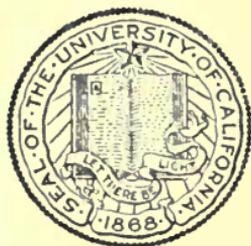


# FRANK MERRIWELL'S HUNTING TOUR



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FRANK MERRIWELL'S HUNTING TOUR







"Frank felt his blood seething in his veins. Surely, this was life and sport." See page 100.

# FRANK MERRIWELL'S HUNTING TOUR

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

AUTHOR OF

"Frank Merriwell's Schooldays," "Frank Merriwell's Chums," "Frank  
Merriwell's Foes," etc.

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Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour

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# Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour

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## CHAPTER I.

### FRANK FINDS A MISSION.

Bump—thud!

One boy had been walking, the other running. They collided at the corner of two streets, and both fell heavily.

"Beg-a de pardon, señor. Very great-a mistake! Beg-a de pardon very much!"

"Let up! What are you begging my pardon for, old man? I am the one to beg pardon. You were walking—I running—came to corner—didn't look—biff!—here we are."

The speaker laughed. It was a jolly, free-and-easy, reassuring boy's laugh. The other lad had a sad, dusky face, with big, dark eyes that seemed filled with a haunted fear. His appearance and his language showed he was not a native of the United States.

The boy who had been running, jumped up.

"Here you go, old man," he cried, catching the other by the hand and drawing him to his feet.

"Unfortunate blunder. Very sorry. In a hurry. Must catch a train."

He flashed out a handsome watch, and glanced at it, whistled softly, then asked:

"How far is it to the Townsend Street railway station?"

"I cannot tell, señor," was the respectful reply, although the words seemed to be uttered in a bewildered way. "I do not know what place dis is at all."

"Hum! So? Why, this is Bush Street, this is Battery, and that is Market, over there."

"No, no! I mean I do not know what citee dis is."

"How? Don't know what city this is? Say, what have you been up against, old man?"

"I speak de trute, señor," was the humble, almost cringing, protest. "I know not where I be here—I know not where I be."

"Whew!" whistled the American lad, beginning to look the other boy over with keen interest. "Off your trolley, eh? Why, this is San Francisco, in the State of California, which is one of the most magnificent gems in that glorious, scintillating collection known as the United States of America. Are you on?"

The dark-eyed lad looked still more bewildered by this spread-eagle manner of delivering information.

"De United States?" he murmured. "I think I must be dere."

"What? Didn't even know you were in the United States? Well, are you sure you're on earth? Jupiter! but you interest me! Wonder if I can catch that train now?"—again glancing at his watch. "Don't look as if I would. Well, let her go. Will have to wire professor again. 'Missed train. Did not start. Try again to-morrow.' How'll that go?"

"I do not know what you talk-a about, señor."

"Of course you don't; stupid of me. I'll introduce myself. I am Frank Merriwell, a traveler by profession just at present. I had a rich uncle—queer old fellow—who died and left me a fortune. In his will he provided that, in order that I might increase my knowledge of the world, and broaden my ideas, I should travel. I have

been doing so, in company with my guardian, Professor Orman Tyler Scotch, generally known as 'Hot Scotch,' and some companions. Companions went home; professor was called East on urgent business. I wouldn't go until I had seen San Francisco. Ready to start to-day; sent all my luggage to station, then ran over to view Chinatown once more. Took too much time about it, and was sprinting for a cab when I collided with you. There you have it in a nutshell. Now, let drive at me. I am curious to know how it happens you don't know where you are at."

"Can I trust-a you?"

"I think so; but I may be somewhat stuck on myself."

"I think I can. You have-a de good face. But I have been fool so many time. I tell you de story. It is long."

"That so? Then we won't stand here. Where'll we go? You look hungry."

"*Si*, señor; have not eat in long time."

"Well, we'll fix that. Wonder where the nearest restaurant is? Must be one close at hand on Market Street. Come along."

"*Si*, señor."

"Don't '*Si*, señor' me any more, please. I am no more than a year older than you. My name is Frank Merriwell. Call me Frank. What is your handle?"

"Handale? I do not understand."

"Oh, that's a Western expression that I have picked up. I mean to ask your name."

"Matias—Juan Matias."

"Good! You'll be Juan; I'll be Frank. That goes. Now for something to eat."

A few minutes later the two lads, who had thus strangely met, were seated in a restaurant, and Frank Merriwell, already well known to readers of this series, had ordered a square meal for Juan, which was quickly

served. The boy with the dark eyes began eating in a way that showed he was extremely hungry, although he did everything with a refinement and grace of manner that told his breeding had been of the best.

When Juan's appetite was well satisfied, Frank said :

"Now, partner, for your story. You said it was long. Cut it short as possible—condense it. We Yankees believe in condensations. You're Spanish?"

"My father was—or is—a Spaniard."

