to hold the frightened animal.

In pursuit of the runaway was a man who was fiercely lashing another horse, and Frank recognized this animal even before he did the rider.

It was the handsome black horse that the stranger had been maltreating in the wood, and its rider was the same hot-tempered young man.

The girl on the runaway was his companion.

Instantly Frank seemed to understand what had happened.

"The fool!" burst from his lips. "He has kept at his own horse till the one the girl is riding has been frightened and is running away with her. She may be thrown and killed!"

Without loss of time, Frank turned about, so he was heading in the same direction as the runaway horse, which was coming behind him.

"Pwhat are yez goin' to do?" cried Barney.

"I am going to stop that runaway horse if I am built right!" returned Frank, with grim determination.

"Look out—look out, there!"

The man in pursuit of the runaway shouted to the boys.

Barney was not given time to turn about. He tried to do so, but in his haste and confusion, ran out of the road into the ditch, and was forced to dismount. Before he could get into the saddle again the frightened horse was bearing the girl past.

The Irish boy caught a glimpse of her face, from which the warm color had fled. Her lips were pressed firmly together, and there was a look of fear in her dark eyes; but she was doing her very best to check the frightened horse, although the animal had the bit in his teeth, and her gloved

hands seemed unable to do but little to restrain him.

A thought of Frank's theories concerning a "light hand" for driving flashed through Barney's head, but he instantly realized that this was an exceptional occasion. Even brute strength might not avail now.

Then how did Merry expect to check the runaway?

The Irish youth saw his friend, who was pedaling swiftly along the road, glance over his shoulder at the approaching runaway. Then Barney held his breath, wondering what Frank would do, but feeling that he was bound to make some desperate attempt to stop the horse.

Frank was pedaling along at high speed when the runaway reached his side. He swerved toward the horse, crying to the girl:

"Hold fast, if he swings sideways suddenly! Don't let him pitch you out of the saddle."

She nodded that she understood. She realized that this daring young cyclist was going to try to check the horse.

Frank was close to the animal's head, and then Barney saw him reach out swiftly and grasp the bit. A moment later Merriwell was torn from the saddle and carried along, dangling at the head of the runaway.

"Hurro!" shouted Barney. "It's just loike th' b'y! It's niver a bit is he afraid av anything at all, at all!"

With a death grip, Frank clung to the bit, knowing he might receive fatal injuries beneath the feet of the horse if his hold was broken. With his other hand he reached up and obtained a hold. He lifted his feet so they did not touch the ground, and, within three seconds, the speed of the runaway slackened.

Then, still clinging, Frank talked to the horse softly, soothingly, reassuringly. His words were snatched out sometimes, sometimes broken, but there was nothing in the sound of his voice to add to the fears of the frightened animal. Instead, there was something to calm and quiet the frantic creature.

"Hold fast!" he again called to the girl.

Then the horse was turned from the road, was swept about in a complete circle, and by the time it again faced in the direction it had been running, it was brought to a stop.

"Jump down quickly," directed Frank, as he saw the pursuing man come thundering nearer and nearer. "This horse will act bad when he comes up."

The girl obeyed. Down from the saddle she slipped to the ground, losing no time in getting away from the prancing horse.

Up came the man, flushed of face and shaking with excitement. He gave a yank at the bit that fairly flung the black gelding upon its haunches, and he hoarsely cried:

"That confounded beast ought to be shot through the head!"

At the sound of the man's voice the horse Frank was holding showed every symptom of fear, making a sudden attempt to break away.

Merriwell spoke soothingly to the creature, holding fast to the bit with a firm, steady hand, and patting its neck.

"It's not the horse," was his thought, "it's the man who ought to be shot!"

"You are not harmed, are you, Iva?" somewhat anxiously asked the man, addressing the girl.

"No," she answered, her voice showing the least trace of agitation; "thanks to the brave action of this young stranger, I am not."

At this the horseman scowled fiercely on Frank.

"Thanks to nothing!" he muttered. "I should have overtaken and stopped the skittish brute. If it hadn't been for these smart youngsters on their confounded bicycles, the horses would not have been frightened."

"I think you are mistaken about that, sir," said Frank, promptly. "When we came in sight of you both horses were frightened, and you were abusing your own mount. I think you are entirely responsible for this runaway, and, if I were this young lady, I should be cautious about riding out with you again."

"Insolent puppy," grated the man. "How dare you talk to me like this! Why, I—I've a mind to —"

"I wouldn't try it, sir!" came sharply from Merriwell, as the fellow lifted his whip. "You touched me with that back in the woods, and I do not care to have you repeat it."

There was something in Frank's manner that caused the man to lower the whip, boy in years though it was who faced him so boldly.

The girl stepped forward quickly.

"Stop, Cousin Stephen!" she cried. "This brave young man stopped Rex, and it may be that he saved my life. You should thank him instead of quarreling with him."

"Thank him for nothing!" growled the man. "It's a wonder he didn't pitch you out of the saddle and kill you when he caught the horse by the bit and yanked its head around."

Barney came riding up, and both horses pricked up their ears and regarded the bicycle with signs of mingled doubt and alarm.

"Get off—get off from that, you fool!" cried the man. "What do you want to do—scare the blooming beasts into running away again? Don't you know anything?"

That was enough to start Barney's temper.

"Av ye'll shtep down a minute, Oi'll be afther showin' yez a few things Oi know," he flung back.

Other horsemen were seen approaching swiftly. There were three in the party, and they headed straight toward the little group in the road.

"Why, it is father and Kenneth!" exclaimed the girl, as she observed them. "And the other is—is Mr. Harden!"

Something like a curse came from beneath the black mustache of the man she had called "cousin." He glared at the approaching horsemen, and Frank heard him mutter:

"What in Satan's name is Harden doing here? I believe he saw the runaway! Hang the fellow! he's always around!"

Up came the horsemen, with a clatter of hoofs. The youngest of the party was not older than Frank, and he was a fine-looking youth, with dark eyes and curling hair. Next to him was a young man of twenty-two or three, with a blond mustache, and the third was a man of fifty, with an iron-gray beard.

The youngest of the strangers leaped from the saddle, and was at the girl's side in a moment, exclaiming:

"Are you all right, sister mine? You are not harmed?"

"Not a bit!" she half laughed; "but there is no telling what might have happened but for the brave young man there who stopped Rex. The horse had the bit in his teeth, and I could do nothing with him."

"We saw it—saw it all," declared the youth. "We reached the top of the hill yonder in time to witness his act, and I must say it was as nervy and skillful as anything I ever beheld. Sir"—speaking to Frank—"I wish to thank you for your gallant rescue of my sister."

He held out his hand, and Frank accepted it. Each felt a thrill as they crossed palms, and their eyes met, and it seemed that a bond of friendship was cemented between them.

"My name is Kenneth St. Ives," explained the strange lad.

"And mine is Frank Merriwell," said our hero.

"Mr. Merriwell, I am happy to know you," declared Kenneth. "Permit me to properly present my sister."

Smiling, Frank lifted his cap and bowed gracefully, but the girl held out her hand, her full lips parting to show her fine white teeth, as she smilingly said:

"Let me shake hands, also, Mr. Merriwell. Pardon the glove."

On his horse, "Cousin Stephen" glared and ground his teeth.

CHAPTER XX—AT SPRINGBROOK FARM

Then Kenneth St. Ives introduced his father and Mr. Harry Harden. To avoid an introduction, Stephen Fenton had turned his horse about, and was staring sullenly in the opposite direction.

"Mr. Merriwell," said Preston St. Ives, dismounting to take Frank's hand, "I owe you much for your daring service to my daughter. I shall always feel that I am indebted to you."

Harden dismounted, and talked with Iva, while Fenton glared at them in a side-long manner, chewing the ends of his black mustache and scowling fiercely.

Within a very few moments Preston St. Ives found out that Frank and Barney were on their

way to New York, and that they were closely followed by a party of friends.

"New York is a long distance away," smiled the father of the girl Frank had rescued. "At most, you would not think of proceeding farther than Philadelphia to-night."

"We intended to stop there," said Frank.

"But there is no reason why you should be in a great hurry," said St. Ives, "and so you must stop at Springbrook Farm to-night."

"Springbrook Farm?"

"That is our country place," Kenneth hastily explained. "It is a roomy, old-fashioned place, and there will be plenty of room for you all. You can't refuse, Mr. Merriwell!"

At first Frank attempted to decline the invitation, but Iva added her invitation to that of her father and brother, and Kenneth promised a jolly time, so that Merry was really inclined to go. A look at Barney's face showed he was eager to have Frank accept the invitation.

"Well, Barney," said Frank, "if we stop at Springbrook Farm to-night, you'll have to watch out for the fellows and let them know about it."

"Thot Oi'll do, Frankie," immediately agreed the Irish lad. "But pwhere is Springbrook Farrum!"

"The farm may be seen from the top of the hill yonder," said Kenneth. "Come along with us, and we will point it out to you."

At this juncture, Stephen Fenton suddenly yanked the head of his horse about, gave the creature a cut with the whip, and went tearing along the road in a cloud of dust, having left the others without a word.

"What is the matter with him?" cried Preston St. Ives, watching the fellow with a look of displeasure. "It's a wonder that horse doesn't run away with him and kill him!"

"Oh, he has been in a cross mood all the afternoon, papa," said Iva. "He is out of sorts with everything and everybody, and it was because he accidently struck Rex with his whip that the dear old fellow ran away with me."

She caressed the muzzle of the horse as she spoke, and the creature seemed pleased with such attention.

"It would serve him right if Firefoot should run away with him!" exclaimed Kenneth, also watching the retreating form of Fenton. "He is hard on a horse, and it's a wonder to me that he hasn't been killed before this. He seems to stick in the saddle some way, although he is anything but an easy rider."

"If that horse's mouth is not already spoiled, he will spoil it in a week," declared Frank.

Mr. St. Ives gave Merry a quick look, as if wondering what he knew about horses.

"I think you are right, young man," he said. "I didn't want to let him have Firefoot, but he seemed to take a fancy to the creature, and not another horse out of the stableful would satisfy him. He'll not get the animal again."

Then there was a mounting of horses, while Frank went back along the road to look for his wheel. He found the bicycle all right as it lay beside the road, Barney having stopped to get it out of the highway.

The Irish lad accompanied Frank, and he was enthusiastic over the prospect of sport at Springbrook Farm.

"It's no tellin' pwhat we'll stroike there, me b'y!" he chuckled. "It's the last chance for a bit av fun before we get inther New York."

"I didn't intend to stop again for anything, for we spent far too much time at Blue Cove. Virginia was not easy to break away from."

"Roight ye are, Frankie. It's a great Shtate Vir-ginny do be. An' the b'ys down there are all roight."

"As fine a set of fellows as I have met anywhere in the whole country," declared Merry, with a touch of enthusiasm. "They are chivalrous, hospitable and sporty. Jack Diamond is a representative Virginian. He is all right."

"Yis, he seems to be since he got back inther this parrut av th' country, but it's a growler Oi thought he wur at firrust."

"He did not seem like himself while we were in the West," confessed Frank. "I was surprised at the change in him, but I knew it was not natural, and I bore with him."

The others came up, Frank mounted his wheel, and they all rode along together, chatting pleasantly. Frank was questioned, and he told of his trip across the continent and back, arousing Kenneth St. Ives' interest.

"Well, you must have had sport!" Kenneth exclaimed. "I should have enjoyed that. Say,

father, we must get up something in the way of sport while they are at Springbrook. Can't we have a hunt?"

"It's too early in the season, my son," smiled Mr. St. Ives.

"I don't know about that," declared Kenneth. "We're liable to have a frost any morning now. It is chilly at times for this season. Perhaps to-morrow morning——"

"The Meadowfair Club visits us to-morrow, you know."

"I had forgotten that. So much the better! If Mr. Merriwell and his friends will stay, we'll find some sort of sport to amuse them."

The top of the hill was reached, and then Springbrook Farm was pointed out, lying on a hillside two miles distant. It was a beautiful place. The great stables seemed modern, but the house was an immense colonial mansion, surrounded by tall trees. The farming land was a broad prospect of cleared land, upon which were great meadows and small groves. Cattle and horses were to be seen, and it had the appearance of a stock or dairy farm.

"There is the place, Mr. Merriwell!" cried Kenneth St. Ives; "and a more beautiful spot is not to be found in all Pennsylvania."

Frank did not wonder at Kenneth's enthusiasm.

Not far from the old mansion was a small lake, with a boathouse on the shore, and some boats lying near.

Frank felt sure that the rest of the party could not be far behind, so Barney would not be compelled to wait long; but it was necessary that some one should meet them, as Springbrook Farm lay off from the main highway, being reached by means of a private drive, and the bicyclists, unless notified, would not know Frank contemplated stopping there.

Barney was willing to wait for them, and so the others rode onward, Frank wheeling along and chatting with them all.

Stephen Fenton was seen riding up the last incline toward the distant mansion, still forcing his horse.

When the place was reached a hostler was at work over Firefoot in one of the stables, and the animal showed the abuse it had received.

Mr. St. Ives dismounted and looked Firefoot over, observing:

"That's fine shape for a horse to be in after a canter along the road. The creature could not look worse if it had been following the hounds across country. I think Stephen will have to take another horse the next time he goes out."

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir," said the hostler, with gruff respect; "but he says as how he were not to blame. You knows, sir, as how this beast is onruly, sir, an' Mr. Fenton says it were skeered by some saucy chaps on bisuckles that paid no attention to its snortin' an' rearin'. You know yerself, sir, as how most of the bisuckle riders are sassy villains, sir."

This was said regardless of the fact that Frank had trundled his wheel into the stable, and the hostler could not help knowing a cyclist was hearing every word he spoke.

Preston St. Ives did not deign to make any reply to the hostler's words, but said:

"See that Firefoot is well rubbed down and cared for, Wade. You need not let Stephen have him again. Remember."

"All right, sir—all right," muttered the hostler, glancing at Frank in a side-long manner. "You knows your business, sir, an' I'm here to take your orders, sir."

The hostler had several assistants, and they were on hand to care for the animals just brought in.

Kenneth showed Frank where to leave his wheel, and then Merry followed the youth into the house.

CHAPTER XXI—TWO ENCOUNTERS

"Vale," grunted Hans, as he stretched himself on the ground in the shade of some shrubbery, "uf dese don't peat der pand, you vos a liar!"

"Wal, I'm swuzzled ef it ain't pretty gol darn slick," agreed Ephraim, thrusting his hands into his pockets and looking around admiringly. "It's queer haow Frank falls inter sech snaps as these. Heer we be invited to stay right heer at this place an' make aourselves to hum jest as long as we want to."

"And I feel as if I could remain here forever," grunted Bruce, from a comfortable hammock, of which he had taken immediate possession on seeing it. "There's something soothing and restful about this place that agrees with my nerves and promises balm and healing for my constitution that has been shattered by Arkansaw chills. It's simply great!"

"It is rather jolly," said the voice of Harry from the cool shadows of a vine-covered arbor.

"But it's tame it'd be afther a bit, me b'ys," declared Barney Mulloy, who was leaning against the trunk of a tree. "It's sbort we're lookin' afther, an' it's ded quoiert here."

"Mr. Kenneth St. Ives promises us some sport if we care to remain," put in Bart Hodge, quietly.

"Phwat sort av sbort do yez think they can scare up here?" asked Barney, with a trace of contempt in his voice. "It's croquet we moight play, but thot's altogether too excoiting."

"Yaw," grunted Hans; "dot growkay likes me, for id don'd peen so much drouble to blay him. Der balls can knock me apoud shust so easy as nefer vas."

"Frank and Jack seem to be enjoying some mild sport," said Harry, as the click of billiard balls and Merriwell's infectious laugh came from the open windows of a large summerhouse in the shrubbery close at hand.

"Those fellows never seem to care about resting," grunted Browning. "They will wear themselves out long before they are old men, unless they let up in their wild career."

All of the boys had reached Springbrook Farm, and Toots was taking care of their wheels. They had been left to themselves for a time, while Preston St. Ives and Kenneth went away to see that proper arrangements were made for the entertainment of their guests.

It had not taken Frank and Jack long to find the billiard table and get into a game, pulling off their jackets to it, as if they were in deadly earnest.

As the boys lolled there in the shade, they saw Harry Harden and Iva St. Ives come down a walk and pass near them, chatting and laughing, seeming well satisfied with each other's society.

At a distance behind them, taking care not to be seen, Stephen Fenton stole along, keeping jealous watch of them.

"Aisy, b'ys," warned Barney, speaking softly. "Take a look at th' spalpane through th' bresh here. It's a dirruty face he has, or me name's not Mulloy."

"That's what he has," nodded Hodge, who took an instant dislike to Fenton. "Who is he? Is that the fellow who was with Miss St. Ives?"

"Th' same, bad cess to him! She was afther callin' him 'cousin'."

"He is following them!" exclaimed Harry, softly. "You don't suppose he will try any crooked work, do you?"

"Oi have a fancy Misther Harden can look out for hissself, me lads," said Barney. "Oi'll back him against Mr. Fenton."

"Yaw," said Hans. "When Parney says dot, id peen all right. He knows my pusiness." Then the Dutch boy relapsed into a position of comfort again, while the jealous spy passed on, watching the couple ahead of him.

Five minutes later the boys were startled by the sound of excited voices and a feminine cry of alarm.

Barney seemed to be waiting for that sound, for he sprang away like a flash, and Bart Hodge was not far behind him. Through the shrubbery crashed the two, and, in a moment, reached a spot where they were able to see what was taking place.

One young man was rising from the ground, while another stood over him, with clinched fists, evidently having knocked him down. To the arm of the latter, begging him not to strike again, clung Iva St. Ives.

"Oi knew it!" chuckled Barney in delight. "It's Fenton thot interfared, an' th' other b'y knocked him down."

In truth, Fenton it was who was getting up from the ground, while it was plain that he had been struck by Harden.

"Oh, I'll even this!" snarled the man who had received the blow.

"Come on!" cried Harden, whose blood was aroused.

"Stop, Cousin Stephen—stop, Mr. Harden!" cried the girl, in distress. "You shall not fight!"

"He insulted me!" flamed Harden.

"I called you a sneaking cur, as you are!" hissed Fenton, getting upon his feet.

"And I knocked you down, as you deserved!" flung back the other young man.

"Hurro!" came softly from the lips of the Irish lad. "Thot's th' shtuff! Sail in, Misther Fenton, an' do up th' spalpane!"

At this moment the other boys, with the exception of Browning, came crashing through the hedge, and were by the two young men.

Fenton looked up, muttered an imprecation and then sibilated at Harden:

"We will settle this some other time!"

"At any time you like," was the prompt retort.

Then Fenton whirled and quickly vanished in the shrubbery.

"It's all over," said Hodge. "Let's get out of this instanter, for it must be a trifle embarrassing to Miss St. Ives."

This little encounter had revealed to the boys that Fenton was jealous of Harden, who, plainly enough, was paying attentions to Iva.

"I believe Fenton is a bad man to have for an enemy," said Rattleton, with unusual seriousness, as the boys once more gathered about the hammock, which Browning had not left for all of anything that was taking place beyond the shrubbery.

"Well," said Hodge, slowly, "it's not likely he is in love with Frank, for Merry was not willing to be imposed upon by him. Frank may have to look out for the fellow."

"What's that you are telling about me?" called the pleasant voice of Frank himself, as he emerged from beneath the vines over the door of the summerhouse followed by Diamond. "I'm all the time looking out for somebody. Here I've been having the battle of my life with Jack, and only beat him one point. I won the game on a fluke, at that."

"But he won it, as he always wins everything he goes into," said the Virginian, with traces of mingled vexation and admiration.

Toots came panting toward the spot all out of breath.

