

Standish Burt L.

**Frank Merriwell's Champions:
or, All in
the Game**



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Frank Merriwell's Champions; Or, All in the Game:*

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Burt L. Standish Frank Merriwell's Champions; Or, All in the Game

CHAPTER I – FRANK AND HIS FRIENDS

Ping! pang! crash!

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

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

“What’s wrong, Frank?”

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

In single file behind Frank Merriwell and his chum, Bart Hodge, came the other members of the bicycle party – fat and lazy Bruce Browning; the gallant Virginian, Jack Diamond; merry-hearted Harry Rattleton; the Yankee youth, Ephraim

Gallup; the Dutch boy, Hans Dunnerwust; the lad with Irish blood in his veins and a brogue to boot, Barney Mulloy, and Toots, the colored boy, who when at home worked around the Merriwell homestead.

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

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

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

"It's a violin," Frank regretfully announced, picking up the

instrument that had been crushed by his wheel and holding it for the others to see. "I don't – "

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

anything that will make me want to eat my words!"

The statement was not without effect.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hammond gave Barney a quick glance of hate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

it that way!”

CHAPTER II – THE LAKE LILY ATHLETIC CLUB

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Barney Mulloy and Harry Rattleton hitched their chairs nearer.

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

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

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

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

“Are they summer visitors?” asked Rattleton.

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

“We’ve met him!” grunted Browning.

“About challenges. What is their character?” questioned Merriwell.

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

Colson looked hopefully at Merriwell and his companions.

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

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

“Av it’s thim chumps upon the hill!” exclaimed Barney Mulloy.

Merriwell nodded.

“I think I’d like that, by thutter!” declared Ephraim Gallup.

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

The others assented, each after his own peculiar manner.

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

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

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

"We must see the landlord of the hotel first," said Merriwell, "for we have already registered here, and he may interpose objections to our summary leave-taking. But you may count on it that we will be with you without much delay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, go chase yourself out of here!" begged Bruce. "I'm

already sick, and your weak jokes make me sicker.”

“It’s because he’s a Shaker.”

Browning groaned and turned his face toward the wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack Diamond flushed and pulled out his own timepiece.

"We've ten minutes to spare, if my watch is right!" he asserted.

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

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

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

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

had reason to know.

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

"I suppose you understand how the scores are to be counted?" inquired Hammond, glad to change the subject, for he did not like the look that had come into Diamond's dark face. "A hit in the gold counts nine, in the red seven, in the blue five, in the black three, and in the white one."

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

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

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

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

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

"It is only fair that it should be measured in our presence,"

continued Frank. "Errors can happen, you know, and as the rules call for sixty yards and we have been practicing for that we don't want to run any risks by shooting at any other distance."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whir-r-r – thud!

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

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

“Heavens! Can’t I do better than that?” Carter growled.

Sep Colson had the lists of the members of the two clubs, and

he called Jack Diamond's name next.

Diamond stepped forward confidently and let his arrow fly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

it is called a thirty-pound bow.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER III – SHOOTING AT THE DISK OF GOLD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But Dunnerwust is just as liable to shoot backwards as forwards,” declared Rattleton, who was ready for a laugh, now

that he knew Toots was unhurt. "He's like the cross-eyed man. You can't be sure that he's going to shoot in the direction he looks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In the red – seven."

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

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

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

“In the gold – nine!” cried the marker, as Hammond’s arrow struck, and then the Blue Mountain boys sent up a cheer.

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

“In the gold – nine!” cried the marker, again, almost before Hammond’s friends had ceased their cheering, and then it was the turn of Merriwell’s followers.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oxcuse me!” supplicated the Dutch boy. “Dot string slipped der arrow py ven I dry to fix him. Shust eferypoty stant away off,

now, so I vill nod ged hurted.”

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

“In the white – one!” shouted the marker.

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

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

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

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

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

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

possible he could handle a bow at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Seven – in the red!" cried the marker.

Then, as Ward Hammond followed:

"Nine – in the gold!"

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

"Here are the leading scores, as revised after that last shoot,"

announced the youth who kept the score card, reading from the card, while the excited and anxious lads gathered closely about him. "Ward Hammond, 145; Frank Merriwell, 140."

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

Again Frank faced the target and let his arrow fly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grasping the bow in the middle with his left hand, he placed the notch of the feathered arrow on the middle of the string

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the size of pin points.