"Was or is? What do you mean by that?"

"Alas! Señor Frank, I know not if my father be living or dead."

"Drop the señor; I'm Frank. Here's a mystery! I love mysteries. Get after that yarn, Juan."

"As you say. I will make it short. My father was born in Spain, of noble ancestors. You see I speak good English when I am not excited. You wonder? I will explain. My mother was an English lady. He met her in Paris, while traveling. She was also traveling. He saw her, admired her, sought her to be properly presented, and was fortunate in obtaining an introduction. He loved her, and she loved him at first sight. But there were difficulties in the way of a marriage—difficulties on both sides. He told her of Spain. A year later they met in Madrid. They had not lost track of each other in all that year. In Madrid my mother also met the Marques de la Villa de Villar de la Aguila. He loved my mother likewise. My father and the marques quarreled; they fought a duel. My father think he have killed the marques, and he fly from Spain, where next he go to Chili. The marques does not die, but he hate my father. Fate bring my father and my mother together again, and they be married. One year later my sistare is born; then, in another year, I am born. In Chili my father come to be a great man. He have power and influence in poli-

tics, and he grow to be rich. Fifteen years he live in Chili—Santiago, Valparaiso and other places. Then the Marques de la Villa del——”

“Cut it short, Juan; give us his last name.”

“The Marques Aguila come to Chili and find my father. He plot against my father. The revolutionary war—it come, and my father he in it. When it is over my father have to fly for his life, and to leave everything. The marques pursues to capture—to keel-a my father. But my father he escape. We live hid in de mountains. But always we fear de marques, for he be rich-a and powerful. In de mountains be de bandits. Black Miguel lead-a dem. De marques offer Black Miguel de pardone if he will capture my father. Ha! what you think of dat?”

“I think your father was in a bad box. Couldn’t he get out of the country?”

“I tell you,” explained Juan, excitedly. “My mother have grow ill—my sweet mother! Father have my sistare and myself, wid my mother. We try to go over de mountains to Mendoza. My mother be weak, and de mountain sickness take her high upon de mountain. She be faint—she fall from de saddle! Den she bleed-a at de nose! My father know to save her we must go back. Dat we have to do, and we live in the valley again. My mother—my sweet mother!—she get worse and worse, and den she die! Oh, señor—oh, Frank, dere we bury her! Den my father do not want to go away. He stay by her grave, all his life gone wid her.”

The tears were running down Juan’s face, and his chin was quivering. Frank turned away and coughed, which gave him an excuse for producing his handkerchief.

For some minutes there was silence, and then the low, musical voice of Juan began again:

“I make it short, now, Frank. Dere we stay and stay.

My sistare be beautiful—she look like my mother when my mother is a little girl. We live some way—any way. I always fear Black Miguel find us, but my father seem to have lost fear and care. Then—Frank—then my father he disappear.”

“Disappears?”

“We never know-a where he go—we never know what become of-a him. Pepita, my sistare, and I go everywhere—we hunt, search, but do not find-a him.”

“What next, Juan—what next?”

“My sistare!” cried the Spanish lad, clasping his hands—“one day she disappear, too! Oh, I be crazee! I wander in de mountain, calling all de time, ‘Pepita, Pepita, Pepita!’ Sometime I think-a I heard her ansare. I listen. It be de wind in de rocks. One time some way, I find myself in a strange valley, near to de blind valley of Cerillos. I cannot get out; I do not know how I come-a dere. I be sick, faint, hungree. I think I must die there. I call-a to Pepita. Den, señor—den, Frank,” cried Juan, rising to his feet, his face working with excitement, “I hear her ansare somewhere—somewhere in de air! I cannot see her; I see a big-a black hole far up in de rock. I look away. When I look again, I see dat hole no more! It be gone! Den I get crazee! Next I know, many men be round me. Dey must be de men of Black Miguel. I be seize, tied, blindfold! I struggle-a, but no use. Dey feed me, dey carry me away, dey put me on a horse, we travel many day. Den we be at the sea. I am put on a ship, kept in de dark-a, oh, so long—so long! And den, in the night, I be brought to de land, and left. I find myself in strange place where de English is spoke-a. I walk-a, walk-a. I am afraid; I speak to nobody. Den you run to me, and we fall down. You know the rest.”

Frank Merriwell’s eyes were blazing with excitement. Neither lad heeded that many eyes were on them.

"Juan," cried Frank, "you have been wronged! With the aid of Providence, your wrong shall be righted!"

"Oh, Frank, I fear never! And my poor little sistare! Look, Frank," taking a locket from his bosom and opening it for the other lad to see, "dis is her picture. Oh, where is she now?"

It was the sweet, innocent face of a girl of sixteen at which Frank Merriwell gazed, and he felt his chivalrous nature stirred to its depths. There was a tender pleading in the pictured eyes that he could not resist.