"Lordy! Lordy!" he gasped; "I done 'clare teh goodness; I's 'feared to stay 'roun' dat stable any mo'!"

"What's the matter?" asked Frank. "You haven't cleaned up all those wheels as soon as this?"

"No, sar; but dat hostler in dar am crazy ma-ad, sar."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He done suffin' to dat hawse Fiahfoot, an' de hawse don kick him up again' de side ob de stall. Wondah it didn't kill him, sar! Po-erful wondah it didn't bre'k some ob his bones! Made him so mad he got a fork an' was gwan teh stick it right inteh dat hawse. I couldn't stan' teh see dat, an' I hollered. Den he see I was a-watchin' ob him, an' he was ma-ad enough teh kill meh, sar. I don' dar' stay an' clean dem bisuckles, Marser Frank."

"Those wheels must be cleaned to-night," said Merriwell, decisively. "Come with me, Toots, and I will settle this thing so the hostler will not interfere with you."

He strode away toward the stable, and the colored boy followed at his heels. Hodge and Rattleton followed more leisurely.

As Frank entered suddenly he detected the hostler, wrench in hand, doing something to one of the bicycles. It looked as if the man was making an attempt to ruin the wheel.

And it happened that the wheel belonged to Frank!

Three bounds took Merriwell to the side of the man, whom he grasped by the collar, crying:

"What are you doing there?"

The man straightened up, and turned his bloodshot eyes on the youth. His face was flushed, and the odor of his breath told he had been drinking heavily.

"Leggo!" he snarled; "leggo, or I'll smash ye!"

"What were you doing to that wheel?" demanded Frank.

"None o' yer business!" roared the hostler. Then he dropped the wrench, and made a swinging blow at the boy.

Frank dodged the blow and thrust out his foot in a manner that sent the awkward man sprawling.

"Land ob wartermillions!" squawked Toots, delighted.

As the hostler scrambled up, his fingers encountered the handle of the wrench and closed around it. His face was purple with anger, and there was a furious glare in his bloodshot eyes. The thick lips, purple and swollen, curled back from his tobacco-stained teeth, and with a snarl that might have issued from the throat of some wild beast, he flung the wrench at Frank's head.

"Look out dar!"

Toots uttered the cry, but Merriwell was watching the man closely, and he dodged the missile, which went whizzing past with an unpleasant sound.

A man was just stepping in at the door, and the wrench struck him on the breast, knocking him down as if he had been shot.

Then Rattleton and Hodge came running up, and bent over the fallen man, who lay groaning on the ground.

It was Stephen Fenton!

The hostler seemed suddenly sobered by his act.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "It were Steve I hit! Hope I didn't kill him!"

Frank was keeping watch of Wade, but saw the man was appalled by the result of his angry act, and so ventured to turn about and hasten to Fenton's side.

"Bring some water!" he ordered. "He may be seriously injured!"

Fenton's face was purple, and he was gasping for breath, but, as Merriwell stooped to lift his head, he feebly but savagely motioned him back.

"Hands off!" gasped the man. "Keep away from me!"

Toots came running up with some water.

"Heah, boss!" he cried; "heah's yo' watah!"

"What do I want of water! Anybody—got some—whiskey?"

"Here!" cried Wade, quickly stepping forward, and taking a bottle from a pocket inside his red flannel shirt; "here's a bit."

It was a pint bottle, nearly a third full. Fenton grasped it with a shaking hand as he sat up, lifted it to his lips, and did not take it down till he had swallowed the last drop.

With a growl, he got upon his feet, flinging the empty bottle aside. He gave Frank a fierce look, then addressed Wade:

"What's the matter with you, Bill? Did you want to kill me?"

"I didn't throw it at ye, Steve—I mean Mr. Fenton. I didn't mean ter hit ye."

Fenton rubbed his chest and coughed.

"Lucky you didn't kill me," he said, huskily.

Kenneth St. Ives appeared.

"What's the matter here?" he asked.

The hostler hastened to explain that he was simply moving the bicycles out of the way when Frank Merriwell assaulted him.

"It was my wheel," said Frank, making a hasty examination, "and he has loosened things up generally around it. If I were to attempt to ride it now without putting it in shape, the chances are that I would break my neck the first hill I came to. It is plain enough that this wheel has been doctored to give me a fall."

Kenneth examined it, and saw at a glance that Frank was right. Still, the hostler protested that he had done nothing to the wheel save move it over slightly, so it would not be in the way.

"These wheels are not in your way, Wade," said Kenneth, sternly, "and you may let them alone. You have been drinking, and you know that means you stand a good chance of losing your position."

The hostler looked sullen and subdued, but said nothing. His assistants had appeared, attracted by the sound of the encounter, but they were holding aloof.

Kenneth reprimanded Wade severely, and then informed Frank that supper was ready for the party.

The boys had been given a chance to wash up, and soon they were seated about a long table in the cool dining-room of the old mansion, with Kenneth St. Ives acting as host.

CHAPTER XXII—HANS USES THE HOSE

A jolly party it was. They laughed, and joked, and told stories. They ate, and drank, and were happy. Browning fairly groaned with satisfaction, and then tried to disguise the groan by a

cough. Hans gasped as he looked about at the good things with which the table was loaded, and his eyes bulged.

"Shimminy Ghristmas!" he gurgled. "I feel like all dot stuff could ead me up und not half dry. I ain'd seen nottings like dot for so long dot you don'd rememper id."

"Wal, gol darned ef this air ain't a slappin' good layout!" observed Ephraim. "I was beginnin' to wish I was to hum on the farm where I could git some baked 'tatures, but baked 'tatures won't cut no ice with me arter I git threw with this fodder."

"Hearty appetites are in vogue at Springbrook Farm," laughed Kenneth; "and I want you all to eat till you are perfectly satisfied. Athletes should eat well at times."

"Yaw," nodded Hans, "I pelief me; but dot Vrankie Merrivell peen keepin' der barty in draining so much dot I don'd had nottings to ead vot you like two veeks a time at. Dot kindt uf pusiness makes you got fat like a ghost."

"Speaking about ghosts," said Kenneth, with a sly wink at Merriwell, "there is a story that our summerhouse is haunted. As you fellows are going to stop there to-night, I trust you will not be troubled by spirits."

Hans' jaw dropped.

"Vot?" he squawked. "I don'd toldt you dere peen a ghost dot house in?"

"Sure," nodded Kenneth. "Those who have seen it describe it as a tall, white figure, and those who have felt it say it has clammy, ice-cold hands."

"Woo!" cried Hans, shivering. "I don'd pelief I vant to slept dot summerhouses in!"

"Oh, the ghost only appears occasionally, and it is not at all likely it will visit the summerhouse to-night."

"Vale, you don'd know apout dot. Uf dot ghost heard I vos here, he peen sure to come. Uf you gif me a bistol und dot ghost came, mape he peen aple to shot me."

"You mean that you will be able to shoot the ghost."

"Yaw, I meant dot I peen aple to peen shot der ghost py."

"That wouldn't hurt him any. Spooks don't mind being shot."

"I don'd toldt you dot? Oxcuse me! I vill slept py der open air. I don'd care apout sleepin' in dot summerhouses."

"Oh, say!" exclaimed Ephraim; "gol darn it! can't you see you're bein' guyed. There ain't no ghost there at all."

"How you known dot, Efy?"

"Why, see um larf at ye! Can't you tell by the way they act?"

But the Dutch boy was not satisfied, and it worried him greatly to think he might be visited by a ghost that night. He insisted that he would not sleep in the Summerhouse unless provided with a gun.

After supper however, Kenneth took Hans aside and explained that a bullet from a gun or a charge of grapeshot and canister out of a cannon would not have the least effect on a ghost, but that ghosts could not stand water.

"In the room where you are to sleep to-night," said Kenneth, "there is a hose pipe with a stopcock nozzle. All you need to do is take the nozzle end of the pipe to bed with you. If the spook appears, point the nozzle at him, turn the stopcock, and let him have it. He will be knocked out in the first round."

"Vos dot der lefel on?" asked Hans, suspiciously.

"That is strictly on the level," assured Kenneth,

"Vale, den I done dot. Let dot ghost come, und I vill gif him der greadest path vot I efer got."

In the meantime, Frank Merriwell had taken Ephraim aside, and was saying:

"Gallup, you must scare the wits out of that Dutchman to-night. You are the tallest one in the party, and so you must wrap yourself in a sheet and play ghost on him. St. Ives is going to fix it so we can all hide behind a curtain in one corner of the room and see the fan. Will you do the trick?"

"Course I will," nodded Ephraim. "I'll skeer the Dutchman aout of his senses, b'gosh! Won't it be heaps of fun!"

"Sure it will," nodded Frank. "You must strip yourself of all your clothes, so you will look as gaunt as possible, then wrap the sheet around you and stalk in on Hans. He'll have a fit."

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed the Vermonter. "I know I'll die of larfin' to see him! Haw! haw! haw!"

So it was arranged, and Frank hastened to tell the other boys.

"This is where Ephraim gets taken in," smiled Merry. "Kenneth St. Ives has arranged for him to turn the hose on the spook, if one appears. If Hans is not too frightened to do anything, he'll

give Ephraim the surprise of his life. With nothing but a sheet over him, the water from the hose will go through to Gallup's skin the first squirt, and we'll be where we can see the fun."

With no small difficulty Hans was induced to sleep alone in a room of the summerhouse. At one end of the room was an alcove that served as a wardrobe. In front of this alcove was a curtain.

Kenneth arranged it so that the hose attached to the private waterworks of Springbrook Farm was run in at the window of the Dutch boy's room, and a full head of pressure kept on. He showed Hans how to turn the stopcock and let the water fly at the spook.

Just before the party was ready to retire Frank came upon Gallup and Dunnerwust, who were talking together and laughing in an odd manner.

"Here!" exclaimed Merry, "what are you fellows chuckling over?"

He was afraid the Dutch boy had told Ephraim about the manner in which he expected to vanquish the ghost.

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed Ephraim. "I was jest tellin' him I'd eat the gol darn ghost if he'd ketch it."

"Yaw!" chuckled Hans; "und I toldt him I peen retty to pet zwi tollars der ghost vould ketch it. He don'd know vot I mean py dot, un don'd you toldt him nottings."

Frank hastened to get the two boys apart, and remained with Hans till the latter was ready to go to bed.

"You don'd pelief dere peen any ghost, did you, Vrankie?" asked the Dutch lad, sleepily.

"Of course not," assured Frank. "That's a guy yarn St. Ives gave you. There's nothing in it."

"Vale, I peen so sleeby I can'd kept meinseluf awake no longer. Good-nighd, poys. I was goin' to ped."

Then Hans waddled off to his room.

It was not far from midnight when the boys arose and prepared for the fun. Kenneth St. Ives was on hand. He had provided some ice for Ephraim.

"When we all get behind the curtain that hangs before the alcove," said Kenneth, "you come into the room, Gallup, stalk up to the bed and run this piece of ice around over the Dutchman's face. If that don't frighten him out of his wits, I've made a big mistake."

"It's a yell thot'll wake ivrybody fer a moile he'll be afther givin' whin he fales th' oice an' sees Ephraim in the whoite shate," chuckled Barney.

In pajamas and nightclothes, the boys tiptoed up to the door of Hans' room, opened it softly, and listened.

Hans was snoring.

One by one, the young jokers slipped into the room and concealed themselves behind the curtain. The moon was up, and a broad strip of light came in by the window and made the room light enough for them to watch what was to take place.

With a sharp knife, which went the rounds, each boy cut a slit in the curtain so he could peer out.

When everything was ready for the appearance of the "ghost," they were startled to hear Hans muttering:

"I know how to feex you. Vater—goot coldt vater; Oh, uf I don'd gif you a path, you vos a liar!"

"He is sleeping in his talk—I mean, talking in his sleep," whispered Rattleton. "He is thinking of the way he will fix the ghost. Oh, my! what a joke!"

Then he clasped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing aloud to think what fun they would have.

"Ven you peen all retty you said so," muttered Hans, apparently continuing to talk in his sleep.

"Wal," said the "ghost," speaking aloud, to the astonishment of the boys behind the curtain, "I ruther guess ev'rything's all ready. Let her rip!"

Then the curtain behind which the jokers crouched was suddenly snatched away.

At the same instant, Hans sat up in bed, and turned the stopcock of the hose.

Swish—spat!

A powerful stream of chilling water shot through the air directly toward that alcove. If struck the astounded boys, drenching them in a moment and knocking some of them over. The others piled upon the fallen ones, and all shouted with astonishment and disgust.

Then Hans, grasping the hose, bounced to his feet, standing upright in the middle of the bed, and poured the stream of cold water down upon that struggling, squirming mass in the corner.

"Oh, say, vot a shoke dot vos!" cried the Dutch boy, swaying the nozzle of the hose to evenly distribute the water over all the boys. "Ain'd you hafin' fun mit us! I don'd belief you nefer seen der peat uf dese shoke before all your life in! You don'd vorget der fun vat you had mit us to-nighd a long dime in."

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared Ephraim. "Soak it to um, Hans! Ain't they havin' a regular picnic with us! Ho! ho! ho! This is more fun than hoein' 'taters!"

"Stop it!" cried Rattleton, gasping for breath. "You blundering Dutchman turn that hose—Woogh-uh-oogh-uh—oogh!"

The stream from the hose had struck Harry full and fair in the mouth, and he was nearly drowned.

"Oi'll murther thot Dutch chaze!" shouted Mulloy. "Oi won't lave a whole bone in his body! Oi'll— Wa-ow! Murther! Boo! Thot's cold! It's dead Oi am intoirely!"

"Hello, Parney!" called Hans, mockingly; "how you don'd like dot ghost pusiness, hey? Don'd id peen vunny!"

"Thunder and guns!" roared Browning. "This will give me another Arkansaw chill! Somebody will get hurt when I find out who put up this job on me!"

Hodge and Diamond made a desperate attempt to get away, but Hans saw them, and gave them a straight shot that knocked them down again in the midst of the struggling, squirming, kicking and shouting lads.

"Great Cæsar!" cried Kenneth St. Ives, as he untangled himself from the drenched and kicking mass. "The joke is on us!"

"It looks that way from the road," admitted Frank, who was laughing heartily as he crowded his body back into a corner to get away from the water. "That confounded Yankee was too sharp to be taken in, and he put up this job with Hans. Goodness! hear him laugh!"

Ephraim was haw-hawing in a manner that told how delighted he was, and the roly-poly Dutch boy was dancing up and down on the bed, as he continued to drench the shivering, scrambling, shouting lads in the alcove.

"Oh, don'd you think dese pen der most fun I efer had!" gurgled Hans. "Dese peen der vay to got a shoke a ghost on. Yaw! Vot do I think uf dese ghost pusiness now, hey?"

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared Ephraim, holding onto his sides, and doubling up with laughter. "Gol darned ef this wouldn't make a kaow larf! Give it to um, Hans!"

"Oh, yaw, I peen goin' to cool them down. After 'dese don'd you pelief me ven dey toldt you I vos scared mit a ghost. Hello, Raddleton! Oxcuse me uf you got der vay in. I didn'd seen you pime-py. You oxbect I vos havin' a goot time, hey?"

Harry had been untangling himself from the others, and now he tried to get up, but the stream of water struck him behind the ear, and keeled him over once more, plumping his head with great force fairly into Browning's stomach.

"Thunder and lightning!" roared the big fellow. "I'd rather be in a football rush! I'll give ten dollars to anybody who will pull me out of this and get me out of the room. My eyes are full of water, and I can't see."

"You don'd haf to took a shower path der morning in, Prowning," laughed Hans.

Then St. Ives and Merriwell got hold of each other, and made a break for the door, doing it so suddenly that they escaped before the Dutch boy could turn the hose on them. They remained outside, laughing and calling to the others, who came stumbling blindly out, one by one, dripping wet and hopping mad.

"The joke is on us, boys," laughed Frank, "and we may as well make the best of it. It's no use to kick."

CHAPTER XXIII—CHOICE OF PONIES

Fearing the boys would attempt to retaliate, Hans and Ephraim closed and barricaded the door, and the Dutch boy shouted that he would "soak" anybody who tried to force an entrance.

Thoroughly disgusted with the turn affairs had taken, Merriwell and his friends sought towels and dry clothing, and decided to let Hans and Ephraim alone for the rest of the night.

In the morning every one about Springbrook Farm knew of the "ghost joke," and the boys were "jollied" unmercifully, Kenneth St. Ives being forced to endure it with the others.

The general uproar in the summerhouse had been heard by those in the mansion, and it had set the hounds to barking in the stable, but the shouts of laughter coming from the house told that it was some sort of frolic, so no one sought to investigate.

Ephraim and Hans came forth in the morning, arm in arm, although they made a most grotesque couple, the Dutch boy being short, round and fat, while the Yankee lad was tall, lank and angular.

The faces of this odd pair were grave and solemn, and their air of innocence was refreshing to behold.

"Good-mornin', fellers," nodded Ephraim. "I hope yeou all slept fust rate late night?"

"How you peen dese mornin', boys?" inquired Hans, with apparent concern. "I hope you didn't disturb me der night in. I peen aple to slept shust like a top all der night ofer mitout vakin' ub ad all."

"I am glad you slept so well," smiled Frank. "There was some noise about the house in the night, and I thought it might have aroused you."

"I nefer heard something ad all," declared Hans. "I pelief me I hat a tream someding apout a ghost, but dot peen all."

"Oh, say," grunted Browning, clinching his huge fist and shaking it close down by his side. "You wait! There are other days coming!"

"Vell, I hope so," said the Dutch boy, blankly. "I don't vant dese von to peen der last von."

After breakfast a jolly party came over from the Meadowfair clubhouse, five miles away. There were nearly a dozen young ladies, and half as many gentlemen. It was plain they were in the habit of visiting Springbrook Farm often, for they were warmly welcomed, and made themselves quite at home.

"This is jolly!" cried Kenneth St. Ives, as he introduced Frank to Paul Stone, the leader of the party. "I knew something in the way of sport would turn up to-day. Do you play polo, Mr. Merriwell?"

"Yes," nodded Frank, with unusual eagerness; "I have played the game, but it has been some time since I have touched a mallet."

"Mr. Stone is a member of the American Polo Association, as also is Steve Fenton, my cousin. Harden and I have applied, and we expect to get in. Father has caused a beautiful green to be laid over yonder. He has worked upon it till it is as solid as the finest green in the country, and we are looking to enjoy several meets here before we return to the city. We have been having a few games, and I think it is royal sport."

"It is the greatest sport in the world!" exclaimed Paul Stone, enthusiastically.

Frank smiled.

"It can't be that you have played much football or baseball, Mr. Stone," he said.

"Baseball hasn't the dash and go of polo," declared Stone; "and too many accidents happen at football. It is a dangerous game."

"There is some danger in polo," said Merry.

"Just enough to make it spicy," declared Stone. "There is not as much danger of getting broken noses and broken necks as in football."

Frank's blood was beginning to bound in his veins, for the thought of a hot, exciting polo game, with its sharp races and its fierce charges, was quite enough to arouse the sporting instinct within him. He was like a war horse that sniffs the smoke of battle from afar.

"Well," he cried, "if there is to be a polo match, I'd like to get into it."

"You can," laughed Kenneth. "You shall have Liner, the finest pony in our bunch. That animal knows as much as a human being. Why, he can almost play polo alone!"

A short distance away Stephen Fenton was talking with another of the Meadowfair party. He was trying to be sociable in his sullen way, but his ears were open to all that was passing near at hand, and he plainly heard the conversation concerning polo.

Kimball, the man Fenton was talking with, also heard something of it, and he exclaimed:

"Polo is the very thing! I had thought of a coaching party, but it is too late for that this morning. You'll play polo, won't you, Fenton?"

