

Standish Burt L.

Frank Merriwell's Alarm: or, Doing His Best



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CHAPTER I. – ADRIFT IN THE DESERT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But we’ll never return.”

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

“He suggested it.”

“And you seconded the suggestion. We started out with a supply of water that we thought would last – ”

“We should have known better!”

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

Jack shot Harry a savage look.

“Be careful!” he said. “I don’t feel like standing too much! I am rather ugly just now.”

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

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

“Those water holes will not be easy to find.”

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

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

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

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

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

Diamond gave an exclamation of disgust.

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

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

“Shut up, will you! I’ve heard enough about that!”

“Drop it, Harry,” commanded Frank, warningly. “You’ve worn it out. Forget it.”

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

“Think so?” asked Rattleton.

“Sure.”

“Then give it a weigh.”

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

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

“Well, it was simply a case of retaliation.”

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

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

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

“Speaking of the punching bag,” said Frank, “makes me think of a good thing on Reggy Stevens. You know Stevens. He’s near-sighted. Goes in for athletics, and takes great delight in the fancy manner in which he can hammer the bag. Well, he went down into the country to see his cousin last spring. Some time during the winter his cousin had found a big hornets’ nest in the woods, and had cut it down and taken it home. He hung it up in the garret. First day Stevens was there he wandered up into the garret and saw the hornets’ nest hanging in the dim light. ‘Ho!’ said Reggy. ‘Didn’t know cousin had a punching bag. Glad I found it. I’ll toy with it a little.’ Then he threw off his coat and made a rush at that innocent looking ball. With his first blow he drove his fist clean through the nest. ‘Holy smoke!’ gasped Reggy; ‘what have I struck?’ Then the hornets came pouring out, for the nest was not a deserted one. They saw Reggy – and went him several better. Say, fellows, they didn’t do a thing to poor Reggy! About five hundred made for him, and it seemed to Reggy that at least four hundred and ninety-nine of them got him. His howls started shingles off the roof of that old house and knocked several bricks out of the chimney. He fell down the stairs, and went plunging through the house, with a string of hornets trailing after him, like a comet’s tail. The hornets did not confine themselves strictly to Reggy; some of them sifted off and got in their work on Reggy’s cousin, aunt, uncle, the kitchen girl, the hired man, and one of them made for the dog. The dog thought that hornet was a fly, and snapped at it. One second later that dog joined in the general riot, and the way he swore and yelled fire in dog language was something frightful to hear. Reggy didn’t stop till he got outside and plunged

his head into the old-fashioned watering trough, where he held it under the surface till he was nearly drowned. The whole family was a sight. And Reggy – well, he's had the swelled head ever since."

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

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

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

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

Suddenly a cry came from Diamond.

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

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

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

"Stop!" shouted Merriwell.

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop, Jack!" he shouted again.

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

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

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

Frank bent forward over the handlebars, muttering:

"Ride now as you never rode before!"

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

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

"Faster! faster!" panted Frank.

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

He heard a strange laugh – a wild laugh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Stop, Jack!”

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

“Hands off! Don’t try to hold me back! Can’t you see it, you fool! The lake – the lake!”

“There is no lake!”

“Yes, there is! You are blind! See it!”

“Stop, Jack! I tell you there is no lake!”

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

“Wait – listen a moment!” entreated Frank.

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

“Hands off!” he shouted. “If you try to stop me you’ll be sorry!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There is no lake."

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

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

"You lie!"

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

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

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

"Oh, I know you – I know!"

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

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

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

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

Frank allowed his friend to sit up.

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

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

There was no lake in sight.

CHAPTER II. – ON TO THE MOUNTAINS

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

“I told you there was no lake.”

“Then – then it must have been a mirage!”

“That is exactly what it was.”

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

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

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

“What do you mean?”

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

Jack was silent a few moments.

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

“Yes.”

Another brief silence.

“Frank.”

“Well, Jack?”

“I was mad.”

“You looked it.”

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

“Well, it’s all over now.”

“Yes, it is all over. The jig’s up!”