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

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

“Look out!” screamed Diamond, jumping to his feet.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV – BRUCE BROWNING'S ADVENTURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I dunno ez I’ve any call ter be helped!” she asserted, starting back and giving a last look at the arrow, which lay on the grass at

her feet, where she had flung it as if it were a snake. "Leastways, I 'low ez how I kin make my way home. I war a good 'eal more skeered than hurt."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Perhaps we'd better gollow the firl – I mean follow the girl,"

suggested Rattleton. "She may have tumbled down again."

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

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

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

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

While the boys talked and speculated, Nell Thornton was hastening on through the laurel scrub, unmindful of the stabbing pain in her shoulder; and, at the same time, Bruce Browning, wrapped in a heavy coat and with a handkerchief knotted about

his shivering neck, was advancing slowly and languidly up the path in the direction of the archery grounds.

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

Nell Thornton, who had struck into this path from the woods, came into view, and was seen to reel and lurch like a boat in a gale.

Browning stopped and stared.

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

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

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

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

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

distance below.

“Just the thing!” he thought. “I’ll carry her down there!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Whar – whar am I?” she demanded, putting up a hand protestingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You are in no condition to go alone, Miss – Miss – ”

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

Still, Browning could see that she was pleased.

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

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

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

“I dunno what dad’ll say ’bout that,” she observed, shyly. “He allus declar’s ez he ain’t got no use fur citified people, with thar store clo’es, an’ sich. So I reckon it’d be an uncommon good piece

o' hoss sense ef you'd track back up the hill."

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

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

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

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

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

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

assistance.”

Then he lifted his cap, and moved grumblingly away.

“Good-by!” she called, timidly.

Bruce turned and faced her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I can inquire my way there, if nothing else,” he reflected, “and perhaps if it seems impossible for me to get home, I can find a bed for the night.”

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

He had returned to Bob Thornton’s cabin!

CHAPTER V – HAMMOND’S PLOT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Air ye goin' up thar ter-night?" the younger man drawled.

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

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

Then he almost groaned aloud as he thought of the dark woods and the paths that seemed little better than squirrel tracks, where he had already lost himself, and could hardly hope to do better in a wild race for the cottages against these miscreants.

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

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

He was on the point of making a dash and trusting to his heels for safety, for, though he was large-limbed and heavy, the bicycle trip across the continent had trained him down into fair condition for running, and the malarial trouble that seemed to have fastened on him had not yet materially affected his strength.

But he was kept from this by the voice of Nell Thornton, who entered the cabin at this juncture, singing that old, old song of the backwoods:

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

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

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

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

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

The man on the bench, chancing to glance around the corner of the cabin toward the increasing light, had seen Bruce clearly outlined against the moon’s silver rim. His instant thought was

that Bruce was the man against whom he and Bob Thornton had been warned – that here was the officer of the revenue service, with head pressed close to the cabin wall, having already spotted Bob Thornton as a moonshiner and tracked him to his home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hollow groan.

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

She was out of the cabin in a flash.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sam Turner raised the club again.

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

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

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

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

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

She broke the silence.

“Fore God, Sam Turner, I tell ye you hev made a mistake! That man hev never hed nuthin ter do with the revnoo. He

belongs up ter the village with them thar summer folks. It's bloody murder ef ye hev killed him!"

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

Browning groaned again, and moved.

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

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

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

He stooped toward Bruce.

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

Turner caught her and hurled her from him.

"Will you quit a-naggin' of me, Nell Thornton? I'm a-goin' ter drag him inter t'other room, an' tie him up fer yer ole dad ter

look at when he gits back. I 'low I'll hev ter tell him, too, that you've acted clean crazy over the feller."

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

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

CHAPTER VI – NELL RETURNS A KINDNESS

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

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

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

All this was startling enough to Bruce Browning.

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

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

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

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

query.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Browning saw that her gaze was not fixed so much on

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Browning moved his head to show that he understood.

"Do ye need ter hev me holp ye?" she whispered, stooping till

her lips again touched his ear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And I'm obliged to you, Nell – Miss Thornton!" declared Browning, with an uncommon warmth of feeling. "Likely I should have been killed if you hadn't come to my assistance. And

at such a fearful risk! I owe you my life!"

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

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

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

Her lips parted in a smile.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII – BY THE WATERS OF LAKE LILY

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

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

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

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

Merriwell's party, with Colson, Tetlow and others, came out of a cottage at that moment. They wore a sober, serious air. They had been talking the thing over, and were intending to institute another search through the woods and along the shores of the lake, though they had already made a number of such searches. Merriwell was to speak to the people, and explain why it was they could not enter the swimming match, and was to announce that if nothing was heard of Browning by noon, the lake would then be dragged for his body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was ten o'clock, an hour later than the time fixed, when

Frank Merriwell and Sep Colson, who had been selected by the members of the Lake Lily Club to uphold the club honors in the swimming match, came out of their dressing-room in the boathouse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Take another dose of quineen, and keep off that chill,” said

Rattleton, extending the capsules toward Bruce.