"Yes," nodded Fenton, "I'll play with your side."

"I think that will be agreeable to Stone," said Kimball; "but I don't believe Springbrook will

want to give you up."

"Well, I'll not play with those stiffs," muttered the sullen-faced fellow. "I want a good opportunity to play against them."

In a short time it was arranged. For Springbrook, St. Ives, Harden, Merriwell and Diamond were the players; for Meadowfair, Stone, Kimball, Fenton and a jolly young man by the name of Lock were to handle the mallets.

"Come, Mr. Diamond and Mr. Merriwell," called Kenneth; "I will provide you with suits."

They followed him into the summerhouse, where such paraphernalia was kept, and in a short time all three were rigged out in white breeches, striped blouses and high boots.

"You will find Liner a dandy polo pony, Mr. Merriwell," declared Kenneth. "Father paid nine hundred dollars for him."

"It's jolly good of you to let me have him, St. Ives," said Frank. "Why don't you ride him yourself? I don't feel like taking him away from you."

"Oh, that's all right," laughed Kenneth. "You are my guest. I'll ride Coffin Head."

"Coffin Head! What a name for a horse!"

"He's an old-timer—a gone-by; but he knows the game, and that is something in his favor. Of course, I do not expect to cut much ice with him, but I want Diamond to have a good mount. Coffin Head has seen his day, but he has been a dandy."

Frank mentally decided that St. Ives was a fine fellow, and all right in every way.

They went out to the stable, hearing the ringing sound of a coach horn, and seeing a coaching party approaching along the road.

"There'll be a jolly crowd here!" cried Kenneth. "There's a party from Cloverdale. We'll have no end of sport, fellows!"

There was a flush in Diamond's cheeks, and it was plain he was eager for the fray, although he said very little.

Just as they were on the point of entering the stable, Stephen Fenton rode out on a handsome pony with four white feet and a general smart look.

St. Ives halted in astonishment.

"Hello, there!" he cried. "What are you doing with that horse, Steve?"

"I'm going to ride him in the match," answered Fenton, grimly.

"I guess not!" exclaimed Kenneth. "I have promised Liner to Mr. Merriwell."

"Can't help that," retorted Fenton, with a sneer. "I rode him in the last match."

"And so you should be willing to let somebody else have him to-day. Don't be piggish, Steve."

The man scowled.

"I didn't suppose anybody would object to letting me have him to-day, and that is why I took him. I see you are afraid of being beaten. What pony did you propose to let me have?"

"Any one but that one. I did think of riding Coffin Head, but you may have him."

"Coffin Head! You must think I'm a fool! Why, that old cob is played out, and I'd be a perfect guy on him. You can't work that on me, Ken."

St. Ives was angry. He showed it in his face and voice.

"I don't care what you ride! You can have anything but Liner."

"And I'll have Liner!" flung back Fenton, defiantly. "I've got him, and I'm going to keep him. What can you do about it? We'll show you chaps up in great shape."

Then he started the pony up, and rode away toward the green.

St. Ives seemed about to follow him.

"I'll make him give that pony up!" he grated. "He has no right to take Liner! If he doesn't want to play, let him get out."

"I wouldn't have any trouble with him about it," said Frank. "If you do, he'll make a big fuss about our being scared. Let's look at the other ponies first, anyway."

After a few moments of hesitation, St. Ives led the way into the stable, and the boys looked the other ponies over.

One of them was a homely old crock, with knees and hocks bunched up out of all semblance to those built on strictly anatomical principles. This pony attracted Merriwell's attention.

"That is Coffin Head," said St. Ives.

Instantly an inspiration seized Frank.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'll ride Coffin Head."

Kenneth gasped.

"You can't mean it!" he exclaimed.

"I do," nodded Merry. "Somehow I've taken a fancy to the old fellow. You say he has been a

good one?"

"One of the best."

"Then he hasn't forgotten the tricks of the business. I'm going to try him."

"The boys will have sport with you, Merry," said Diamond.

"Let 'em," smiled Frank. "I may get as much sport out of it as they do. May I have Coffin Head, St. Ives!"

"Of course you may if you want him," said Kenneth, "but I'm sorry that——"

"Never mind it!" came gayly from Merriwell. "Saddle up old Coffin Head for me, boy," he cried, to one of the assistant hostlers. "I'll manage to take some part in the game. Hurrah for Coffin Head, the old-timer! He may prove a surprise party for somebody."

CHAPTER XXIV—THE FIRST GO

Tang! tang!

It was the timekeeper's gong, and the game of polo was begun with a charge.

Each team had lined up within twenty feet of their respective goals, and, as the ball was dropped in center field, the little ponies tore forward like blooded racers.

It was a spectacle to send the blood leaping in an instant.

For all that the game had been hastily gotten up, the boundary line was crowded with the *élite* of the countryside. It seemed as if people had risen from the ground.

Merriwell's friends were all together, and, with the possible exception of Browning, they were keenly interested. Bruce was stretched out in a lazy position on the ground, seemingly as apathetic as usual.

Bart Hodge's dark eyes were gleaming and his cheeks glowing.

"Oh, if I could have taken part in that!" he muttered. "I don't believe Diamond can play the game a bit better than I can."

Bart was disappointed, and a feeling of jealousy toward Diamond had been aroused in his heart. It began to seem that Frank cared too much for Jack.

"It's queer, too," thought Hodge. "Diamond was growling all the time while we were in the West, and he made the rest of the crowd tired. Merry is the only one who has had any patience with him; but that's just like Frank. He's mighty queer, and I don't understand him now, for all that I have known him so long."

Kenneth St. Ives was captain of the Springbrook side, while Paul Stone commanded the other side.

"Soy," cried Mulloy, "will yez take a look at thot ould bob Frankie is shtraddle av! Did yez ivver see th' loikes av thot?"

"Gol darned ef that don't look jest like dad's old plaow hoss!" laughed Ephraim Gallup. "Ther sight of that critter makes me wish I was to hum on the farm. I'm humsick, b'gosh!"

Bruce Browning grunted and looked disgusted.

"Merry must be a fool to take such a pony!" he growled. "They're making a guy of him."

"G'way dar, boy!" muttered Toots, shaking his head. "Don't yeh beliebe yehself! Dey don' mek no guy ob dat boy ver' much."

"Say, Browning," cried Rattleton, excitedly, "you ought to know better than to think anybody can fake a mool—I mean make a fool of Frank."

"Yaw!" nodded Hans; "I oughter known petter dan dot, hand't you? Vot do I take you for, Prowning! Vere you peen all my life, ain'd id? You don'd fool Vrankie Merrivell haluf so much as I think you can, you pet my axidental bolicy."

In the opening charge Frank did not get in quite as quick as the others. Mounted on Liner, Steve Fenton shot down on the ball, and with a skillful crack, sent it skimming toward the Springbrook goal, causing a shout to go up from the spectators.

"He'll make a goal for Meadowfair, in less than two——Great Scott! how'd the boy do that?"

Frank, somewhat behind the others, had caught the ball as it skimmed like a bullet over the

ground, even though it seemed that he must have swung his mallet almost at the same instant as Fenton. The first crack was answered by a second, and the basswood ball suddenly went skimming back toward the Meadowfair side, with Diamond racing after it to send it through.

But Liner showed his mettle. It did not seem that Fenton paid the least attention to the pony, but the creature twisted about in a moment, and carried its rider along at Diamond's side.

It was a brief but most exciting race, and the spectators cheered and waved their handkerchiefs.

"Go it, Diamond, old boy!" cried Harry Rattleton.

"Go id, Shack, oldt poy!" shouted Hans, hopping about like a toad. "You vill pet on my head!"

"Git doawn an' crawl, gol darn ye!" whooped Ephraim. "Naow hit her a knockaout blow, and — Great gosh!"

In a most skillful manner Fenton's pony had forced Diamond's mount over, and the dark-faced man swung across in time to get a crack at the ball. The skill with which he struck it told that he was the most dangerous player on the Meadowfair side.

"Look out there, Harden!" cried St. Ives.

Harry stopped the ball, but it caromed from his mallet and came near going out of bounds. In a twinkling there was another hot rush and a threatened crash. Immediately all the players were clumped about the ball.

"Where are you, number one?" cried Paul Stone. "Strike, Kimball—strike, man! What's the matter with you?"

For some moments the ball "hung," and the players "dribbled"; but they were cool, and Lock made a neat and quick turn, passing the ball to Fenton, who took it up and hit it to boundary.

Over the board went the ponies, and the sticks crooked as they tried to give the ball a fillip outside. But Diamond, "half-back" for Springbrook, saw his opportunity, made a rush and a hard backhander on the near side, and out shot the little white sphere on its way to glory.

Merriwell was on it, as if he had been waiting for that very play. His stick, which he had selected with great care, seemed to swing free for a moment from the strap about his wrist, then the malacca did its work.

"Hooray!" cried Ephraim Gallup. "It's a goal sure! Hooray!"

"Yaw!" screamed Hans, "id peen a dandy!"

"Outside! outside!"

"Who says outside?" snapped Rattleton. "The referee? I know better! It's a goal sure!"

"Outside, I tell you!" came the voice of the referee, and the game stopped.

It was a disappointment for Frank's friends, for they had felt certain he would make a goal, but the fairness of the referee was not to be questioned.

The captain of the Meadowfairs had the strike-off, and the Springbrooks fell back from the line.

But Stone was cunning, and he gave the ball a clever sweep to right field, and away from his goal. His "forward" knew the trick, and Liner was keyed up for a race to boundary.

But Frank had seen that trick before, and he resolved to find out what sort of stuff Coffin Head was made of, now that there was a good opportunity. The pony had handled himself with such ease and skill, for all of his awkward and homely appearance, that Merry was more than delighted, and now came the supreme test.

Liner flew out after the ball, upon which Fenton's eyes were steadily fastened. But Coffin Head was in the race, and the old crock didn't do a thing but spread himself. The way he tore along over the ground amazed everybody who saw it. It seemed that the old horse had renewed his youth and was out for blood. He made the run of his life to get his rider on that ball. Like a meteor he flew across the green, and Liner was fairly beaten, causing Frank Merriwell's friends and admirers to rise up and shout with astonishment and delight.

The check was too sudden, however, and the old pony slid on his haunches. Then up rushed a mass of men and ponies, making for a moment a wild *mélée*.

Kimball got a crack at the ball, but it glanced off the ribs of Harden's pony, causing the animal to wince and swerve.

That let in Merriwell, who had brought Coffin Head about, and he made a skillful stroke. As he did so, he felt something whistle past his head, and realized that he had narrowly escaped a blow that must have spoiled the effectiveness of his work.

Frank did not take his eyes off the ball; but, nevertheless, he saw it was Fenton who had attempted the foul stroke, being unable to reach the ball himself.

Diamond went down on the sphere with a rush, and carried it along toward the enemy's

posts. With a clean lead at the proper moment, the Virginian, who had already showed himself a perfect horseman and perfect polo player, sent the white ball sailing through the timber, and Springbrook had made the first goal.

CHAPTER XXV—THE END OF THE GAME

Diamond was heartily congratulated, and his dark face flushed with pleasure over his success.

"But I didn't do it alone," he declared. "Merriwell deserves as much or more credit, for he sent it out of the bunch, and gave me my chance at it."

"You fellows must have played together a great deal," said Harden. "You work together perfectly."

Frank laughed.

"We never played together in a game before," he said. "I didn't know Diamond played polo till a short time ago."

"It's remarkable!" smiled St. Ives, who was delighted over the work of his team. "And old Coffin Head is right in the game."

"You bet!" cried Merry. "He is an old dandy! I wouldn't swap him for Liner now!"

"But he has not done such work this season. He is in his old-time trim, and I believe two-thirds of it comes from his rider."

Diamond touched Frank's arm, and drew him aside.

"Say, Frank," he whispered, "do you know you came near getting a crack over the head?"

"Sure," nodded our hero.

"Well, take my advice and look out for that Fenton. I saw him when he struck at you, and I know he would have struck just as quick if his mallet had been made of iron."

"I'll watch out for him, Jack."

"Do it, and I'll keep my eyes open myself."

Lock had strained his side twisting in the saddle for a stroke, and a fellow by the name of Hawley was substituted. Kimball and Stone both rushed to the stable to change ponies, and Hawley called for another pony in the place of the one Lock had ridden. Of the Meadowfairs, Fenton was the only one who retained his mount.

Harden was the only Springbrook man who made a change. His pony had not acted satisfactorily, although it was considered a fairly good animal. But it is an old saying that "the more a man knows about polo ponies the less he knows about them," and the paradox is an indisputable truth.

Nearly all polo ponies are Western bred, and have broncho blood in them. A broncho is unreliable at best. For a thousand times he may serve you perfectly, and then, when you least expect such a thing, for no apparent reason, he may prove utterly unreliable.

Ponies for expert players must have lots of speed and good blood in them, but it is necessary that they should be tough and hard to injure.

As for the game of polo, there is no other sport in which the nervous force, cool decision and quick judgment of man are coupled to such an extent with the natural instincts of the horse.

Polo, properly played by man, with ponies thoroughly trained and keyed up to the highest tension, is a game which possesses just danger enough to make it attractive to men of nerve. It requires a cool head, quick eye, infinite perseverance and marvelous horsemanship.

The chief qualifications of an expert polo player are the ability to measure distance while riding at top speed, the knowledge when and where to race, and the judgment and skill to play a waiting game at times. The best player should be a past master of all the strategies and tactics of a cavalry horseman.

Besides this, it requires courage. A player must have the kind of nerve that would face unflinchingly a hand-to-hand struggle for life on the battlefield.

The friends of Frank and Jack hastened to congratulate them, with the exception of Browning and Hodge. The former was too lazy to exert himself so much, and the latter was in the "dumps,"

as the sulky look on his face plainly indicated.

"Gol darned if I ever saw sich a crummy lookin' hoss as that what could git araound so humpin' lively!" declared Ephraim Gallup.

"Yaw, dut bony peen lively as a pedpugs," nodded Hans. "Vot would you take for him uf you vant to bought him, Vrankie?"

"Merry, me b'y," put in the Irish lad, "it's a lulu ye are, an' Diamond is a p'ache; but it's thot spalpane Finton ye want to be lookin' afther roight sharrup, fer Oi saw him swat at yez."

"Don't worry, Barney," said Frank. "I'll keep watch of him."

Iva St. Ives chatted with Harry Harden, while from a distance, Stephen Fenton chewed his dark mustache and watched them sullenly, muttering to himself.

There was a sudden hurrying out from the stable.

"Time!"

Bang!—sounded the gong, and once more the game was on.

"Now play, boys!" cried Paul Stone. "We won't waste any time. Don't fool with it! Hit it hard!"

Fenton was on the ball, and he struck it as if an engine was back of him. The sphere flew over the grass, and Liner took his rider in hot pursuit.

Harden tried to get in at the ball, but was cleverly hustled by Kimball. It seemed plain sailing. The Meadowfairs were going at it with a rush, and it looked like a goal at once.

Another hundred feet, and then, with a clever stroke, Fenton passed the ball to the mallet of Hawley. But Hawley's stick was too short by three inches, and he missed on the swing.

Harden was making a hard push for the ball, and Fenton, who was following it up, tried to crowd him. They came along side by side, with their knees jammed together as the ponies raced.

Then—how was it done? Liner seemed to stop suddenly, as if turned to stone, and Harden was torn from the saddle of his pony, which shot on without him. He fell heavily to the ground in the very track of the whole mass of onrushing ponies.

A scream of fear broke from Iva St. Ives, who was watching it all, for it seemed that Harden was doomed to be severely injured beneath the hoofs of the ponies—perhaps killed.

Frank was slightly in advance of the others, and, quick as thought, he leaned far over to one side, like a cowboy, and his hand fastened on the belt of the fallen player.

Harden was too heavy for Merriwell to swing back into the saddle, but he carried the young man along till the other players could swerve aside, and he did not drop him till he could stop Coffin Head.

In a moment Harden was on his feet, and, as he sprang up, the spectators broke into loud cheers.

"Thank you, Merriwell!" exclaimed the man Frank had thus cleverly saved by a cowboy trick. "I won't forget that."

Then he darted away after his pony, apparently uninjured.

"I know it was a foul trick that flung him from the saddle," thought Frank. "I wonder why the referee doesn't declare a foul? Is there some kind of a job in this?"

Then a shout came from his lips as he awoke to the fact that the game was still on, and Diamond had cleverly prevented Fenton from making a goal.

Coffin Head was away after the ball almost before the shout came from Frank's lips. As if nothing of an unusual nature had happened, the game continued.

Hawley tried to cut Merriwell off from the ball, but old Coffin Head would not have it, and Frank got in a crack that made the spectators shout with delight. Then Kimball shot across ahead of Frank, and Kenneth St. Ives found a chance to carry the ball down the field, but broke his stick trying to strike a goal, and was forced to ride out of bounds for another mallet.

Luckily for Springbrook, Diamond was playing the game of his life. He came down and drove the ball from under the nose of Kimball's pony, making another goal just as the first half closed.

Then came a rest of ten minutes, during which the ponies were rubbed down and the perspiring but enthusiastic players secured a respite.

Frank was quickly surrounded by an admiring throng. Pretty girls crowded about him, and sought an introduction, and men came up and felt of his arms, expressing their amazement that he should have been able to rescue Harden from beneath the feet of the charging ponies.

This was all very embarrassing for him, and he sought to get away. As soon as possible, he joined his friends, but they were ready with congratulations.

"It must have been tough, don't you know," yawned Browning; "but it was clever, Merriwell—confounded clever."

"It was a dandy trick!" cried Harry Rattleton, bubbling with enthusiasm and admiration.

"What'll the fellows at Old Yale say when they hear of your cowboy trick, Merry?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't tell them about it!" exclaimed Frank. "What is there to make such a fuss over?"

"Gol darned if I don't think that feller was throwed off his hoss by Fenton!" put in Ephraim. "I couldn't see just haow the trick was done, but I bet four dozen aigs it was done somehow."

On this point Frank was silent.

Soon the gong sounded again, and the play was on once more. The Meadowfair men seemed desperate, and they fought like tigers. Three times within as many minutes the ball was forced down so near the Springbrook goal posts that a clever strike would have made a goal, and three times, mounted on old Coffin Head, Frank Merriwell sent it back into the center of the field.

On the third trip, Kenneth St. Ives got in a clever stroke and passed it to Diamond, who had been playing a waiting game. Jack saw his chance, and he rushed it for the Meadowfair posts.

Fenton charged on Jack like a whirlwind, but made a miss stroke, and the Virginian rushed the white sphere down through the posts, making another goal for Springbrook.

Two minutes' rest followed, and then the ball was put in again.

The face of Stephen Fenton was dark with anger, and he played as if possessed by a fiend. But all his work was vain, for Springbrook made three goals in the last half, and the game closed with a complete whitewash for Meadowfair.

CHAPTER XXVI—BEFORE THE HUNT

"I believe there will be a frost to-morrow morning," declared Kenneth St. Ives, as the boys were gathered in the summerhouse that evening. "It has turned very cold within an hour, and there is not a breath of wind. If there is a frost look out for sport."

"What sort of sport?" eagerly asked Harry Rattleton. "Something we can all take part in?"

"Sure."

"Name it."

"Fox hunt."

"Jupiter! That will be great."

"We've got as fine a pack of hounds as can be found in this part of the country, although it is not a large pack," said Kenneth; "and we have the foxes. Every one of you fellows who can ride may take part in the hunt."

"I'm pretty sure I shall have another chill to-morrow." mumbled Browning. "I wouldn't dare start out on a hunt."

"Rats!" cried Rattleton. "The trouble with you is——"

"Let Browning stay behind and take things easy," said Hodge, quickly. "The rest of us can go. For real sport, give me a fox hunt."