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

“The mountains! I shall never reach the mountains, Frank. I am done for – played out!”

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

“You never give up.”

“Well, I try never to give up.”

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

“Oh, never mind that! It’s all right, Jack.”

“I want you to say you forgive me.”

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

Diamond looked his admiration from his bloodshot eyes.

“You’re all right, Merry,” he hoarsely declared. “You always were all right. I knew it all along. Sometimes I get nasty, for I have a jealous nature, although I try to hold it in check. I never did try to hold myself in check in any way till I knew you and saw how you controlled your tastes and passions. That was a revelation to me, Merry. You know I hated you at first, but I came to admire you, despite

myself. I have admired you ever since. Sometimes the worst side of my nature will crop out, but I always know I am wrong. Forgive me for striking you.”

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

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

A look of determination came to Frank’s face.

“You shall not do anything of the kind!” he cried. “I won’t have it, Jack!”

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

“Come, Jack, make a bluff at it.”

“No use!”

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

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

“No! no!”

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

“That is one of the peculiar effects of the air out here.”

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

“Remember, I was told how to find water there.”

But this did not give the disheartened boy courage.

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

Then it was that Merriwell began to grow angry.

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

“Must?” came rather defiantly from Jack. “I’ll not be forced to do it!”

“Yes, you will!”

The Virginian looked at Frank in astonishment.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean that you will brace up and attempt to reach the mountains with the rest of us, or I’ll give you the blamest licking you ever had – and there won’t be any apologies afterward, either!”

That aroused Jack somewhat.

“You – you wouldn’t do that – now?” he faltered.

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

“But – but – ”

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

Diamond remonstrated weakly, but Frank seemed in sober earnest.

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

A sense of shame came over Jack.

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

“Of course you have.”

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

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

“What’s the use?” Diamond hoarsely whispered. “I tell you I can’t keep in the saddle!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it was dry!

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

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

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

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

“A well!” muttered Rattleton. “We’ll sink a shaft here!”

“Well, I don’t know!” murmured Browning.

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

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

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

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

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

“Merciful goodness! how sweet!” he gasped. “More, Frank – more!”

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

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

“Well, you can’t have another drop till the others have taken their turn – not a taste!”

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

“We’ll see!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He struck at you behind your back.”

“Never mind; he won’t do so again.”

“Oh, you don’t know!” muttered Diamond.

“Yes, I do,” declared Frank, with confidence.

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

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

CHAPTER III. – THE SKELETON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I believe we have some hard bread and jerked beef, haven’t we, Merry?” asked Browning.

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yah! yah!” laughed Toots. “Cayarn’t fool dat boy, chilluns! He knows his business, yo’ bet! Won’t s’prise me a bit if he teks us stret to a resyvoyer – no, sar!”

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

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

“Wow!” gasped Rattleton. “What’s struck him?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a time the others were speechless.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ask me something easy,” said Merriwell, shaking his head.

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

"But where is that person?"

"Not here, that is sure."

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

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

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

"Very likely."

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

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

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

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

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

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

So they proceeded to stack their wheels, Toots observing:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s the matter?” asked Merriwell.

“Look! Look!” gasped Harry, pointing toward the niche in the rocks. “The skeleton – it has disappeared!”

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

The mysterious skeleton had vanished!

CHAPTER IV. – “INDIANS!”

“Gone!” cried Jack.

“Sure!” nodded Frank.

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

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

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

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

Rattleton was excited.

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

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

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

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

“Mistah Dimund,” said the colored boy, with attempted dignity, “if yo’ll let dat debbil kerry yo’ off yo’ll nebber be missed – no, sar.”

Jack pretended he did not hear those words.

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

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

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

“Well, fat do you whind – I mean what do you find?” cried Rattleton, impatiently.

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

“So have my cigarettes!” groaned Browning.

“The treasure – is any of that there?” asked Harry, eagerly.

“Not a bit of it.”

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

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

Jack shrugged his shoulders and shivered, saying:

“There’s something uncanny about it, old man. I believe it is a warning.”

“Nonsense!” cried Frank. “What sort of a warning?”