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

“Swally anither dose av quoinin an’ kape aff thot ager,” advised Barney, doing the same.

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

“Mistah Browning’ll make you have wuss dan de fevah an’ chilluns,” warned Toots. “T’s su’mised dat Mistah Browning ain’t feelin’ berry good dis mawnin – no, sar!”

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

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

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

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

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

"I believe you are right," assented Browning.

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

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

"Ready!" ran along the line.

"One, two, three – go!"

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

"They're off!" some one yelled.

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

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

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

Craig Carter, who had been seated in a boat beside the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

increased.

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

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

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

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

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

Inch by inch, foot by foot, and yard by yard, Frank gained on his opponent and bitter enemy. His head drew alongside of

Hammond's thrashing heels, forged up to Hammond's side, came up to Hammond's shoulder and neck, then passed him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

struck harmlessly on the water.

When Frank came up, he was seen to be swimming neck and neck with Ward Hammond, and the goal not a dozen yards away. Then pandemonium again broke loose on the shore.

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

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

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

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

“See, the conquering hero comes!”

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

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

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

as he was for this swim?”

CHAPTER VIII – A FAIR GUIDE

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

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

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

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

“No more of that,” cried Rattleton, coming up at that moment,

and overhearing the question. "You're the worst grumbler on the face of the footstool, Browning. I should think you'd be just dancing with joy this morning to think how you slipped through that scrape down at Thornton's. And if there is anything prettier than that mountain, with the morning mists creeping around it, I don't know what it is."

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

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

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

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

The starting point of the climb was a glade at the foot of Bald Mountain, and the goal a flat rock beyond the mountain's

outthrust shoulder, both the shoulder and the rock being well-known landmarks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As for Craig, he held himself aloof from the joking and

conversation, and was not without a fear that Merriwell would seek to punish him yet for his contemptible conduct.

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

The starter looked at his watch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Be afther takin’ a little more quoinin’ to roise yer spairts,” advised Barney Mulloy, with a grin.

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

“What is it?” Frank questioned.

“Look there! There’s Nell Thornton waving to us.”

“She wants to speak to us,” said Rattleton, looking in the direction indicated by Colson’s pointing finger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The worst kind,” declared Rattleton.

“Thar’s a way it kin be done,” she said, with kindling glance, “ef so be ez you uns air good climbers. Thar’s a path which the mounting men foller when they air in a hurry, sech o’ them ez

knows 'bout it. I kin show it ter ye, though ef dad knowed I done it he'd jes' nacherly kill me!"

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

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

Browning flushed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was followed by Colson and Rattleton. Then came Bart

Hodge and Jack Diamond.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hogs looked fierce enough to justify Rattleton's assertion. "A boar hunt in these hills wouldn't be bad," said Hodge. "One of those fellows had tusks like razors."

They soon found abundant use for the rope, of which Nell

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

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

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

“Or kill me!” Bruce growled.

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

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

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

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Rattleton.

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

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

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

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

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

Merriwell looked at his watch.

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

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

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

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

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

Browning stepped forward.

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

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

"He must have got tired and stopped," said Merriwell. "We

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that were dropped, too. We may need them again.”

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

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

“No Hans in sight yet,” said Merriwell.

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

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

Merriwell looked at his watch again.

“An hour and twenty minutes since we started. Lead on, Rattleton. If you’ve seen the rock, you may act as guide. We’re after you.”

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

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

CHAPTER IX – THE VALIANT DUTCH BOY

Where was Hans?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Some liddle dhings make a pigger vuss dan – ”

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

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

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

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

Discovering this, he became terrified.

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

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

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

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

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

Hans scrambled up, with a screech of fear.

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

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

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

As it chanced, the tree was in the direct line of the sow's flight. She dashed toward it, bringing another squeal of fear from Hans, and the pigs scampered at her heels.

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

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

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

Now and then a peanut spilled out of the pocket, and when the

pig had devoured all, it looked up at the peanut fountain for more, placing itself directly under Hans with its mouth expectantly open.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He lifted himself slowly on his hands and stared, his eyes

rounding out in astonishment.

The pig lay on the ground as if dead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then, to make sure that the pig could not by any possibility come back to life to frighten him again, he picked up an

enormous club, and proceeded to belabor it to such an extent that if there had been any life remaining in the pig's body, it would have been beaten out.

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

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

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

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

Hans answered, with a squeak of delight.

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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