"Yaw!" nodded Hans; "dot peen der sbort vor you, hoch. I peen britty coot at dot."

"Hev yeou got guns for ther hull on us?" asked Ephraim.

"Guns?" cried Kenneth, astonished.

"Yeh."

"What do you want of guns?"

"Why, to shoot the gol darn fox with, of course!"

"But what do you want to shoot him for?"

"Hey!" gasped the astonished Vermonter. "Haow be yeou goin' to hunt him if yeou don't shoot him?"

"Why, we hunt foxes on horses, and let the dogs run them down."

"An' don't do nary bit of shootin'?"

"No."

"Wal, that's what I call a mighty slim sort of a hunt," declared Gallup, in disgust. "Yeou oughter see Win Page hunt foxes daown hum. Give that feller one dorg an' a good gun, and he'll go out 'most any mornin' an' gather in two or three of the critters afore breakfast. He keeps the

door of his barn all nailed over with fox skins, an' skunk skins, an' muskrats, an' he kin set araound the grocery store an' tell huntin' stories fer a week at a time 'thout stoppin' to eat ur ketch his breath."

"It is evident that Mr. Page hunts foxes in a different way and for a different purpose than we do," smiled Kenneth.

Then Frank briefly explained to Ephraim the style of hunting foxes on horseback for sport, but Gallup did not seem to think there could be much sport in it that way.

"I'm sorry father had to fire Wade, the head hostler, to-night," said St. Ives.

"Had to fire him?" questioned Frank. "What for?"

"He was drunk and insolent. But he knows more about taking charge of a stable than any man I ever saw, and he kept our hunters in fine condition. He has been drinking too much lately, however, and he was getting intolerable. By the way, Merriwell, you had better look out for him."

"Why—how is that?"

"He seemed to think you were the cause of his dismissal, and he said he would 'make it all right.' He's got a bad temper when he's boozing."

"Why, I didn't say anything to your father about Wade."

"I know it, but I told father about your trouble with him, and it is possible that's why father was so ready to get rid of the fellow. Father insists that his guests shall be treated properly by everybody connected with the place."

"If Mr. Wade knows what's good for him, he'll let Merry alone," declared Rattleton.

"He may not be seen around here again," said Kenneth. "Father told him to get away and stay away."

The boys' discussed the prospect of a hunt and grew very enthusiastic over it, with the exception of Browning. Hodge was aroused, for he fancied he saw his opportunity of making evident the fact that he was quite as good a horseman as Diamond, whom he could not help envying for the glory he had won at polo.

Bart had not been able to change his nature, and so he frequently was jealous of others, although he tried to suppress and conceal the fact, and, when he considered it in cold blood, he was always disgusted with himself.

Kenneth said the visitors at the house, those who had arrived that day and remained there, had been talking of a hunt, but it was not thought probable there would be an opportunity thus early in the season. The cold turn would be sure to arouse their expectations, however, and he would see that they were prepared for what might happen in the morning.

"I'll guarantee a mount for every one who cares to go," he said; "so don't any one worry about getting left."

The prospect of such sport seemed to revive Hodge, and he challenged Rattleton to a game of billiards, which challenge was promptly accepted.

St. Ives rang the bell for a colored boy, who lighted up the billiard-room, and soon Bart and Harry were at it, while the others lay around and looked on.

St. Ives motioned to Frank and Jack.

"You fellows come with me," he said. "I've something to show you."

They followed, and he took them out to the huge dog kennel, which was a house by itself, located under the trees by the stables. Their approach aroused the dogs, but the sound of St. Ives' voice quieted them, and the boys entered. Kenneth lighted two lamps, while the dogs frolicked around him.

"Down, Bruiser—down!" he ordered. "Off Pirate! Away, Madge—get out!"

The dogs obeyed him reluctantly,

"There, fellows," he cried, proudly, "what do you think of them? I say they are all right, and they are dying for a run. I reckon they will get it in the morning."

Frank and Jack looked the dogs over critically. Diamond's eyes gleamed and he called Pirate to his feet.

"Here is the old dandy for any sum!" cried the Virginian. "That dog will be in at the death if he can keep a foot under him."

Kenneth nodded.

"Pirate is a great hunter," he said; "but he doesn't run away from Madge very often."

For half an hour they looked the dogs over, and then left the kennel.

"I'll have to go into the house, and see what the others think about it," said St. Ives. "Won't you come in, fellows?"

"No," said Diamond; "I am too tired."

"I'm tired myself," confessed Frank. "I think we'll roll into our beds very soon."

The boys strolled down past the summerhouse, while Kenneth went into the mansion. Through a window Frank and Jack could see the billiard players at work, and they heard Rattleton shout with laughter at some fluke Hodge made.

"It strikes me this is the last round of sport before we get back to the grind," said Jack.

"Yes," said Frank, somewhat sadly; "we've had our summer's whirl, and it's over; but it was fun while it lasted."

Arm in arm, they walked down through the garden. They did not take the gravel path, but kept on the grass. Their feet made no noise, and they were silent, as both were thinking of their varied adventures since starting westward on the bicycle tour.

All at once they heard voices, and stopped suddenly.

"Catch your chance, Bill. A hundred for the boy and two hundred for the man. You do not like either of them, so——"

"Like 'em! Cuss 'em, I hate 'em! I'll do it if I git a good chance."

"That is settled, then. You'd better get away from here, for you don't want to be seen. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Frank leaped toward the bushes beyond which the voices sounded. They were thick, and he broke through with difficulty. When he reached the other side, he could hear the sound of running feet in dull retreat, but both men were gone.

Frank started in pursuit, but the ones who were running away seemed to know the turns of the garden walks better than he did, for both got away.

Diamond found Merriwell near the summerhouse chewing his lip and standing in an attitude that expressed mingled rage and disgust.

"Didn't catch either of them, did you?" asked Jack.

"No," was the answer; "but I think I know them both. They were the discharged hostler and Steve Fenton, or I'm daffy."

CHAPTER XXVII—THE HUNT

"Hark away!"

The sound of baying hounds and the hunter's horn cut the crisp morning air.

"The dogs have struck a track!" gayly cried Frank, who was mounted on Firefoot, having chosen that horse, although warned that he was the most dangerous animal in the Springbrook stables. "Listen to that! Is it not music to stir the blood?"

The baying of the hounds grew more and more distinct, and surely it was sweet music to the ear of the enthusiastic hunter. Rising, falling, now loud and clear, now faint and low, the mellow notes came across the meadows.

"They're coming this way!" cried Diamond, excitedly, as his mount pricked up its ears and pawed the ground, plainly longing to be off after the baying dogs. "Come, Frank!"

"Shimminy Ghristmas!" gurgled Hans Dunnerwust, who was astride an old steed. "You don'd pelief dese hoss vos bound to run away mit myseluf, do I?"

"I don't think ye need ter worry abaout that," grinned Ephraim Gallup.

"I make you feel petter ven you said dot," declared the Dutch boy. "I peen avraidt I might run away mit dese hosses und throw heem off."

"It's a warm scent, fellows!" palpitated Bart Hodge, who was a-quiver with excitement. "Oh, this morning will be filled with glory!"

"I thought you fellows would enjoy it," said Kenneth St. Ives, who was with Frank and his friends, the hunters having split into two parties. "I want you to enjoy all the time you spend at Springbrook."

"There's the horn again!" fluttered Diamond; "and there they come! It's a signal to us. Look! look! look!"

Out from a bit of scattering timber far across the meadows broke the hounds, the foremost running nose to the ground, the others following close, but often baying with uplifted muzzles. As the dogs had just struck the track, the hunters were close after them, and the bright colors of their clothing showed through the trees almost before the dogs appeared, rising and falling with the movements of their galloping horses.

"Harden is in the lead!" cried Kenneth St. Ives, "and Fenton is a close second. Look—look, fellows! The third one is my sister! Doesn't she ride beautifully! Oh, she is as good as the best of them! I'll wager a sawbuck she leads both Fenton and Harden before the chase is over, and she is sure to be in at the death."

"That's a habit I have myself," smiled Frank Merriwell; "and I shall make an attempt to be in at the death this morning."

"Firefoot will balk on you before you are through with him," declared Kenneth. "He's got speed and blood, but he is treacherous."

"I don't believe he will play any tricks on me," said Frank. "I do not believe he has been handled right. Your hostler, Wade, had a grudge against the horse, and Fenton didn't know how to treat him. But this is no time to talk of that. See—the dogs take that hedge! Hurrah! See Harden follow! What a glorious sight! Hurrah! hurrah!"

The boys could not repress their cheers. The horses they bestrode were dancing now, but the animals were held in check yet a little longer, and then, with a cry to the others, Frank gave Firefoot his head.

Down toward the hunters charged the second party, riding to join them. They were seen, and Harden set the horn to his lips and blew a welcome.

Ta-ra, ta-ra, ta-ra-tar!

How the bugle note cuts the frosty air! It is enough to stir the blood in the veins of a sluggard.

The horses cannot be held in check. Oh, the glorious excitement of the mad ride—the delight of speed! Whip nor spur is not needed, and like birds they go across small washouts, down into a tiny ravine, and then up again with short, sharp jerks.

"Ou-oo! ou-oo! ou-oo!"

It is the baying of the hounds, the whole pack bursting into a grand swell of melody. Who would not rise early to hear such a morning chant!

The fox—there he goes! He is a red fellow, fine and large, good for many a mile. He seems to run with his legs stretched straight and his body almost touching the ground, while his brush is defiantly erect.

"This is indeed sport!" thought Frank Merriwell. "And, barring accidents, Firefoot will bring me in at the death."

"Hi! hi! hi!"

The fox came to a fence. Under it he went. A moment later the hounds reached the fence, Pirate in the lead. Over they went in a stream, as pretty a spectacle as one could ask to see.

Firefoot swept along like a meteor. Frank could have cut ahead of Harden, but he knew better than to do such a thing. He fell behind the bugler, but ahead of Fenton. The others of his party were farther back.

The fence was reached, and Harden cleared it beautifully, without seeking for an easy spot. Frank followed, and Firefoot sailed over the obstruction like a bird.

"Good boy!" laughed Merry. "You're all right! I'd like to own you!"

A strong feeling of affection for the horse sprang up in his breast. He touched Firefoot's neck with a caressing hand.

Now came some scrub timber, and through it darted the fox, with the hounds plunging at its heels. Harden did not swerve, but held straight on the track. Frank followed.

Limbs were dodged, bushes slapped him in the face, and vines tried to drag him from the saddle; but he did not draw rein. Straight on he kept, and soon the small timber was behind.

A road was reached and crossed. Ahead was a field that sloped gradually, presenting a full view of the chase. Still the fox was running speedily, holding its own with the dogs.

"Ou-oo! ou-oo! ou-oo!"

Again and again the entire pack gave tongue. An old farmer on his way to market, stopped his cart on the road, stood up, waved his hat about his head, and cheered like a boy.

Once Frank looked back.

"Jove!" he exclaimed.

Almost neck and neck, Steve Fenton and Iva St. Ives were following him. It was plain that the

girl was riding with as much reckless abandon as the best of them. It was not an easy thing for her dark-faced cousin to hold his own with her.

"She is a queen!" muttered Frank, as he once more gave his attention to the chase. "I don't wonder that Harden is stuck on her. And he appears like a fine fellow. I hope he wins her."

The fox had darted under another fence, and again the dogs were streaming over. Harden followed close, seeking no favors. His horse cleared the fence, and onward he went.

"Firefoot, old boy," laughed Frank, "you can follow him anywhere he goes."

Straight at the fence he charged. Firefoot lifted to the couch, settling on his haunches, then going up into the air.

Just then, from some unknown point, a shot rang out, and the black horse pitched forward. Its forward feet struck the rail, and Frank was flung headlong.

Firefoot came down with a crash, and lay still, a bullet in his brain!

And just beyond the fallen horse Frank was curled in a heap upon the hard ground!

But Frank did not lie thus a great while. As he was getting upon his feet, rubbing his arm and shoulder, he saw Iva St. Ives and Stephen Fenton come over the fence. And Fenton jumped his horse almost in the track of the boy who had been in advance, although he must have seen that an accident of some sort had happened.

One glimpse of Fenton's face did Frank obtain, and he knew the man had hoped to maim or kill him. Barely was he able to leap aside and escape from beneath the feet of the horse Fenton bestrode.

Iva St. Ives would have reined about, but Frank motioned for her to keep on, shouting:

"Don't stop for me! I'm all right! I'll be in at the death!"

The other hunters cheered him, while Fenton and the girl went on without stopping.

Frank knew a shot had been fired. He stooped over Firefoot, and a glance showed him the horse was dead. From a bullet hole in the animal's head blood was welling.

"I knew it!" muttered the boy, his face hard and set. "I saw the puff of smoke even as I fell. It came from those bushes yonder."

Toward the bushes he ran, paying no heed to those who called to him. He was on a fresh scent, and he kept repeating over and over:

"I'll be in at the death—in at the death!"

Into the bushes he plunged, regardless of the fact that he did not know but the would-be assassin was still crouching there. He was ready for anything he might meet.

The clump of bushes was small; the ground was moist. He looked around, then stooped and examined the ground. Yes, this was the very spot! Here were the footprints of a man, and here he had knelt upon one knee as he took aim when the shot was fired. Without doubt he had rested the gun in the crotch of a sapling that was just the right height. A slight abrasion in the bark of the sapling told Merriwell he was right.

But whither had the wretch gone? Frank looked around, he forced himself through the bushes. There were the tracks.

A valley lay below. Away to the west the baying of the hounds sounded, fainter and fainter. Through the valley ran a small stream. There was some timber, and into the thickest of this a horseman was vanishing. Something in his hands looked like a gun.

"There's my game," cried Frank. "I'd give something for a good horse—Jupiter!"

A horse was feeding in a pasture at a distance. It looked like a fairly good animal.

A moment later Frank was running back toward the spot where the dead black horse lay under the fence. Two or three of his friends were there. He gave no heed to them, but, with feverish haste, he stripped the bridle from the dead animal.

"What's up, Merry?" asked Rattleton, excitedly. "Who did it, anyway? and what are you—See him go!"

But Frank stopped suddenly and wheeled about.

"I want that horse, Rattleton!" he cried. "There's one over yonder you may take, if you want to bother to saddle and bridle him. I can't spare the time to catch him."

Harry tried to ask further questions, but not a word would Frank reply. He pulled Rattleton from the saddle, and sprang up himself. Then he gave the animal the spur and was away.

Frank did not glance over his shoulder to see if the others were following. He thought of nothing but the human game he was after. Would the wretch secure such a start that it would not be possible to overtake him?

"No!" came through Frank's set teeth. "I will run him down!"

Round the clump of bushes he guided the horse, and then cut down through the valley toward

the spot where he had seen the unknown horseman riding into the timber.

Over the stream leaped the horse, up the slope he galloped, and the timber was reached. Then Frank found the very spot where the man's horse had been hidden, and he struck the trail of the murderous-minded rascal.

Now, Eastern boy and Yale student though he was, Frank Merriwell had followed at the heels of the best trailers in this country. He had seen them work, and he had studied their methods, becoming a fairly expert trailer himself.

At first what he discovered puzzled him. The tracks of the horse showed quite plainly on the soft ground, but the marks of the shoes did not seem to indicate that the animal had gone toward the timber.

"I saw him!" muttered Frank. "It was no optical delusion."

Then he got down on his knees, holding on to the bridle of his horse, and examined the tracks still more closely. An exclamation broke from his lips.

"Queer horse that! Never heard of a horse walking on his heels before!"

A moment later he sprang into the saddle and was away, but he was riding in a direction precisely opposite that which it seemed the horse had gone!

Into the timber Frank plunged. It was not a very wide strip, and he soon passed through it. On the farther side he found the tracks again. The shoes of the horse pointed to the north, but Frank Merriwell rode to the south.

The other boys had paused to help Rattleton catch the horse in the pasture, so they were unable to follow Frank closely.

Ahead of Merriwell, beyond a field, lay a road. He made straight for a gap in the fence, and there he found the horse had passed through, apparently having turned from the road and taken to the field at that point, judging by the direction in which the shoes pointed.

Frank took to the road, gave his horse the spur, and tore along till he came around a bend. Nearly a mile away a horseman was just leaving the road and taking to the fields. He carried a rifle in his hands.

"You're my game for a cool thousand!" thought the boy, triumphantly; "and I believe you have handicapped yourself by the trick you have tried to play."

He rode in hot pursuit, and it was not long before the man discovered he was followed. Then the unknown showed guilt, for he whipped up his horse and tried to run away.

"I'll kill this horse before you shall do it!" grated Merriwell.

It was a hunt by sight now, with the fugitive making for a long strip of timber between some hills. Frank felt that the man stood a good chance of escaping if he got into those woods.

A fence lay before the man in advance. It was a high, zigzag affair. Without seeking an opening, he made straight for it.

Frank was watching. He saw the horse try to clear the fence, saw the animal strike, saw the man and beast go down.

"Hurrah!" shouted the boy. "That's a check!"

But neither the man nor horse got up. Both were hidden beyond the bushes that grew along the base of the fence.

Before long Frank was close to that fence, and he was lying flat on the back of his horse, half expecting the one he was pursuing was crouching behind the bushes, ready to stop the pursuit with a second shot.

With his usual reckless disregard of consequences in times of great danger, Merriwell rode at the fence, rose in the saddle, and jumped his horse over.

Man and horse lay under the bushes. The latter lifted his head and struggled to rise, but fell back. The man lay quite still, with his head curled under his body in a cramped position.

Out of the saddle leaped the boy, and he was bending over the man a moment later. Still the man did not stir, but the horse regarded the boy with a look of pain and appeal in its eyes, and whinnied pitifully.

Frank turned the man over, and the bloated face of Bill Wade, the hostler, was exposed. The man was stone dead, his neck being broken, and the horse had broken a leg.

"Poor fellow!" muttered Frank, but he was thinking of the horse.

Then he stooped and looked at the horse's feet.

"Just as I thought!" he cried. "The shoes are set the wrong end forward on the creature, and I might have been fooled if I had not seen Wade riding into the timber. It was a clever trick, but it failed."

Then he turned and looked down at the man once more.

"In at the death!" he grimly said.

CHAPTER XXVIII—A CHANGE OF SCENE

With the death of Wade, the paid tool of Stephen Fenton, the latter took alarm and disappeared from Springbrook Farm, leaving a clear field to Harry Harden.

Before leaving Springbrook, Frank was forced to repeat the story of the hunt so many times that he became heartily tired of it. He was also tired of being regarded as a hero, and hearing compliments from all sides. A less level-headed lad might have become inflated with his own importance, but "swelled head" was a disease that never secured a hold on Frank Merriwell.

But the boys all voted that they had enjoyed themselves hugely at Springbrook, and each and every one of them was forced to promise that it would not be the last visit to the place.

They might have remained longer, as it was, but the fall term of college was at hand, and several of them were impatient to return to dear Old Yale.

"I want to get back and take a rest," said Browning. "A big, long rest. I think I need it."

"Did you ever see the time you didn't rest a need—I mean, need a rest?" cried Harry.

"Are we to go right straight through to New York?" questioned Jack.

"I thought so at first," answered Frank. "But I have received a letter which may change our plans—if you agree."

"What letter?" asked several.

"A letter from Charlie Creighton, of Philadelphia. He urges us to stop off and pay him a visit."

"Creighton, eh?" said Jack. "I remember him. He was a good chap at Yale."

"Can we have some sport in Philadelphia?" questioned Harry.

"I think so. But not such sport as we have had here or in the mountains."

"Dot vos all right alretty," put in Hans. "I peen villing to take it easy for you, you bet mine life! No more vild adventures py me alretty!"