“A warning of the fate that awaits all of us.”

“You are not well, Jack.”

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

“The vanishing of the mirage came about in a natural manner, but – ”

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

“It was removed by human hands – I will wager anything on that.”

“Then where is the human being who removed it?”

“I don’t know.”

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

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

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

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

“It am de debbil’s work!” asserted Toots. “Don’ yeh mek no misteks ’bout dat, chilluns.”

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

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

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

“Nor I,” nodded Rattleton.

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

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

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

“Here’s good-by to the vanishing skeleton for to-night,” cried Frank.

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

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

“O-oh, Lordy!”

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

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

The other lads looked at each other in perplexity.

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

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

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

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

“We don’t seem able to do much of anything now. Come on.”

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

“Stop!”

“Oh, riv us a guest – I mean give us a rest!” flung back Rattleton.

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

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

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

“Well, what are you going to do?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He has wonderful nerve!” thought Merriwell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Indians!” palpitated Harry Rattleton.

CHAPTER V. – BLUE WOLF TRIES THE BICYCLE

“Indians!” echoed Jack Diamond.

“Indians?” grunted Bruce Browning, astonished.

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

“Turn!” commanded Frank – “turn to the left, and we’ll make a run to get back through the pass.”

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

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

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

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

“Stop, fellows!” cried Merriwell. “We mustn’t run away and leave them! Come back here!”

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

“Up, old fellow – up and onto your wheel! We may be able to get away now! We’ll make a bluff for it.”

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

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

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

Browning assumed a defensive attitude, muttering:

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

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

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

“Ugh! ugh! ugh!” grunted the others.

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

“Well, this is a scrolly old jape – I mean a jolly old scrape!” fluttered Rattleton. “We’re in for it!”

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

Frank singled out the tall Indian and spoke to him.

“How do you do?” he said.

“How,” returned the Indian, with dignity.

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

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

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

“Jee! he can talk United States!” muttered Rattleton.

“Talk it!” said Bruce, in disgust. “He can chew it, that’s all.”

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

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

Browning lifted his cap and felt for his scalp.

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

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

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

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

"I am afraid it does," confessed Browning.

Diamond got upon his feet, assisted by Frank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"O-oh, Lord!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go ahead, Bruce," directed Frank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wow!” howled Blue Wolf.

“Oh, my poor bicycle!” groaned Browning, once more.

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

“Ugh!” grunted the watching Indians, solemnly.

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

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

“Yah!” snarled the unlucky Indian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Heap bad medicine!” he observed.

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

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

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

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

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

“Say, that is great, old man!” enthusiastically whispered Rattleton in Merriwell’s ear. “Keep it up.”

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

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

“Ugh!”

“All right,” said Frank. “I’ll show you how it is done.”

Then he motioned for the savages to stand aside.

“No try to run ’way,” warned Black Feather. “Injun shoot um.”

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

CHAPTER VI. – TRICK RIDING

The Indians made room for Frank to mount and ride.

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

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

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

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

The Indians nodded and looked pleased.

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

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

“Heap good!” observed Black Feather.

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

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

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

“Heap much good!” declared Black Feather, growing enthusiastic.

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

“What more white boy can do?”

“Several things, but I’ll have to make a larger circle.”

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

“Go ’head,” directed Black Feather.

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

“Paleface boy great medicine!” said Black Feather.

“Ugh!” grunted all the Indians but Blue Wolf.

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

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

“Much big!” confessed the chief. “Do some more.”

“All right. Catch onto this.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wait and see.”

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

“Perhaps so.”

“Of course they will!”

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

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

The Indians were more pleased and astonished than ever.

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

Again the Indians grunted.

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

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

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

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

“He’s done gone an’ lef us!” wailed Toots.

“That’s what he has!” grated Diamond – “left us to the mercy of these miserable redskins! That’s a fine trick!”

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

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

“What you thought doesn’t cut any ice. He’ll come back.”

“After we are murdered.”

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

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

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

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

“I’ll take chances on it,” muttered Bruce, giving up quietly.

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

“Deciding how they will kill us,” said Diamond, gloomily.

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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