

Standish Burt L.

**Frank Merriwell's Backers: or,
The Pride of His
Friends**



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CHAPTER I. IN THE TRAP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crack! Ping!

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

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

More than ever Merriwell admired the skill of the Indian. Thinking that the old fellow had instructed Dick in the craft which he knew so well, Frank believed such knowledge had not been acquired in vain. Some time Dick might find it very valuable to him.

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

"Oh, Merriwell!" called a voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, Merriwell!"

Frank lay perfectly still and made no answer.

"Oh, Merriwell!"

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

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

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

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

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

After a time they were silent.

They were satisfied that the trap held fast.

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

Merriwell needed sleep, and he did not hesitate to take it. It spoke well for his nerves that he could sleep under such circumstances. It may seem that it did not speak so well for his judgment. Still he knew that he would awaken at any sound of an alarming nature, and he believed those men

would rest content, satisfied that they had him caged where there was no possibility that he could give them the slip.

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

Then he slept again.

And so the night passed on.

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

"Oh, Merriwell!"

"Hello, yourself!"

"Are you hungry?"

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

"Are you thirsty?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ever gamble?" asked Frank.

"Oh, we sometimes take a chance."

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

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

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

"Say it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II. IN THE HANDS OF CIMARRON BILL

A shout quickly brought an answer.

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

"We're willing. Parley away."

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

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

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

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

"And how about the gentlemen below?"

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

"Is this all on the square?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frank smiled.

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

"There was last night."

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The varmint is sartin gone," he averred.

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

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

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

"Left you?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For what?"

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

"A message? What sort of a message?"

"A letter and some papers."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I did."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bill looked him over.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III. INTO THE NIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I allows, Sam, that we'd better be keerful, jest as the boss suggests, fer it ain't a whole lot healthy to have anything happen contrarywise to his wishes. Such bein' the case, I propose we tie up this here young gent some, so he'll not bring trouble on hisself an' us by tryin' to lope out."

Sam looked disappointed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To which Merry vouchsafed no retort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Sam did so.

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

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

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

The others had turned back.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV. IN THE OLD HUT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then I am thankful for the boss."

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

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

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

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

"Thar ain't no robbery about it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ruffian looked at him in apparent wonderment.

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

Then he went out.

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

That was a serious question.

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

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

"Good morning," said Frank.

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

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

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

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

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

The sentinel went out, closing the door.

Bill lighted a fresh cigarette.

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

"Possibly not," said Frank noncommittally.

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

"It's quite plain."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks!" laughed Merriwell.

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

"Thanks again!"

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

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

"Like 'most ev'rybody," said Bill, "I'm out fer the dust. That's what brought me up against you. I opined you'd be easy meat. I've sorter changed my mind. You look an' talk like a tenderfoot, but I take it that you has your eye-teeth cut, an' this yere ain't the first time you've seen Arizona."

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

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

"Well, I rather enjoy the strenuous life."

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

"Without doubt."

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

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

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

"Only that?" smiled Merry scornfully.

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

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

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

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

"All right."

Again Bill lighted a fresh cigarette.

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

Then Bill called the guard and sauntered out.

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

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

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

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

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

Frank smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monte laughed hoarsely.

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

The man after Frank dropped out.

Pinto Pede raised five dollars.

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

"How men' card?" asked the Mexican.

"I'll take two," said Monte.

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

Pede looked inquiringly at Merry.

"One card," said Frank.

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

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

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

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

"I tak' two," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The betting began.

Monte started it with a dollar.

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

Frank raised five.

Pede shoved in six dollars, and added another five.

"I tak' dis pot," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V. PINTO PEDE RECEIVES HIS LESSON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Merry had gathered the cards and was shuffling them.

"You may cut," he said.

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

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

Then he dealt.

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

Monte threw his down, with a cry of amazement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The guards also were near, watching every move closely.

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

Merry ate supper heartily.

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

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

"Oh, comfortable," carelessly answered Frank.

"Smoke?"

"Never do."

"Drink?"

"Out of my line."

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

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

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

"You're very complimentary!"

"I'm givin' it to ye straight. You're my style. Now, I wants ye ter know that I kin be of great service to ye, so I reckons it was well enough to tell ye what has been done. You sent them papers

to your brother in the East. Well, I has sent one of my best men a-chasin' the papers, an' he'll be sure to get 'em if it kin be did. If he succeeds, you'll be plumb out in the cold. Howsomever, in case we rigs up a partnership, it won't be nohow so bad, fer my man he brings me the papers, an' that fixes it all right. Savvy?"

"That is the way you look at it."

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

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

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"How do ye make it out?"

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

"How did you send them?"

"Registered mail."

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

"Well?"

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

"He may."

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

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

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

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

Bill frowned.

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

"Rather," laughed Frank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I have my doubts."

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

"That's speedy," confessed Frank.

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

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

"How?" demanded Sam contemptuously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Which you will never do."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

CHAPTER VI.

INJUN JOE TO THE RESCUE

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

The starlight came in at the small, square window.

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

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

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

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

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

There Frank found a dark form sitting on the ground.

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

It was Crowfoot, the faithful old redskin.

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

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

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

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

"How do we pass him?"

"Joe know. Leave it to him."

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

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

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

"All right. Coast clear."

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

"Him guard," said Joe.

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

"Him sleep."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No see him after leave you."

"He was sent away to follow you."

"No see him. He no bother me."

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

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

"The stamps are in operation," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's your report, Joe?"

"Bad men heap gone."

"Cimarron Bill and his gang?"

"Joe mean um."

"They have gone?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII.

MERRIWELL AND BIG MONTE

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

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

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

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

"He's coming out!" Merry decided.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did I reach him?" thought Frank anxiously.

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

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

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

But something told him his lead had not gone astray.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good Lord!" Merry cried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I must be there!" muttered Merriwell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

Monte closed up, obeying like a child.

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

"Hold up, thar! Who goes yander?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right," said Frank. "I had to ride through them, and they banged away at me to their satisfaction. I was lucky to come out with a whole skin."

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

"Big Monte."

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

The men began to murmur.

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

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

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

Somehow Frank Merriwell was ahead of them all.

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

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

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

"Let him die in peace."

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

Frank lifted one hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come on!" cried Jim Tracy.

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

CHAPTER VIII. THE DEATH-SHOT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

The first man was stone-dead.

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

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

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

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

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

But they drew back.

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

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

"I reckons that's correct."

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

The miners looked on in amazement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I fail to see what."

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

"Did I?"

"Sure thing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How you get shot?" he asked.

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

"Heem – he shoot you?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

"That's a good lot."

"Beel he do it."

"No doubt o' that, I reckons."

"Mebbe you an' I haf the chance."

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

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

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

"Don't count me into your deviltry."

"No count you?"

"No."

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

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

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

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

"You safe yourself if you help keel him."

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

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

"What are you driving at?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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