"By gum, it's time we quieted deown," snorted Ephraim. "Ef we don't we'll be as wild ez hawks when we git ter hum!"

The matter was talked over for quite a while, after which a vote was taken by which it was unanimously resolved to move on to Philadelphia, pay a short visit to the college youth mentioned, and see "how the land lay," as Harry expressed it.

Two days later found them on the way. They picked out the best bicycle road, and took their time, so that even Bruce did no growling.

A telegram was sent ahead to Charlie Creighton, and he met them at the Continental Hotel, at which place they decided to put up for the time being, for they knew Creighton could not very well accommodate the whole crowd, and they were unwilling to separate.

"You must stay over, at least a few days," said Charlie Creighton. "And some of you must stay up to our house too. It's up on Chestnut Hill, and I know you will like it. My sister has a number of girl friends up there, and all of us will do what we can to make you comfortable." And so it was settled.

Frank found the Creightons very nice people, and soon felt at home with them. Mabel Creighton was a girl who reminded him slightly of Elsie Bellwood, although he did not think her quite so pretty as his old-time sweetheart.

Mabel had several girl chums, and soon Frank and the other boys were on good terms all around.

The girls loved to play tennis, and it was not long before they induced Frank and the others to play.

What one of these games led to will be told in the chapter to follow.

CHAPTER XXIX—FRANK MEETS DEFEAT

"Look out, Merriwell!" called Bart Hodge, from his comfortable seat in the shade of the vine-covered arbor. "This game decides the set."

"I know that," smiled Frank, as he took his position back of the base line of the right court, poised his racket, and prepared to serve. "Miss Creighton is a wonder at tennis."

The pretty girl on the opposite side of the net laughed merrily.

"Oh, what a jolly thing it will be to defeat Frank Merriwell, the great Yale athlete, of whom my brother is forever telling some improbable yarn!" she cried.

Three other girls, two of whom were swinging in a hammock, clapped their hands and laughed.

"Do it, Mabel—do it!" eagerly urged Bessie Blossom. "My brother is forever talking about Frank Merriwell, too! Sile seems to think Mr. Merriwell is the only fellow in college."

"Oh, he's not the only pebble on the beach!" sang Fanny Darling, who, for half an hour, had been trying to tease Jack about Frank, and had succeeded in making the loyal fellow decidedly sour and sarcastic. "He may be able to cut some ice with men, but he'll have to sharpen his wits when he encounters the opposite sex."

Fanny was freckled and given to slang, but she was independent, could take care of herself, and was popular.

The third girl, Lucy Lake, said nothing at all, but seemed to enjoy it all very much.

Frank was not at all disturbed by the chaffing of the girls. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it thoroughly, and he laughingly said:

"If I am to fall, I could choose no fairer conqueror."

Mabel Creighton laughed, but added color came to her flushed face, and she could not entirely conceal her happy confusion. She betrayed in a moment that already she had learned to regard her brother's guest with unusual favor.

At tennis Mabel Creighton was a wonder. Never had Frank seen a girl who was so light on her feet and so deft with a racket. She had actually driven him to the base line game, while she played a net game and volleyed with such bewildering skill and rapidity that it made Frank gasp for breath.

To himself Frank confessed that he had never before seen a girl who could serve so perfectly, or who ran up on her service so quickly. It seemed impossible to take her off her guard.

Frank had started out with a half-formed fancy to let her win, but it was not long before he discovered she was an opponent worthy of his best efforts.

And now, as he prepared to serve, the score stood "games all," with one "advantage game" to Mabel's credit. If she could win again, Frank would be defeated.

If possible, Frank resolved to keep her from winning that time, just to make it interesting.

But, on this occasion, Frank was to discover it was not such an easy thing to keep a determined girl and a good tennis player from defeating him.

With as much freshness and vigor as if she had not been so long at work, Mabel received the ball, returning it with a smashing stroke, upon which she risked everything.

Frank was not looking for such a play at the very start, and it took him slightly off his guard. He got the ball on the bound, but drove it out of bounds, and lost the first point with surprising quickness.

"He's going to lose the set!" muttered Hodge, disconsolately.

Fanny Darling laughed merrily.

"Of course he is!" she cried. "Why, he isn't in it!"

The game went forward swiftly, but Frank won the second point by "lobbying," being able to toss the ball over the girl's head so she could not get back to receive it.

"He's getting desperate when he resorts to that style of play," decided Diamond.

Fanny Darling gave a shriek of laughter.

"Oh, my goodness!" she cried. "Did you see that, girls? That's all the way he can get a point now! He's afraid to try a drive! Is this the mighty Frank Merriwell, of whom we have heard so much? Oh, my! oh, my!"

Frank joined in the burst of laughter.

"Miss Creighton has me guessing," he confessed. "I acknowledge I fell back on what seemed my last and only resort."

"It's too bad to laugh like that, Fan," protested Lucy Lake. "Just see what a gentleman he is, and how honest he is in owning up that Mabel is giving him a close game."

"Too bad!" mocked Fanny. "Oh, I don't know! He's altogether too honest! Nothing seems to ruffle or disturb him. I don't like a fellow who is so cool. I'd give anything if I could get Frank Merriwell real good and mad."

"Why do you wish to do that?"

"Oh, just for fun! I'd like to prove that he can lose his temper occasionally."

On the very next play Frank succeeded in winning another point by placing the ball skillfully, which made the score stand thirty-fifteen, in his favor.

Hodge brightened up.

"Oh, Merry has been fooling all along," he declared. "You'll see how easy he will pull off the set, Miss Darling. He hasn't cared to hurt Miss Creighton's feelings by showing her up."

"Indeed!" scornfully returned the saucy little witch with the freckled face. "Don't count your chickens so soon. Mr. Merriwell won't melt things."

Mabel Creighton looked doubly determined as she again prepared to serve. Her eyes measured the distance to the net carefully, and though she made a fault by placing her first ball against the top of the net, she sent the next over with a speedy drive.

In a moment Merry was on it, and he made a handsome return, which, however, did not deceive the girl in the least. Mabel volleyed, and Frank was forced to resort to the same play. For some moments the game was highly exciting, and the spectators gasped for breath. Then the girl smashed one down within three inches of the outside line, and Frank's return was outside, so the score was evened.

"Oh, I knew it!" chattered Fanny Darling. "I'll bet a pound of Huyler's that Mr. Frank Merriwell does not make another count."

"Done!" cried Hodge.

"Oh, say, isn't this easy, girls?" laughed Fanny. "It's a perfect snap!"

"For us," smiled Bessie Blossom. "We'll have some of that candy who ever wins."

The next point was scored by Mabel, and Diamond called:

"You must quit fooling, Merry, old man. It's forty-thirty, and she wins if you do not tie her this time."

"I shall do my best," declared Frank.

He did do his best, and it seemed that he would tire the girl out, but he was not successful, and a final daring drive from Mabel's racket was successful.

She had won the game and the set.

"Well, Merriwell, I must say you are a good thing!" called a laughing voice. "I didn't suppose you would let a little girl like that get the best of you at anything."

It was Charlie Creighton himself who had entered the grounds, and was standing near the tennis court, accompanied by a stranger.

The latter was a stocky-built lad of nineteen or twenty, with thin lips and a hard-set jaw, besides having a large neck that swelled at the base. He was dressed in clothes that fitted him perfectly, but were a trifle "loud" or "sporty," to say the least.

"Yes, I am a good thing," returned Frank, also laughing; "and your sister has enjoyed herself with me immensely. If you taught her to play tennis, Creighton, she does you credit."

"Oh," cried Fanny Darling, "now that Mr. Merriwell is defeated, I suppose he will say it is not polite to win from a girl, and so he did not do his best. That makes me tired!"

"I shall say nothing of the sort, Miss Darling," declared Merry, with unfailing good-nature. "I tell you honestly that I soon discovered I would not be in the game at all if I loafed, and I did my prettiest. I think I played my average game, and I know that Miss Creighton defeated me without receiving any favors."

"Really, you astonish me!" said Fanny, who did not seem pleased by this confession. "But I see you are inclined to be diplomatic. I don't blame you, but——"

She interrupted herself with a toss of her head, and she had hinted quite enough to bring the hot blood to Frank's cheeks, although he pretended not to understand her meaning.

Generous to a fault, it cut Merriwell deeply to be suspected of declaring he had been beaten fairly and not meaning it. A blow in the face would not have hurt him so much, but he simply smiled, saying:

"You do me an injustice, Miss Darling."

No one understood how Frank had been touched better than Bart Hodge, and he growled under his breath, giving Fanny Darling a scowl, which she did not see.

The stranger with Charlie Creighton was sizing up Merriwell in an open manner that was little short of insolent.

"Merry," called Creighton, "permit me to introduce Mr. Wallace Hegner—Mr. Hegner, Mr. Merriwell."

Frank came forward, and offered his hand, which Hegner accepted with an air that was rather supercilious, to say the least.

"How do you do, Mr. Hegner?" said Frank. "I'm always pleased to meet any of Creighton's friends."

"How are yer?" said Hegner.

The touch of the fellow's hand gave Merry a feeling of repulsion. He dropped it almost instantly.

"Mr. Hegner is Burk's trainer, you know," explained Creighton. "You remember what I was telling you last night about Hank Burk going against Tom Jackson?"

"Yes, I remember," nodded Merry. "I believe you said this Jackson is backed by the Olympic Club?"

"Yes, they are the challenging parties. They think Jackson can whip his weight in wildcats, and it is their boast that he will hammer the best man Fairmount can put up all over the ring. Mr. Hegner has been handling Burk nearly six weeks, and has him in the pink of condition. He says our man will give Jackson the biggest surprise he ever struck. If it was to be with hard gloves, it's more than even Burk would knock Jackson out in four rounds. But we——"

"Oh, Charlie!" exclaimed his sister; "what do you suppose we care about that! You can talk of those things at the club, and you are there the most of the time."

"I beg your pardon," laughed Creighton. "I forgot the young ladies present. They do not care for boxing."

"Some of them do," said Fanny Darling, quickly. "I like a fellow who can handle his fists scientifically and take care of himself. That's why I admire Mr. Hegner so much."

"Thank you," Hegner bowed, with great gravity. "The manly art is worth acquiring, if it were useful only to protect young ladies from insult."

"Haw!" grunted Hodge. "There are some fellows who can box a little, and yet do not make a great spread about it."

Hegner's eyes narrowed, and he surveyed Hodge with the same insolent air with which he had regarded Frank Merriwell.

"I presume you box some, sir?" he asked.

"Not much, but I have friends who are able to put up quite a little go."

Charlie Creighton interposed laughingly, and introduced Hegner and Hodge. Bart bowed stiffly, but did not offer his hand, while Hegner nodded as if he had rheumatism in his neck. Then Diamond was introduced.

"Do you put on the gloves?" Hegner asked of the Virginian, in a blunt way.

"Not often," was the answer, as Jack's cheeks glowed a bit. "Never had them on in my life till I went to Yale and ran up against Merriwell. Southerners, sir, have a way of settling differences with other weapons than their fists."

"Oh!"

Jack bit his lip, for there was a hidden sneer in that simple exclamation. For a moment he felt like challenging Hegner on the spot, but remembered that he was in the North, where such things did not "go."

Hegner turned to Frank, whom he again surveyed from head to feet.

"From what Mr. Diamond says, I infer that you are something of a boxer," he observed.

"Well, there are others," smiled Merry. "I do not consider myself anything more than fairly handy with the gloves."

"Now, Frank!" began Hodge; but Merriwell cut him short with a glance.

"Well, I didn't know but you thought you could spar," said Hegner, in a bored way, and then he turned and began to talk to Fanny Darling, who chatted and laughed with him as if pleased by his attention.

Frank was thoroughly disgusted by the air assumed by Creighton's companion, and Charlie himself was not pleased. And Bart Hodge was chewing his tongue as a war horse might champ its bit, while he glared at Hegner's back in a way that told he was thoroughly "stirred up."

After a while, Creighton proposed that they should go down to the club. To this the girls objected, but Hodge and Diamond exchanged significant glances, and then expressed sudden eagerness to go.

"I'll have to go anyway," said Hegner. "Burk will be there, and I am due to give him his regular course."

"Well, I will remain here and do my best to entertain the girls," said Frank.

"Not by a hanged sight!" said Hodge, quickly. "We want you to come along with us, Merry."

"That's right," agreed Diamond. "Won't you come, old fellow?"

"Oh, yes, by all means, go!" cried Fanny Darling.

"We can get along very well without any fellow to bother us."

It was too good an opportunity for Frank to miss, and so he quietly said:

"If I remained behind I should not bother you much, Miss Darling."

This was unusually ungallant for Frank, but he began to see that Fanny must be met with her own weapons, and he had suddenly decided on his course of dealing with her in the future. His retort brought the blood to her cheeks, and her eyes flashed as she snapped:

"That's right! I wouldn't let you!"

As the five lads walked away to take a car, Bessie Blossom said:

"How could you be so rude to such a splendid fellow, Fan? It was just perfectly horrid of you!"

"That's so!" chorused Lucy and Mabel. "Frank Merriwell is splendid!"

"Say, girls," cried Fanny, "you make me weary! The trouble with Mr. Merriwell is that he is smart, and he knows it. He has been accustomed to having everybody flatter him, and it will do him good to know there are persons who do not think he is the only item in the paper. Perhaps it will reduce the size of his head so an ordinary hat will fit him."

"If there is any fellow in the world who has every reason to have a swelled head, and still hasn't got one, it is Frank Merriwell," declared Mabel Creighton. "My brother says so, and he knows. He says that, for a fellow in such a position, Merriwell is the most unassuming chap in college. You do him an injustice, Fanny."

The girl with the freckles gave her head a saucy toss.

"Oh, that's what's the matter—every one of you is stuck on him! I saw that right away. And it always happens that way. Wherever he goes, the girls get all broke up over him, and then flock around him. Well, he'll find there is one girl who doesn't care a cent for him—so there!"

"At least, Fanny, you might treat him decent," protested Mabel.

"I will, for I won't have anything at all to say to him after this. I hope that will satisfy you. If Wallace Hegner would put on the gloves with him, and give him a good thumping, it would help take the conceit out of him. But Mr. Merriwell, the great Yale athlete, would be far too shrewd to stand up in front of Hegner for a bout."

CHAPTER XXX—FRANK EXPRESSES HIS OPINION

The members of the Fairmount Athletic Club, of Philadelphia, were mainly lads under twenty years of age. There were a few older members in the club to keep everything straight and see that it was run all right, but the club was organized and conducted for the advantage of lads from fifteen to twenty-one.

Not a few of the members were sons of wealthy parents, but it was not necessary for a fellow's parents to be rich in order that he might become a member. Rich men contributed liberally to the support of the club, which made it possible for the regular fees and dues to be light, and youngsters whose parents were quite unknown, but who were regarded as "all right" themselves, obtained admission to the club.

Although great precaution had been exercised not to let in any one who would be objectionable, it was impossible to exclude all objectionable parties, for, after getting in, some of the members showed traits of character which their best friends had never dreamed they possessed.

Gambling in the clubrooms was prohibited, but cards, billiards and pool were permitted. There was a fine bowling alley, and the gymnasium was fitted up splendidly with all needed

apparatus. In the reading-room were all the late magazines and papers, among which were the leading sporting publications. There also was a good library of books, containing volumes treating of sports and athletics. On the walls were pictures of famous amateurs, of matches, contests and races, of all sorts, and of the members of the club who had made records.

Creighton had opened the club to Frank Merriwell and his friends, all of whom were led to understand that they would be welcomed there as long as they remained in Philadelphia.

After leaving the girls at the tennis ground, Charlie and the others proceeded directly to the club. There they found a number of fellows assembled, waiting to see Hegner put Burk through his daily course.

Burk was there, a tall, thin fellow, with short-cropped hair and a bullet-head. There was nothing attractive about his face, and there was something vicious in his little eyes.

At a glance, Frank saw that the fellow selected to represent the Fairmounts had many of the characteristics of the professional prize fighter. He was hard and sinewy, quick in his movements, had a big knotty fist, and looked as if he could stand any amount of punishment. Blows would have very little effect on him, unless they were delivered with skill sufficient to knock him out.

Creighton introduced Burk to the boys, and Frank talked with the fellow. It did not take Merry long to find out that, although Burk had a father who was wealthy and moved in good society, the son belonged to that class of boys who never advance beyond a certain limit, no matter how much they may be pushed. He had no fine sensibilities, and was coarse-grained in everything.

"What do you think of him?" asked Charlie Creighton, as they moved away, after Frank had chatted with the young pugilist.

"Well, you know I have not had sufficient time to form a settled opinion," answered Merry, evasively.

"Come off!" exclaimed Creighton, quickly. "I know you, and I know you have sized him up. What do you think of him?"

"To be honest, Charlie, I am astonished to find him a member of this club."

"Eh? Oh, I know what you mean; but Hank is all right, and his dad cuts a figure in this town."

"I presume he got in on his dad's reputation?"

"Well, that had something to do with it."

"He looks as if he might make a good professional bruiser in time."

"Well, you know there is to be nothing professional about this affair, old man. That's on the level."

"How do you manage it?"

"Why, there is a fierce rivalry between the Olympics and Fairmounts. This club started first, and it rejected a number of fellows who applied for membership. Those fellows usually were sons of rich parents, but they had a bad record, and we didn't want them. They got mad and formed an organization of their own. Their fathers were angry to think their sons should be shut out of here, and they swore the Olympic should knock the spots off this club. They have a building of their own, and it is furnished magnificently. The dues are high, and no one but the son of a rich man can afford to belong there. It has cost their fathers a royal round sum to establish the club, and it is costing them big money to keep it going. At first, they attempted to be exclusive and look down on the Fairmount with disdain, but that did not seem to bother us, and when they found it appeared to be just what we wanted, they adopted another policy. They set out to lead us in athletics, and their men have been against our men in every event possible since then, while they have poured out money like water in order to down us. They have not always been inclined to be thoroughly fair and square about it, either. If they can get the best of us at anything by foul means, there is no doubt but they will do it."

"I understand. But you said this match is not to be like a professional contest. In what way do you mean?"

"Why, it is like this: There is no purse offered, no admission will be charged, and the victor will win nothing but glory."

Frank looked doubtful.

"I fail to understand how you can carry the thing on in that way. Did Burk agree to it readily?"

"At first he wanted to fight for a purse, and tried to have it a hard glove affair; but that would have made it a regular prize fight, and Fairmount could not stand that."

"I should say not! I believe in boxing, but if there is anything I heartily detest it is prize

fighting and prize fighters."

"I believe I have heard you express your opinion in that direction before."

"I have expressed it often enough."

"And still you can fight yourself, Merriwell."

"I can fight if it is necessary, and I believe every fellow should learn to do that, for there will come times when he'll find the knowledge valuable. As long as the world stands there will be ruffians and bruisers who will attempt to impose on peaceful people, and there have been scores of times in my life when I have not found it possible to avoid a fight. When I have to fight, I sail in for all I am worth, and do the other fellow up as quick as I can; but I do not like it, and the chap who does has too much of the brute in him to suit me."

"You have very decided ideas on almost everything, Merry."

"What is a fellow worth if he does not have a few convictions he is willing to stand by?"

"Not much."

"That's right. I respect a fellow who will fight for what he thinks is right, even though it may be wrong; but I do not respect a prize fighter who will fight like a beast for a purse of money."

"Well, there is to be no purse in this affair. I think you will like Burk better when you know him better. He is going to fight Jackson for the honor of the club."

"And Jackson—what about him?"

"I don't know. Those fellows can make such arrangements with him as they like; it's nothing to us."

"You do not expect to stop betting?"

"No betting will be allowed in the clubroom. Of course there may be betting on the outside. We can't expect to stop that."

"Well," said Frank, "it has a slight flavor of a prize fight, and still it is not one. What sort of gloves will they use?"

"Six ounce."

"Eight ounce gloves are allowable."

"I know it, but six have been decided on. This is for points."

"And will it be carried out under the rules of the Amateur Athletic Union?"

"Sure."

"How do those fellows class?"

"Light. Burk's weight is one hundred and forty-six usually, but Hegner has him down to one hundred and thirty-two now, and says he does not care to get him lighter."

"I presume two judges and a referee will be chosen?"

"Yes. If the judges disagree, the referee will decide."

"Well, I hope you win the trick, Creighton."

"Oh, we'll do that if it's possible. Hegner knows his business, and he says Burk can do Jackson."

"I wouldn't trust Hegner as far as I could throw a Texas steer by the tail."

"That's because you have taken a dislike to him. I will confess that he is not agreeable sometimes, but it is his way."

"It's a very poor way."

"Yes, I'll admit that; but he was on his guard against you, for he has heard so much about you. He expected to find that you thought you knew it all."

"That does not excuse his boorishness."

"Admitted; but still I say he knows his business, and we depend on him when he says Burk will win. Hegner is the cleverest boxer of his age in Philadelphia."

"That is saying considerable."

"I mean it, and he'd prove it to you if you were to put on the gloves with him. I know you are pretty good, but Heg would give you a surprise."

"He must be good, if you have so much confidence in him. Well, I sincerely hope your confidence is not misplaced, but there is something about the fellow's face that makes me suspicious of him. I would not trust him, and I believe he is treacherous. It is my opinion that he will try to get something out of this mill some way."

"He is getting something out of it."

"Ah! So?"

"Yes; we're paying him to put Burk in shape."

"It is possible that will satisfy him, but I think he's a schemer. I tell you, Creighton, you'll find it to your advantage to look out for Hegner."

CHAPTER XXXI—THE FIRST BLOW

Hegner was giving Burk his regular daily training, explaining just when it was best to use the stop for the left-hand uppercut and when it was advisable to duck and counter on the body.

Quite a throng had gathered to watch them. Both were stripped down to their regular training suits, which gave Frank a chance to size them up still better than heretofore.

Merriwell saw he had made no mistake in Burk, but, if anything, Hegner was more sinewy and had better muscular development than Frank had thought.

The two lads were working gently, going through the movements for each blow, parry, dodge and counter with deliberation, and Frank soon saw that Hegner really knew his business.

"What do you think of those chaps, Merriwell?" asked Hodge, who seemed strangely restless and nervous.

"I haven't seen them get to work in earnest yet," was the answer.

"Say, old man!"

"What is it?"

"I'd like to see you go up against that Hegner and hammer him all over the lot. I despise the sight of him."

"Perhaps I couldn't do the trick, you know."

"What? Get out! I know you could!"

Diamond was attracted by what was passing between them, and dipped in.

"Could? Could what?" he asked.

"Could knock the packing out of Mr. Hegner," declared Bart, incautiously.

"Of course!" nodded Diamond.

Frank was about to caution them to speak lower, but it was too late. Hegner's keen ears had heard enough, and he whirled on the trio like a tiger.

"Who is it that can knock the packing out of Mr. Hegner?" he harshly demanded. "If it is one of that party, let him step out! I'll give him a chance."

This sudden action confused both Hodge and Diamond, and Merriwell was silent. The eyes of all in the room were turned on the little group.

After a moment, Hegner laughed scornfully.

"What's the matter with you chaps?" he sneeringly demanded. "I heard one of you say that somebody could knock the packing out of me. If you will bring the gentleman forward, I'll be happy to give him a chance to try."

Still the three were silent.

"Bah!" cried Hegner. "You're a lot of bluffs! I can do you all in turn, one after the other, but there's not one of the lot who has the nerve to put on the gloves with me."

"If that is what you think, Mr. Hegner, it won't take long to show you that you are mistaken," said Frank, quietly, as he stepped out. "I am willing to put on the gloves with you for a friendly go."

"You'll be a snap," came derisively from Hegner.

"Possibly so; but you can tell better about that later on."

Creighton was somewhat disturbed.

"Hold on, fellows!" he exclaimed. "If you're going to box, we do not want any hard feelings about it."

"Don't let that worry you as far as I am concerned," said Frank, as placidly as ever. "Can I borrow a suit, Charlie?"

"Yes, you may have mine."

Frank followed Creighton to a dressing-room, and Diamond went along. Hodge started to accompany them, and then seemed to change his mind, and remained behind.

"It's too bad!" declared Creighton, as soon as they were in the room. "I'm sorry anything of the kind should happen."

"I'm glad of it!" exclaimed Diamond, whose dark face was flushed and who seemed to be well satisfied.

"Oh, it's all right," laughed Frank, as he began to strip off. "There's no damage done, old man."

"But there may be. Hegner has an ugly temper."

"Unless he can control it, it will be all the worse for him."

"I don't know. You can't tell what he will do."

"Don't let it worry you."

"But you do not profess to be away up in fighting and that fellow can fight like a tiger."

"All the same, I shall do my best to give him a lively go."

Creighton was worried, and he did not get over it quickly. In his heart he feared that Frank would get so much the worst of it that he would be regarded with derision, and he had bragged a great deal about Merriwell as an all-around athlete.

Diamond was not worried at all. He had the utmost confidence in Frank, and he seemed elated to think Merry was about to get at Hegner.

It did not take Frank long to strip and get into Charlie's suit. Then the three came forth and found Hegner waiting for them.

The fellows present had gathered around, and it was the almost universal opinion that Hegner would make short work of the fellow from Yale.

Frank looked handsome in the sparring suit. He was neither too stocky nor too thin, but was graceful and supple, with a figure that aroused the envy of many a lad who looked him over then.

"This is to be a friendly bout, Mr. Hegner," he said, as he accepted the gloves which were passed to him. "We are not to attempt to murder each other."

"Oh, not at all!" said the other, with a crafty twinkle in his eye. "There is not much danger of murder with such gloves as these."

When the gloves were carefully put on, they faced each other and shook hands, after which they were at it quickly.

Hegner danced away and came in with a bewildering rush, which was avoided with ease by Frank, who gave him a light body blow as he passed. Like a cat Wallace came about and was after Merriwell again. They sparred a moment, and Hegner tried to get in with a feint and a straight left-hand drive for the face. He put all his force into the blow, and it would have been a stunner had it landed; but Frank guarded with his right and countered with his left, sending Hegner staggering backward.

At the very outset Merriwell had the best of it, much to the surprise of those who had expected Hegner to "walk into him with a rush." They looked at each other, and then said over and over that there would be a sudden change.

Wallace seemed a bit dazed by the reception he had received, and he ground his teeth with anger. He did not delay about coming to the scratch, however, and the bout went on.

After a little sparring, both led for the face, neither guarding, and both blows told. Then, like a flash, Hegner dropped under and tried to uppercut Frank, thinking to do this before Merry could recover.

The Yale lad went back with a bound, and Hegner found nothing but air. In another instant Frank came in again, and they were at it with fresh fury.

Again both led at the face with their left, but both ducked, and, with crossed arms, their fists shot over each other's shoulder. They got away instantly, and Hegner followed Frank up, apparently determined to press the battle.

"If he gets Heg angry, he'll be sorry," declared one of the club members. "The fur will fly."

Diamond, who seldom laughed, laughed now.

"If Mr. Hegner knows what is good for him, he'll hold his temper," he said. "If he loses it, Frank Merriwell will play with him."

"Rats!" was the return. "Mr. Merriwell won't melt things, if he is from Yale. He's not the only shirt in the laundry; he can be done up."

"You may be right, but Wallace Hegner hasn't the starch to do the job."

"Wait and see."

For some moments the boxers sparred craftily, feeling for an opening, and then Hegner pushed things again. But his leads were met or dodged, and he received several sharp raps in return. One of his swinging blows came near landing, and it would have knocked Frank down had it reached.

It was plain enough that all Hegner wanted was a good opportunity to strike Merriwell with every bit of force at his command. He tried the trick repeatedly, and the look of rage increased in his eyes as each attempt was a failure.

"Merriwell is cleverer than I fancied he would be," admitted one of the club members; "but he can't last. Hegner will get him on the run after a while."

A lead with Hegner's left brought a sharp cross-counter from Merriwell, and the tap set the head of the young trainer ringing. He tried to get in with his right, and, instead of retreating a

bit, was met with a right-hand cross-counter. Then he made a savage effort to uppercut with his left, but Frank ducked to the right and gave him a wind-killer under the heart.

Then it was seen that Hegner was fast losing his temper. He did his best to get Merriwell's head under his arm, but simply succeeded in receiving a tap on the nose that made the blood run freely.

Hegner would have gone on fighting with the blood streaming down over his mouth, but several fellows jumped in and stopped the bout for the time, declaring that he must wash up.

"I know nothing has been said about rounds, but this is enough for the first one," said Creighton.

"Steady, Heg, old man!" warned Burk, as he got hold of the excited fellow. "You are losing your head and giving him all the best of it. Take a little time to cool off, and you will be better off for it, my boy."

So Hegner was led away to wash off the blood, but he called to Frank that he would return and finish the bout.

With the exception of Hodge and Diamond, nearly every one of the spectators was astonished by what he had seen. It was evident that Frank had much the best of the battle thus far, but still they could not bring themselves to believe he was a more scientific man than the trainer of Hank Burk. Hegner would redeem himself quickly enough in the next round, they were sure.

Frank was quite cool, smiling a bit as he pulled off the gloves and stood talking with Diamond and Hodge. But most remarkable of anything, although, with the possible exception of Frank, those who saw it did not know it, was the fact that there was a smile on the faces of both Bart Hodge and Jack Diamond. A smile was something remarkably rare for the face of either, and never before had they been known to smile both at the same time.

"Oh, this is great—simply great!" muttered Hodge. "Wonder if he isn't beginning to think I knew what I was talking about when I said you could knock the packing out of him?"

"Oh, if you had on anything but those soft gloves!" said Diamond. "But you want to keep your eyes open. Some of his blows are wicked. They'd shake you up bad if they landed."

"Have you seen any of them land yet?" asked Merry, in his quiet way.

"Not yet; and that's why I'm happy. This is going to be the biggest surprise that ever struck the Fairmount Athletic Club."

Hegner came hurrying back, with his companions trailing at his heels. He had succeeded in stopping the flow of blood very quickly, and now he was palpitating to be at Merriwell again.

"Come on!" he cried. "Let's settle this thing! I haven't got warmed up yet."

"Give it to him, Merry!" cried Hodge.

"Crowd him this time!" whispered Diamond.

Again the lads faced each other. They began sparring slowly, Hegner making an effort to control his temper. He led at Frank a number of times, but Merry broke ground quickly each time, and it began to look as if he had resolved to hold off and keep away from Hegner. Wallace decided this was so, and attempted to press the tussle.

Right there he made his mistake. Merriwell had been trying to lead him on, and the effort was successful. One of the trainer's rushes was met as if Frank had been nailed to the floor, and Hegner was sent spinning backward with two well-directed blows, catching his heels and sitting down heavily on the floor.

Somebody laughed outright.

Almost frothing at the mouth, the fallen fellow leaped to his feet. For a moment he stood glaring at Frank, and then, with a cry of rage, he threw off both gloves and leaped forward!

"I know when you try a foul!" he grated. "Two can play at the same trick!"

Then he tried to smash Merriwell in the face with his bare fist.

Frank was not in the least excited, and he did not attempt to get the gloves off. He met Hegner, parried his first blow, gave him a jolt that drove him back two steps, followed him up and came in with a swinging smash that landed on the fellow's jaw.

Hegner was literally lifted off his feet and sent flying through the air. His head struck against the hard wall with a resounding crack, and then he dropped to the floor, where he lay in a limp and motionless heap.

CHAPTER XXXII—A SURPRISE PARTY

"I am sorry it was necessary to strike him such a blow," said Frank, as he deliberately removed the gloves from his hands; "but I call on you all to bear witness that he came at me with his bare fists, and I was forced to defend myself."

"That's right," said Charlie Creighton, quickly. "Hegner had no right to do such a thing. You would not have been to blame if you had got off your glove and struck him."

To this a number of the club members agreed, while some were silent. Hank Burk and two others bent over Hegner and tried to arouse him, but the fellow had been severely stunned when his head cracked against the wall and it was some time before he seemed to realize what had happened.

When he did understand, however, he was furious.

"Let me get at him!" he madly cried, struggling to his feet. "I'll hammer the life out of him! I'll have revenge!"

"Steady, Hegner!" warned Burk. "You're in no condition to go against him now. You slipped when he struck you the last time, and——"

Hegner caught at this eagerly.

"Yes, yes, I slipped!" he snarled. "If it hadn't been for that, he'd never have got the best of it. And I fell and struck against the wall. I can do him any time."

"Of course you can, old fellow. But you know a fight will not be allowed in this club. You'll have to wait for your opportunity. It will come all right."

Hegner cooled down.

"Take your hands off me," he said. "I won't touch him again, but I want to tell him something."

"Sure you won't get excited and jump him?"

"Sure."

"All right."

They fell back and let him go. He advanced toward Frank, and shook a clinched fist in his face, harshly grating:

"This is all right, Merriwell! I'll not forget you! You can bet your life I'll more than get even!"

"I simply defended myself from an attack on your part, and I kept the gloves on all the time, Hegner."

Frank stood with his hands on his hips, looking the raging fellow straight in the eye.

"You struck me foul before that. Oh, I'll not forget your blow! I'll have another whirl with you!"

"Well, let me warn you to look out for my next blow. It may be much more severe than the last one."

"Bah! You are a blowhard! I'll not waste my breath on you!"

Then Hegner turned and walked away, accompanied by Burk and two or three others.

Frank turned to Charlie Creighton, saying:

"Old man, I trust you will believe me when I tell you I am very sorry this affair occurred. It was not of my seeking, even though I had no liking for Hegner."

"You are not to blame in the least, Merriwell, and I believe the majority of the fellows who saw it will say so. Eh, boys?"

"Not in the least," chorused nearly all those present.

"Still I am sorry it occurred here," asserted Frank. "I am a visitor here, and——"

"That is a reason why we should express our regrets, not you," said a member. "Hegner lost his head when he saw you were getting the best of him. He owes you an apology for that and for his insulting words just now."

"Well," smiled Frank, "I scarcely expect an apology from him, for I believe he is a fellow who will nurse his discomfiture and brood over it, thinking he is the one wronged. I am glad, gentlemen, you do not think I was at all to blame."

Then Frank, Charlie, Jack and Bart went away to the dressing-room, where Merry stripped off and was rubbed down with a coarse towel before resuming street clothes.

"Merriwell," said Creighton, as he admired the magnificent figure of the handsome young Yale athlete, whose entire body was glowing from the rub-down, "I want to say right here that I underestimated you previous to this. I knew you were a good man, but did not think you could

make a monkey of a fellow like Hegner, who is a semi-professional prize fighter. I was afraid he would be too much for you, and you know I have had considerable to say about you to the fellows."

"I didn't know but he might be too much for me when I put on the gloves with him," confessed Frank; "but that would not have killed me. I do not consider myself invincible."

"Well, Hegner was a mark for you, and we have considered him as good as anything going in his class. It made him furious when he saw he was no match for you."

"In my estimation that fellow is a fake," declared Hodge. "He puts up a big bluff, but——"

"He may be a good trainer," said Frank. "Many a first-class trainer is unable to put up much of a mill when it comes right down to business."

"Oh, you want to be too easy with the fellow!" broke out Diamond. "I don't believe he is any good, and I am sure he is crooked."

"You have taken a dislike to him, and that's why you think that," said Creighton. "He is all right in his way."

"But that is a very poor way."

"I confess that he lost his head and made a fool of himself, and I hope he will realize it when he cools down."

"If he should apologize I presume you would meet him halfway, Merriwell?"

"You may be sure of that," nodded Frank, getting into his clothes. "I'd be a churl if I didn't."

"If he ever apologizes I am a fool," grunted Hodge.

When the boys came out of the dressing-room they immediately left the club and proceeded directly to the hotel, where the rest of Frank's friends were staying.

Barney, Hans, Ephraim and Bruce were engaged in a game of pinochle when the others came in, and the Dutch lad was greatly excited.

"You poys don'd gif nopody a show!" he squawked. "On der last handt Parney feex der carts, und dese dime I haf a shance to meld dree hundret beenuckle, but you don't let me done him. Uf dot peen fair blaying you vos a liar!"

"Arrah, come off yer perch, ye Dutch chaze!" retorted the Irish lad. "Ye troied to milt two quanes av doimonds an' two jacks av spades instid av voicy varsey, an' thot koind av a play don't go in this game."

"Vot vos der madder mit me anyvay!" cried Hans, flourishing his cards. "You pelief I don'd know nottings apout dot game, hey? I shown you britty queek, py shimminy! Vait a bit! I haf der deese und a hundred und vifty drums, und den I pelief you vill laugh oudt uf der odder side uf my mouth."

"Oh, say!" grunted Browning, with a yawn, "are you chaps going to play cards? or are you going to shoot your mouths at each other all the time? I'm getting tired."

"So be I, b'gosh!" put in Ephraim, banging his fist down on the table. "I never played this game before, and yeou fellers roped me in for a sucker, but I'll show ye what kind of suckers they raise in Vermont. I'm gittin' hot enough to melt the hull gol darn pack!"

"There is a lively game of cards," laughed Frank. "It is better than a circus when they get to playing pinochle."

The appearance of Frank and his companions broke up the game, for Hans protested that he was being cheated, and refused to play any more, to the disgust of the other players.

Creighton invited the entire party to be present at the bout between Burk and Jackson, and an hour was spent discussing the coming event, at the end of which time Charlie departed, having invited them all to call on him any time. Before departing, he gave Frank and Bart a quiet tip that he would be pleased to see them that evening.

Nearly all the boys had secured tickets for the Chestnut Street Theatre that evening, with the exception of Frank and Bart. They were resolved to have a pleasant time while they remained in the Quaker City.

Although it was September, the evening proved to be very warm, and, on arriving at Creighton's, Frank and Bart found something of a lawn party was in progress. The garden was illumined by Chinese lanterns, with the exception of certain cozy corners where comfortable seats could be found, and such corners were much sought by more or less sentimental young couples.

An orchestra furnished delightful music, and the hum of voices and sound of laughter could be heard on all sides, while pretty girls and manly-looking lads strolled and flitted hither and thither about the grounds.

"Jove!" muttered Frank, as he and Bart paused and looked about. "This is a surprise!"

Creighton didn't tell us what was going to happen."

"If he had, I should have spruced up a trifle more," came ruefully from Hodge. "I have half a mind to skip out now."

"And I have half a mind to skip with you," confessed Merry.

"Neither of you shall do anything of the kind!" exclaimed the voice of Mabel Creighton, and then she, accompanied by Bessie Blossom, swooped down on the hesitating lads and made them captives.

"This is just a jolly surprise all around," Mabel explained. "There is scarcely a soul present who knew what was going to happen. Charlie said it was the last opportunity we'd have for a lawn party this season, and we decided to improve the occasion. We'll have a jolly time."

"We always have a splendid time here," said Bessie, clinging to Bart's arm. "Charlie said you were coming, and we have been waiting for you."

"And now we've caught you, you can't get away," laughed Mabel.

"Then we must resign ourselves to fate and thank goodness we have such charming captors," smiled Frank.

"I don't seem to care what happens to me now," Hodge declared. "I can be led to any fate without a struggle."

"Then come on," cried Mabel, "and we'll lead you to cake and ices."

Soon they were cozily seated at a small table, with ices before them. As they chatted and laughed, another couple came along and took a table near at hand. Before they appeared Frank recognized the saucy laugh of Fanny Darling.

"Oh, it was such fun!" she was saying, as she sat down. "I knew I could touch him if I kept firing hot shots in his direction, and I was right. He stood it as long as he could, and then he shot back. But wait till I get another good chance. I won't do a thing to that fellow!"

"He is not worth wasting your time and breath on, Miss Darling," said the voice of Wallace Hegner. "The best thing you can do is not to notice him."

"Oh, I couldn't do that! There wouldn't be any fun in it. He may be smart, but there are others. I'd like to see you get at him, Mr. Hegner. I'll bet you'd do him up in short order with the gloves."

"Well—ahem!" coughed Hegner, "I mean to get at him some time, and I may not wear the gloves. What I'd like to do is to leave the mark of my fist on his——"

The girl gave a startled exclamation and grasped Hegner's arm, saying something in a low tone. Hegner was heard to ask, "Where?" and a whispered conversation followed.

Frank was genuinely amused, for he knew they had been speaking of him. A low, musical laugh came from his lips, and he observed:

"It is remarkable how really amusing some little occurrences are, Miss Creighton. Did you ever notice it?"

The others of the party had not failed to take in the significance of the words they had heard, and it was with no small difficulty that they repressed a hilarious burst of laughter. Indeed the girls were unable to refrain entirely from laughing, and Hodge smiled in a weary, derisive way, saying:

"Some people never know how really amusing they are. They go through the world thinking they are having fun with everybody else, and all the while they are making a show of themselves."

Fanny Darling jumped up quickly.

"Come, Mr. Hegner," she said, her voice not quite steady; "I do not care to sit here."

Hegner said something in a growling tone, and they moved away.

"It's too bad," said Frank; "but we are not to blame. We could not help hearing."

"I don't know as it's too bad," declared Mabel. "They should be careful what they say. I can't bear Wallace Hegner, and I do not understand what there is about him that interests Fanny. But she is queer, anyway."

"It doesn't strike me that she is very agreeable," said Bart.

"If she takes a fancy, she can be awfully hateful; but she is good-hearted, and when she likes a person she would do anything in her power for him. It's too bad she is so freakish."

"She is just saucy enough to be amusing," declared Frank. "I do not mind it in the least."

"It is evident she does not know of your little bout with Mr. Hegner," said Hodge. "She thinks he can do you."

"Charlie told me all about it," put in Mabel, quickly. "I'm so glad, for Wallace Hegner has carried himself with an air that was little short of bullying."

"Perhaps he has learned a lesson," smiled Bessie.

"It will take more than that to teach him a lesson," Mabel asserted. "What he really needs is a good whipping."

"Well, that is what he is liable to get if he does not let Merry alone," nodded Bart.

A few minutes later Creighton appeared.

"Hello, fellows!" he cheerfully called. "I'm glad you are here, and I see you have found the parties who told me to be sure to invite you."

This confused Bessie somewhat, but Mabel immediately confessed that she had told her brother to be sure to invite Frank.

Charlie sat down a few moments and talked, and then strolled away, saying he must see that every one was enjoying the evening.

CHAPTER XXXIII—A GIRL'S REMORSE

During the greater part of the evening Frank and Mabel were together, while Bessie seemed to cling to Hodge, who appeared very well satisfied.

Several of the fellows Frank and Bart had met at the club were present, and it was natural that all should drift together after a time, and fall to discussing the affair between Merriwell and Hegner.

The boys were almost universal in positively declaring that Hegner was entirely in the wrong, and Frank was glad to know he was not blamed for what he had done.

While they were talking Hegner drifted past, but seeing Merriwell in the group did not pause.

A little later, however, Frank and his foe came face to face. Hegner turned as if to walk away, but whirled back swiftly, saying:

"You have had your turn; mine comes next. I won't do a thing to you! I'll make you sorry you ever saw the inside of the Fairmount Athletic Club!"

Then without waiting for Frank to speak he hastened away.

"That fellow is full of threats," thought Merry; "and I fancy he means to make them good if he gets a chance. I must keep my eyes open, for he would strike a fellow behind his back."

He found Bart talking to Bessie and Mabel, and they all went over to a distant part of the grounds, where there were to be fireworks on the lawn.

There was music, laughter and song. It was a night for youth and happiness. It was a night when a hand touch, the perfume of a breath, a half-understood whisper, the rustle of the leaves caused the blood to flow swift and warm in youthful veins.

The fireworks consisted mainly of mines, Roman candles and red fire. There were a few pinwheels, but no rockets.

Wallace Hegner and Fanny Darling were together again. With her usual daring, the girl was touching off Roman candles and laughing merrily. She seemed to be enjoying herself thoroughly, but it seemed certain that she had avoided Frank since he had overheard her talking with Hegner the first of the evening.

The musicians played a lively air as the candles burned, the mines exploded, the pinwheels buzzed, and the red fire glared. Fanny Darling ran across the lawn swinging a Roman candle and letting the fireballs pop into the air. Hegner was close behind her, with a glowing stick of fire in either hand.

Suddenly there was a scream of terror, followed by a chorus of shrieks and hoarse cries. Then it was seen that Fanny's dress was blazing.

The girls scattered and fled from her, while the boys stood still for the moment and stared at her stupidly. Hegner dropped both sticks of red fire, but fell back, calling for water.

Through the circle burst a youth who stripped off his coat as he ran. He leaped straight toward the imperiled girl, who was vainly trying to beat out the flames with her hands, a look of terror pitiful to see upon her face.

"Steady, Miss Darling!" called the voice of Frank Merriwell. "Don't resist me and I will save

you!"

He flung the coat about her, lifted her, dropped her upon the grass, knelt over her, rolled her, smothered the flames and beat them out with his hands.

It was all over in a moment. He had extinguished the fire before others could think to move. As they gathered around he lifted her to her feet, anxiously asking:

"Are you severely burned, Miss Darling? I sincerely hope you are not. I reached you as soon as possible."

She tried to speak, and her eyes met his. She choked, her chin quivered, and she burst into tears, sobbing:

"Oh, Mr. Merriwell!"

It was all she could say, but there was a world of self-reproach, shame and remorse in that exclamation.

It was found that Fanny Darling had been burned, but her injuries were not severe. In beating out the flames Frank had burned his hands, but there was a doctor present who attended to the girl and her rescuer.

Frank's hands were covered with a coating of creamy stuff and bound up with handkerchiefs.

"I think that will prevent them from blistering," said the doctor. "I always take a small case with me wherever I go, and it is fortunate I was here to-night."

"Oh, I am all right!" laughed Merry; "but I sincerely hope Miss Darling was not injured much. I reached her as soon as possible."

"It is almost certain you saved her life, and I am sure you prevented her from being disfigured as long as she lives," declared the physician. "She has much to thank you for."

In another room, with her girl friends hovering about her, Fanny Darling distinctly heard what the doctor said, for there was an open door between the two rooms.

Her face was very pale, and she bit her lip till the blood started, while her hands were tightly clinched.

"Is the pain so terrible, Fanny?" tenderly asked Mabel Creighton.

"Pain? What pain?"

"Why, the pain of your burns."

"That's nothing. It was another pain that I felt."

She covered her face with her hands, and they saw a tear steal down between her fingers, although she made no sound.

"Mr. Hegner wishes to see you," said Bessie Blossom. "He is at the door, and he is very anxious to learn from your lips just how you are."

Fanny's hands dropped, and her face grew crimson.

"Tell Mr. Hegner that I do not care to see him!" she exclaimed.

So Wallace Hegner was turned from the door, much to his rage and chagrin.

"I suppose she wouldn't see me because I didn't happen to be the one to put out the fire," he grated, as he left the house. "What could I do? My coat was too thin. It was just that Merriwell's confounded luck to jump in there and do the trick. Oh, but I'm going to settle with him!"

After a time the most of the girls left the room, and Fanny was alone with Mabel and Bessie. Then it was that she burst into tears, sobbing as if her heart were breaking.

Both girls tried to comfort her.

"What is the matter, Fanny, dear?" asked Bessie, kneeling beside her. "I suppose your nerves are all shaken."

"She is almost hysterical, poor girl!" said Mabel. "And I do not wonder a bit."

"Who wouldn't be, after such a narrow escape?"

"It—it's—not—that!" sobbed Fanny.

"Not that?"

"No."

"Then what can be the matter with you, dear?"

"Oh, girls—I'm—I'm just the meanest creature in the—whole world—and I just—just hate and despise myself! So there!"

Mabel and Bessie looked at each other in astonishment.

"You must be silly, Fanny! You are nothing of the sort!" cried Mabel.

"Yes, I am!" sharply declared Fanny, using a handkerchief to dry her tears. "I am just as mean and hateful as I can be, and I wish I were dead! It would have been a good thing if I'd burned!"

Mabel and Bessie looked horrified.

"It's dreadful!" they exclaimed.

"I don't care, it's true!" cried Fanny. "Just think of the mean, hateful things I said to Frank Merriwell, and then think what he did for me! And I did not mean those things at all! Oh, I'm wicked, and I know it!"

"Why, Fanny! Mr. Merriwell did not mind what you said," assured Mabel, hoping to pacify her in that manner.

"He heard them, and he must think me the meanest, hatefulest creature alive. I shall never dare to look him in the face again—never!"

After a long time her agitation subsided, and then, of a sudden, she exclaimed:

"Girls, do you know what I am going to do?"

"No; of course not."

"I am going to ask Frank Merriwell's pardon on my knees! I will do it now!"

Both Mabel and Bessie were so astonished that they could hardly speak. The idea of Fanny Darling getting on her knees to any one was utterly preposterous. But there seemed a most astonishing change in her, and now she started to find Frank.

But Frank was gone. Charlie Creighton came in and told the girls that Frank and Bart had departed to their hotel.

"Oh, it's too bad!" cried Fanny. "I should have gone to him at once, but truly I was so ashamed that I could not face him. Tell me, Charlie, was he burned much?"

"Well, the doctor could not tell just how severe the burns on his hands might prove to be."

"Well, the very next time I see him I'll do my best to let him know I appreciate his heroism," said Fanny.

In the meantime Frank and Bart had taken a car and were on their way to the Continental. Bart showed considerable agitation concerning Merry's hands.

"I hope you will not be knocked out so you'll be unable to go in for athletics the same as usual this fall, Merry," said Hodge. "What would the Yale eleven do without you?"

"They would get some other man equally as good," smiled Frank.

"They couldn't!" cried Hodge, loyally. "That would be an impossibility!"

"It can't be you really mean that, old man?"

"Of course I do."

"Then you are foolish. Why, Hodge, there are hundreds of men just as good as yours truly. I know I am a good player, but I also know there are others."

It was nearly midnight when they left the car and started to walk the short distance to the hotel. Frank led the way by a short cut through a narrow street, which was rather dark and deserted.

"There are not many fellows who would have done what you did to-night for a girl who had treated them as Miss Darling treated you," said Bart.

"Oh, I don't know! It seems to me that almost any fellow would have done that."

"Hegner was with her, but he did not lift a hand to save her."

"It is plain he did not know what to do. He did not think quickly enough."

"That is just it, Merry. In any emergency you think of just the right thing to do, and that is what makes you such a good man. I say Yale can't afford to lose you from her eleven, and I hope you will not be damaged so it will knock you out."

At that instant five or six dark forms suddenly darted out from both sides of the street and surrounded the boys. A voice snarled:

"When we are through with him he'll be damaged so he won't play football this season!"

CHAPTER XXXIV—A FIGHT AGAINST ODDS

"Ambushed!"

"Trapped!"

Frank and Bart uttered the exclamations as those dark forms gathered around them and they

heard that snarling voice.

At a glance they saw the faces of their assailants were hidden by handkerchiefs which had been tied across them to their eyes, and one of them had turned his coat wrong side out.

The one with the turned coat seemed to be the leader of the party.

"Get around them, fellows!" he ordered, sharply. "Don't let them skip!"

"We're in for it!" grated Hodge.

"It looks that way," admitted Frank.

"We'll have to fight!"

"Sure."

In another moment they had placed themselves back to back, and were ready to meet the assault of the young thugs of the street.

"So you'll fight, will you?" grated the leader. "Well, you won't stand much show with this crowd. We can knock the packing out of you in short order."

"Don't be so sure of that," said Frank, with that singular laugh which Hodge knew indicated Merry was thoroughly aroused. "You may not find it. such a snap."

"We are three to your one."

"Even then you are not so many."

"The trouble with you is that you think yourself a great deal smarter than you are. Well, you'll change your mind after this. To-morrow you'll be in a hospital."

"You may be in a coffin, my fine fellow."

The masked ruffians had surrounded Frank and Bart, and were ready for the attack. Their leader gave the word:

"At 'em, boys! Hammer 'em! Knock 'em down and kick 'em!"

Then the assault was made with a rush that was hard to withstand. For a moment it seemed that Merry and Hodge would be swept off their feet, overthrown, crushed.

Hodge was a fighter. He had a temper like a cold chisel, and he did not fear anything that walked. Frank knew the caliber of his Fardale chum, and he was glad that Hodge happened to be with him.

A big fellow got Bart by the throat, after Hodge had sent two others reeling backward before cracking blows, and for some seconds it seemed that Frank's friend would be overcome.

But Bart broke the hold of his assailant, gave him a terrible jab in the wind, and then smashed him under the ear, when he doubled over. That put him out of the fight for a few moments at least.

The others were ready to come at Bart again by this time. They were cursing in a manner that told they were genuine toughs of the slums.

"Kill der bloke!" snarled one.

"Give it to him, Bill!" howled the other.

"That's right!" cried Hodge fiercely. "Come right on and give it to me! You'll find me here!"

One of them succeeded in striking him a blow on the cheek that cut his face and started the blood to flowing; but that did not daze Bart for a second, and he got a kick at the ruffian that doubled him over and made him gasp and groan.

Frank could use his feet, as well as his hands. He had learned the trick in France, where a style of boxing with the feet is taught. When a man can strike and kick with equal skill he is a dangerous antagonist, and it was not long before the ruffians found they had a Tartar in Merriwell.

Frank watched his chance and then tried to tear the handkerchief from the face of the leader of the gang, but he failed in this, although he knocked the fellow's hat from his head.

"I know you just the same!" cried Merry. "You have proved to be just the kind of a fellow I thought you were!"

"You know too much!" the fellow flung back. "You won't know so much in a few minutes!"

One of the other ruffians came in on Frank, who made a feint to strike, and then kicked him in the neck with such violence that he went down as if he had been shot. He lay on the ground like a log, and it was plain he had been knocked out.

"Blazes!" howled one of the others. "He's knocked Shiner out!"

"All I want is a good chance at you," laughed Merriwell. "You'll get the same dose, my fine fellow!"

"Hammer him—hammer him!" panted the leader. "Get in on him quick! We must do this job before the police come!"

He rushed at Frank, who attempted to kick him over, as he had the other chap, but failed, for

the fellow dodged. In a moment two of them were pressing Frank close.

"Here's where we do a little in-fighting," said Merry, as if he were jubilant over the prospect.

It was hot for some seconds, but it proved too hot for Merriwell's assailants. Frank had a way of causing them to bother each other, and it sometimes seemed that one could have done much better against him.

But Frank was not to escape without a scratch. He was unable to watch every enemy, and a blow on the ear made his head ring and staggered him.

"Now we have him!" shouted the leader.

They sprang upon him, and Frank found himself forced to his knees.

"Down with him!"

He fought them off, but they assailed him like furious tigers. He was struck repeatedly while on his knees.

It happened that Hodge had beaten off his foes for a moment, and he saw Merry's peril. With a growl such as might have issued from the throat of a wild beast, he whirled to aid his friend.

Crack! crack!—with two blows Bart sent two fellows spinning, and then he dragged Frank to his feet.

"Much hurt?" he asked.

"No, not a bit," was the cool answer.

The ruffians were astounded by the fight made by the two fellows they had expected to overcome with ease. They had never before struck anything just like that, and, for a moment, they hesitated.

The leader, however, was raving like a madman, made insanely furious by the rebuff.

"At 'em again! at 'em again!" he fumed. "I'll make it ten more each. Do 'em up some way!"

A scornful laugh came from Frank.

"So these are your hired bruisers, my fine chap!" he cried. "Well, they are fit associates for a creature of your low instincts. It's a hundred to one you land behind the bars with the rest of them."

The fellow urged his satellites to a fresh attack, and they came at the boys once more. The one Frank kicked had recovered and joined in the new assault, although he took care not to get another one from Merry's feet, for which he had a healthy respect.

The fight was resumed with fresh vigor, but still Frank and Bart held their own, for they had been given a few moments to recover their breath.

"Why, this is a regular cinch!" cried Frank as with a corking left-hander he bowled one of the masked rascals over. "I haven't struck so much sport as this in an age! Hit hard, Bart—hit hard!"

No need to tell Hodge to hit hard; he was putting in his best licks, and they were counting. Blood was running down his face, but he did not realize he had been touched at all.

Again Frank resorted to the use of his feet, and he sent one chap back with a sharp kick in the middle, while another caught his heel on the back.

Then it was that one of the ruffians cried:

"We can't do 'em without the others. Call the guards!"

A shrill whistle cut the air, and it was answered from up and down the street.

"There are more coming, Bart!" cried Merriwell. "Put as many of these fellows out of the game as you can before the others get here! This has turned out to be a very warm evening!"

CHAPTER XXXV—MERRIWELL'S CLOSE CALL

Frank had quite forgotten his burned hands; there was no time to think of them then. Had both arms been in splints, he would have tried to defend himself just the same.

Down the street came a running figure; up the street came another. They were two of the gang, who had been set to watch for the approach of officers.

Although there were three of the ruffians to one of the boys they had attacked, the gang had been forced to call on the watchers for assistance!

"What's the matter?" panted one, as he came up. "You're making an awful racket! Can't you do them two stiffs?"

"Get at 'em!" ordered the fellow whose coat was turned. "It'll take all of us to do the job."

"All of you may not be able to do it," cried Merry.

But the two fellows who had been on guard were fresh, and they pitched in fiercely. In a short time Bart and Frank found they were being overpowered. They were blinded by blows and beaten breathless, but still they fought.

Hark! What was that? The sound of singing from a distance—the old, familiar song:

"Here's to good Old Yale—drink it down!

Here's to good Old Yale—drink it down!

Here's to good Old Yale,

She's so hearty and so hale—

Drink it down! Drink it down! down! down!"

From Frank Merriwell's lips pealed a wild cry—the Yale yell. It echoed along the street, and the distant singing stopped. The cry was answered!

"Help, fellows!"

There was another answer, and soon running feet were heard.

"A thousand furies!" snarled the leader of the ruffians. "Those other fellows are coming!"

Then he made a desperate lunge at Frank, who saw something bright glitter in his fingers. Merriwell avoided the thrust, but heard a cutting sound as the bright instrument slashed his coat.

Frank knew the wretch had struck at him with an open knife, and again he snatched for that handkerchief. This time he caught it and tore it from the fellow's face.

But the leader of the ruffians turned and ran like a deer. Merry would have followed, but, in trying to do so, he stumbled over one of the gang who had been knocked down.

This fellow grappled with Frank, and then Mulloy, Diamond, Rattleton, Gallup, Browning and Dunnerwust came running up.

"Pwhat's this?" cried Barney, excitedly. "Is it a schrap, an' Oi not in it? Did yez ivver see th' loikes av this!"

"Wal, gol darn it all!" puffed Ephraim. "If this don't beat all natur! Where's the rest of um?"

"They ran when they heard you coming," said Frank; "but I have this chap all right."

"Shimminy Ghristmas!" gurgled Hans. "Uf I hadn't peen here before, dem vellers vould peen licked britty queek, ain'd id! Ven I heard dem comin' they all rund away off. I pet your life dey known vot vas coot vor mineseluf. Yaw!"

"Blame the luck!" grunted Browning. "Think of running like that and then arriving too late to get into the fight! It's disgusting!"

"Who were they, Frank?" asked Diamond.

"I think I know the leader, and I have the handkerchief he had tied over his face. As for this fellow— No, you don't!"

The one Merry was holding made a desperate attempt to break away, but was prevented.

And, now the fight was over, a policeman approached, saw the crowd, and rapped a call for assistance. Within a minute three officers were on the spot.

Frank and Bart told their story. At first the officers were inclined to discredit it, thinking there had been a street row among those found there by them, but when they saw Merriwell's captive and obtained a good look at the fellow's face one of them cried:

"It's Shiner Gregg! He belongs to the Stone Alley gang."

Then Frank showed where his coat had been slit open by a knife, told where he was stopping, and satisfied the officers that he was telling nothing but the truth.

Two of the officers took Shiner Gregg to a police station, while another accompanied the boys to the hotel, where he satisfied himself that they had told the truth, and made Merriwell and Hodge promise to appear against Gregg.

After washing up, Frank and Bart found they were not severely scarred; but that it had been a close call for Merry was made evident by the slash in his coat.

"Well," said Frank, as he held up the coat and looked at it ruefully, "that finished your career, but you did one good job to-night. You smothered the fire that would have burned a very saucy and very attractive young lady. I think I will keep you as a reminder of the occasion."

"It's fortunate we were out strolling around after leaving the theatre," said Rattleton. "We were feeling rather gay, and did not seem to want to turn in so early."

"New Yorkers say Philadelphia is slow," grunted Browning; "but I'll be hanged if it doesn't seem to be a hot town! I think New Yorkers are sore on the place."

"Slow," drawled Ephraim Gallup, with a queer twist of his homely face. "Thutteration! There's more goin' on here than there ever was araound aour taown up in Varmont, an' we uster think that was purty gosh-darn lively sometimes. Once we had a dorg fight, a thunderstorm an' Jeduthin Blodgett's chimbney burnt aout, all in one afternoon, an' I tell yeou things was all fired lively up raound them diggin's. But I swan Philadelfy has more goin' on than that 'most any day but Sunday."

Some of the boys laughed at this, but Hans stared at Ephraim in a bewildered way.

"Dot must peen a lively down," he said. "Uf you vos to life there a great vile I oxbect id would turn my hair gray."

For a long time the boys talked over the street encounter, and then Frank produced the handkerchief he had snatched from the face of the leader of the ruffians. After looking it over carefully he uttered an exclamation.

"What is it, Merry?" asked Rattleton.

"I have made a discovery," said Merriwell, with a look of satisfaction, as he restored the handkerchief to his pocket.

"What sort of a discovery?"

"One that may prove of great importance."

"Don't be so mysterious about it," urged Diamond. "Tell us what you have discovered."

"Wait," said Frank. "I will tell you later."

"Do you think you know any of the ruffians who assaulted you besides the one caught?"

"I fancy so. Let's go to bed now. We can talk this over to-morrow."

Frank went to bed and slept as well as if nothing serious had happened.

This was not the case with Hodge. His blood had not cooled, and he turned, twisted, muttered and grated his teeth in his sleep. Diamond, who slept with him, got out of bed, went into the room where Hans and Ephraim were sleeping together, awoke the Dutch boy, and sternly ordered him to go into the other room and sleep with Hodge.

Dunnerwust protested some, but as he was stupefied with sleep and being somewhat afraid of the Virginian, he finally obeyed.

Toward morning there was a wild outcry in that room, a thump on the floor and sounds of a struggle. Then Hans was heard calling:

"Hellup! hellup! Somepody gome und took him off! Uf you don'd gome und done dot britty queek he peen sure to kilt himseluf! Hellup! Fire!"

Several of the boys rushed into the room, and when they turned on the light, an astonishing spectacle was revealed.

Hans and Bart were struggling on the floor, all tangled up in the clothes they had dragged from the bed. Hodge was striking out wildly, muttering:

"Come on! come on! We are enough for you! Three to one is small odds! Back to back, Merry! We'll fight as long as we can stand! They can't lick us! They never could lick us at Fardale, Merry!"

One of his fists landed on the Dutch boy's ear, and Hans squawked louder than ever.

"Hoch, I peen gone grazy!" he cried. "Took him off I toldt you! Uf you don'd took him off he vill kilt mineseluf! Murter! Id hurts heem ven he hits me dot vay!"

Frank and Jack grasped them and dragged them apart, but Hodge turned on Diamond and gave him a crack that sent him up against the wall.

"Come on, the whole of you!" he shouted. "You can't do us up! Give it to them, Merry!"

Hans broke away and tried to crawl under the bed, wildly crying:

"Oxcuse me vile I look vor my vatch! Id might step on somepody uf I don'd took care uf id."

Merriwell made a leap and caught hold of Hodge, whom he ran up against the wall, where he held him, speaking sharply:

"Steady, Bart, old man! It's all over! We have cleaned out the whole gang."

Bart struggled a moment, and then a wondering light came into his eyes, which had been wide open and staring all the while. His hands dropped at his sides, and he ceased to struggle.

"What's the matter?" he faintly asked.

"You have had a rather lively touch of nightmare," explained Merry.

"Nighdtmares!" cried Hans from under the bed, in a smothered voice. "Uf he didn'd haf a whole heardt of vild hosses you vos a liar!"

The racket had aroused a number of guests, and the night watchman and two bellboys

appeared. It took considerable smooth talk from Frank to convince them that murder had not been attempted in that room, but the curious ones departed at last, although there were mutterings of "disgraceful," "an outrage" and "ought to be fired."

Frank laughed when it was all over.

"We'll be lucky if we are not fired in the morning," he said.

Hans refused to go to bed with Bart again, when he had been dragged from beneath the bed.

"Uf I done dot, you vos a fool!" he squealed. "I vould peen in dancher uf killin' me pefore der mornings! Shack Tiamon', you haf no peesness to done noothing like dot! Id vos an imbosition on me, und you von't stood id!"

So Diamond was obliged to sleep with Bart, but Hodge did not create any further disturbance. The remainder of the night passed quietly enough.

CHAPTER XXXVI—AN EXPLOSION COMING

When Bart and Frank presented themselves at the police court on the following day to testify against Shiner Gregg, the judge took them into a private room and heard the story they had to tell, after which he said:

"I am going to hold this Gregg a day or two for a purpose before I give him a trial. The police are looking for some information they believed the prisoner could give them, and they proposed to 'put on the screws.'"

Frank and Bart assured the judge that they would remain in Philadelphia four days and could be found at the Continental when wanted. Then they were allowed to depart.

Immediately after lunch Merriwell started for Charlie Creighton's, feeling a strong anxiety to know how severely Fanny Darling had been burned.

As for Merriwell, he was astonished to find he had not been seriously injured by the fire. The prompt attention given his hands by the doctor had saved them from blistering, and, although they were red and tender, they promised to be all right in a day or two. He had them done up again, and was advised to keep the air from them as much as possible till the following day.

Creighton and his sister were at home, and they welcomed Frank warmly.

"I called at the Continental this forenoon to see you," said Charlie; "but you and Hodge were out. However, the fellows told me your hands seemed much better than you had expected they would be."

"Yes," nodded Frank; "they seem to be coming out all right. The stuff the doctor put on them appears to have worked marvels."

"I am so glad!" exclaimed Mabel. "It seemed terrible to think you might be hurt so you could not play football this fall, for Charlie says Yale could not get along without you."

"Creighton is too kind!" exclaimed Frank. "He overestimates my abilities. But I wish to ask about Miss Darling. Have you heard from her to-day?"

"Yes, I have seen her. One of her arms is quite severely burned, but that seems to be all. She says she will be all right in two or three days, at most."

"I am very glad to hear that, for I feared her burns might be more severe than was supposed at first. I reached her as soon as possible after she screamed."

"It's amazing to me that you reached her as quickly as you did," declared Charlie. "Wallace Hegner was with her, and he did not find an opportunity to lift his hand to help her."

"He acted like a coward!" exclaimed Mabel, her eyes flashing. "He retreated from her, and he has been rewarded for his pusillanimous act."

"Rewarded—how?"

"When he tried to see her last evening after her burns had been attended, she refused to have anything to say to him, and she says she'll never speak to him again."

"Well," said Merry, slowly, "I don't know but that fire was a good thing if it has opened her eyes to Hegner's true character."

Creighton flushed and looked abashed, whereupon Frank quickly cried:

"I beg your pardon, old man! I made a break then, for I forgot you introduced us."

"It's all right," declared Creighton; "and it is my place to beg your pardon for the introduction; but I assure you that I did not dream Hegner was the fellow he has since proved to be. If I had—Well, I scarcely think you would have met him at my home, and I am sure you will not see him here again. You have done considerable to show him up, and——"

"I may do more."

"More? How?"

"I cannot explain just now, but I am not through with Mr. Hegner. Yesterday I struck him with a boxing glove. The next time I strike it will be a far more severe blow, and I shall not use my hands."

"That sounds queer from you, Merriwell. At college you have been considered altogether too kind to your enemies."

"I am ready to be easy with an enemy who shows any redeeming features, and I am aware that a fellow may dislike me and still be a good fellow at heart. Such things happen. I have my own failings, and I believe in doing by others as I would that they should do by me. But a fellow like this Hegner—well, I doubt if he has a single redeeming trait, and I consider it my duty to expose him as far as possible. That's all."

Mabel was regarding Frank admiringly, and she was thinking that he could be stern and unrelenting if the occasion demanded, although he was naturally generous and forgiving.

After a little, Merriwell told of his street encounter of the previous evening, and his hearers listened with breathless interest.

"Great Scott!" cried Charlie. "You must have had a close call! And you think the object was not robbery?"

"I am sure it was not."

"Then the gang must have attacked you with the sole object of doing you up."

"That's right."

"And you think you know one of them?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"That is something I will tell you later. Shiner Gregg may be induced to squeal. Look out for an explosion, Creighton. It is coming."

Two days later, while walking along one of Philadelphia's principal streets, Merriwell noticed a fellow who was blocking the path of a girl with his person and speaking to her excitedly, although she was trying to pass to reach a carriage that stood at the curb.

"It's Hegner!" muttered Frank. "And the girl is—Fanny Darling! She is trying to avoid him, and the rascal is— Confound him!"

The exclamation escaped Frank's lips as he saw Wallace Hegner grasp the girl by the wrist, lean forward and hiss something in her ear.

Frank made a spring, and as he came forward, Hegner happened to turn his head slightly and see him. The girl also saw him, and a look of relief came over her face.

Hegner scowled blackly and hesitated, then he dropped Fanny's wrist and hurried away.

Merriwell was tempted to follow him, but Fanny called to him, and he stopped. As he did so, lifting his hat with a graceful movement that was natural for him, her face, pale a moment before, grew crimson.

But she did not hesitate; immediately she came forward and held out her hand, saying:

"Mr. Merriwell, I said I would ask your pardon on my knees, but I can't do it here in the street, and so perhaps you will not expect it."

"Well, hardly!" laughed Frank. "I don't know why you should ask my pardon at all."

"I do! I ask it now, Mr. Merriwell! You were a gentleman, and I know I was not a lady. Oh, I have been so ashamed of myself when I thought it all over and realized what sort of an opinion you must have formed of me!"

"Miss Darling!"

"And I am trying to leave off slang, although I will make a break occasionally—there! I want to thank you for the heroic manner in which you came to my rescue when my clothes were on fire."

"I am afraid you make too much of that. I fail to see where the heroism came in."

"That—that fellow you just drove away did not make a move to help me, and he was the nearest of anybody! I don't care, it was heroic of you!"

"All right," smiled Frank; "if you are determined to have it that way, I'll have to let you

regard me as a hero."

She looked him straight in the eyes, and softly said:

"I do!"

After a moment, her eyes drooped before his steady gaze, and he saw she had long lashes that almost touched her cheeks.

"Mr. Merriwell."

"Yes, Miss Darling."

"I am afraid it may seem bold, and I know you think me far too forward now——"

"No, no—I protest!"

"I can't help it if you do think so. I can't be strictly conventional at all times. We are standing in the street, where we must attract more or less notice. There is my carriage. Will you ride with me?"

"With pleasure."

The footman in livery held open the door for them to enter, and then that door closed behind them. The dignified footman ascended to his seat, and the coachman started up the horses. The closed carriage rolled away.

For some moments Frank and Fanny were silent, both seeming embarrassed. At last, he asked her about the burns she had received, and they chatted in a commonplace way for some time.

"Do you know," he said, "when I heard you scream that night and saw the fire, my heart nearly leaped out of my mouth. I was afraid I could not reach you in time to keep the fire from your face and neck."

"What if you hadn't! I'm not a raving beauty now, and it would not have damaged my looks very much."

"Don't say that, Miss Darling! It would have been terrible! And you are pretty! I am sincere!"

She gasped for breath.

"Really—really, Mr. Merriwell! It's impossible! Why, there is Mabel!"

"I know. She is charming, but to my eyes, you are far prettier. Don't think I am trying taffy, for I give you my word, Miss Darling, that I am not."

"Why, I—I thought you were dead stuck on Mabel!" cried the wondering girl.

"Not that. I like her, and she has treated me very nicely."

"Yes, far better than I have; but that night, after you had saved me, I heard the doctor say, that if you did not save my life, at least you had prevented my frightful disfigurement. Oh, you will never know the sensation that came over me then! Such a sense of shame, for I thought how I had treated you. But—but I want to tell you something now, Mr. Merriwell. It is awfully hard for me to say, but I must say it. I did not treat you that way because I disliked you. No! no! no! It was for just the other reason. I liked you too well—there! I thought you did not care anything for me and was all taken up with Mabel, so I tried to get a dab at you every time I could. It was mean—I know it! I didn't expect you to forgive me, for I am sure I did not deserve it. And then, after all the mean things I had done, you passed all those near me when I was in danger and saved me! I could have died from shame!"

She was sobbing now, although fighting back the tears. He did his best to soothe her, and succeeded very well.

"I think we understand each other very well now," he said.

The closed carriage rolled on. The coachman pulled down the horses to a slower pace, as if he knew there was no need to hurry. The footman sat up very straight, with folded arms and solemn, dignified countenance, as if such a thing as curiosity had never entered his heart, and he had no thought of the young couple within the carriage.

Yes, they understood each other very well at last.

CHAPTER XXXVII—THE LAST BLOW—CONCLUSION

The gymnasium of the Olympic Athletic Club was crowded. There were seats all around the room, and a roped-off ring in the center. A referee and two judges had been chosen. Hank Burk's second was Wallace Hegner, his trainer. Tom Jackson had a second who seemed to know his business.

The excitement was at fever heat, for the great match was about to begin. The principals came out and entered the ring, accompanied by their seconds. They wore bath robes, which were soon flung aside. Then the spectators cheered as they saw the two lads stripped to the waist.

On choice by lot the Olympic had secured the bout for themselves; but the guests of the Fairmount were admitted, so all of Frank Merriwell's friends were there.

But Frank—where was he?

"I can't understand it," declared Diamond. "It is most remarkable that he should not be here. I didn't suppose anything could keep him from this mill."

Hodge looked worried.

"He will be here," Bart declared. "You know he has promised a sensation, but I'm afraid he failed in securing the evidence he needs."

Tang!—the gong sounded.

Burk and Jackson advanced to shake hands.

Then it was that Frank came hustling into the room, looking flushed but triumphant. Hurrying to the ringside, he turned to the spectators and cried:

"This match must be stopped five minutes! I have something to tell you before it goes on!"

There was a murmur of astonishment and disapproval. The audience, their nerves tingling with the desire to see the boxers go at each other, were angered by the interruption.

"You can tell it afterward," cried a voice.

"No!" came firmly from Frank. "It must be told now, for it concerns this match. I know you all want to see fair play—with a very few exceptions. I tell you now that there is a job here, and I can prove it! This match is fixed!"

What a stir that created! For some moments it seemed that there would be a riot, but the excited spectators cooled down at last, although a dozen voices demanded the proof.

In the ring Hank Burk and Tom Jackson looked at each other in a startled way, while Wallace Hegner's face grew pale.

"What does he know?" asked Burk in a whisper.

"He can't know anything," said Jackson. "He is putting up a bluff."

Hegner found his voice and demanded that Merriwell be removed from the room. But it was too late, as he soon saw, for the young fellows who had heard his assertion were eager to hear more.

"I know you do not permit betting," Frank cried; "but there has been betting on this match. Large sums of money have been staked on the result, but a most surprising fact is that the principal backer of Jackson—the one who has furnished most of the money bet on him is the trainer of Burk, Mr. Wallace Hegner!"

Hegner gave a howl and made a rush for Frank, but Bruce Browning was on hand and interposed his massive form, grasping the furious lad by the collar and holding him helpless.

"I will tell you how I know this," Frank went on, speaking swiftly. "This Hegner has a grudge against me, and, with several of his friends, a gang of thugs, he attacked me the other night. In the fight I secured a handkerchief marked with his initials, and he came very near getting a knife into me. One of the gang was captured, a fellow known as Shiner Gregg. The police have been wanting to get hold of Gregg for some time, and when he fell into their hands they 'put on the screws.' As a result of the squeezing the fellow has confessed everything. He told how Mr. Hegner obtained his money to stake on this crooked match. Two weeks ago the jewelry store of Isaac Rosenfeld was entered and robbed. Gregg says Hegner planned the robbery and was one of the four concerned in it."

"It's a lie—a downright lie!" screamed Hegner, struggling to reach Frank. "Let me get at him! I will kill him!"

"It is the confession of Shiner Gregg," said Frank. "He says this match was fixed—that Jackson would win, and Burk would receive good pay for flunking. Here is the proof that I have spoken the truth."

He whistled, and into the room came six uniformed policemen. They quickly reached the ring, and Hegner, who had fought like a tiger to break from Browning, was collared, handcuffed and taken in charge.

By this time, in some mysterious manner, Burk and Jackson had disappeared. The spectators

were furious. They talked of tar and feathers.

Wallace Hegner, limp, white and crushed, was marched away between the officers. As he passed Merriwell he lifted his eyes, but they fell instantly, and his appearance was that of a whipped cur.

Frank's second blow had been a knockout.

Hegner was held for the Grand Jury, tried and convicted, for overwhelming evidence against him was obtained. As it seemed to have been his first offense, he was given a comparatively light sentence.

Frank pitied the fellow at last, for all the heart and life seemed gone out of him. Never before had Frank struck an enemy such a blow as that.

Burk and Jackson escaped from the Olympic with a portion of their clothes, and they took care to keep in hiding for a long time after that.

It was suspected that the judge had been tampered with, but this was never proved. That several of the Olympic men knew all about the game was certain, but Jackson and one other were the only ones expelled from the club.

Before leaving Philadelphia Frank Merriwell and his party attended a banquet given in their honor by the Fairmount Club. It was a jolly affair, for young lady guests were present and everything passed off finely.

There were speeches and toasts, and the mention of Merriwell's name always brought a tumultuous burst of applause.

A gay time was had for two days more in Philadelphia, their new-found friends doing everything possible to make the visit a pleasant one.

From the South came news that Harlow had escaped from jail by striking down a keeper. But he had been hit in the head with a club later on, and was now in the hospital.

"He won't come to trial just yet," said Frank. "And perhaps it is just as well."

"And now for Yale!" cried Jack. "Hurrah for old Eli!"

"So say we all of us!" shouted Harry.

And then a roar went up in which all of their new-found friends joined:

"Hurrah for old Eli! Hurrah for the brave boys of the Yale Combine!"

THE END.

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