"Juan, we will find where she is—we will rescue her!"

"How?"

"By going to her! I have money enough, Juan, and I am not going East. I shall send a message to Professor Scotch immediately, and together, you and I will take the first steamship for Valparaiso."

"Oh, my good friend, is dat possible?"

"It is possible, and it shall be! It shall be my mission to solve this mystery, to learn your father's fate, to save your sister! Juan, your hand! We are partners on the box seat—partners till the mission is ended!"

Their hands met in the clasp of undying friendship.

## CHAPTER II.

### OLD FRIENDS MEET.

Toward sunset of a beautiful day the steamer *California*, cleared from San Francisco, dropped anchor in the harbor of Valparaiso.

On the forward deck two lads, Frank Merriwell and Juan Matias, were gazing at the picturesque city that rose on the slope beyond the quay, with the purple mountains, the mighty Andes, making a background in the remote distance.

"Hurrah, Juan!" cried Frank, in his impulsive way, "we are here!"

"Yes, Frank."

"Why, what's the matter with you? You say that as if your heart were heavy with fear."

"So it is. Ah, Frank, something tell me we soon be in great danger."

"Danger be hanged! You should be happy to get back—happy at the prospect of soon finding your father and sister."

"But I fear we can never find them, and I fear——"

"Get out with your fears! We will find them! I have made it my mission. Come, cheer up. How do we get ashore?"

"See the little boats coming off to us, Frank. They will set us ashore."

It was nearly an hour later, however, before arrangements had been made so that they were taken upon one of those boats.

Before long, each with a leather grip in hand, they were hastening to find a hotel in Valparaiso.

It was the hour when there was the most life and movement in the city, and, in many ways, the scenes reminded Frank of those he had beheld in Mexico.

Throngs of people, in red, orange and blue, strolled everywhere. The greater part of the women wore rebozas and scarlet sashes, although, to break the harmony of all this, Parisian gowns and bonnets were in evidence. There were men wearing vermilion serapes about their shoulders, with wide hats of felt, trimmed with silver, and breeches of pink buckskin, held together down the sides with silver buttons. But there were other men in English coats and trousers, with silk hats and Piccadilly shoes. Some even twirled their canes; and walked in imitation of English swells.

On the streets were donkeys piled high with sacks of silver ore, or carrying great jars of water. Spirited horses dashed along the streets, ridden by men who sat in the saddles as if they were a part of the animal. Soldiers were to be seen at frequent intervals, and, as in Mexico, the peon was on every hand.

Suddenly Juan grasped Frank's hand and drew him quickly around a corner, panting:

"Queek—we must run!"

"Run? What for?"

"One of Black Miguel's men—Bengo—a spy, a wretch!—have seen me!"

Juan fled, and Frank followed till he could overtake and stop the frightened lad.

"Be sensible, Juan. It is not likely this Bengo recognized you. You are dressed now like a native of the United States."

"That attracts his attention!" palpitated the frightened

boy. "He look-a at us both sharp-a. I be sure he know-a me."

After some time Frank succeeded in calming Juan, and they proceeded.

But another adventure awaited them before they reached the hotel.

Juan sought secluded streets and dark ways. Suddenly they were startled by the sound of voices that came from a little group of dusky figures. One of these figures was standing with his back against the wall of a building; the others surrounded him in a half circle. The one with his back against the wall was saying:

"Wall, gol ding your picters! I knowed you was folerin' me for something that wasn't no good. So you want my purse?"

"Si, señor," bowed one who seemed to be the leader. "You geeve-a us dat, we do not hurt-a you."

"Haow kind! I s'pose yeou kin see this ere revolver I've got? Wal, she's loaded, by gum! an' ef yeou don't git aout mighty dad-bimmed lively she'll commence to shoot, by thutter! an' I won't hold myself responsible ef some of yeou fellers git hurt, by ginger!"

In a moment Frank Merriwell sprang forward, shouting:

"That's right, Ephraim! give it to 'em! I'm with you!"  
Smack! smack!

Frank struck two blows, and two of the ruffians went down. The others took to their heels instantly, and the ones who had been struck scrambled up and followed, all quickly disappearing.

Then Frank turned to the person who had been trapped by the band. Out went his hand, and he cried:

"Ephraim Gallup, of Vermont! I'd quicker thought of seeing a being from Mars!"

The other, who was a tall, lank, awkward boy, somewhat older than Frank, gasped and staggered.

"Frank Merriwell!" he roared. "Frank Merriwell, who was at skule with me at Fardale! Jumpin' jee-whiz! kin this ere be possible!"

"I reckon it is," laughed Frank, as he grasped the hand of the Yankee lad. "Come, let's get out of this; it's dangerous here. We'll find a hotel, and we can explain everything to each other's satisfaction there."

Juan proved valuable now, for he conducted them to a good hotel, at which he did all the business of securing accommodations.

To Frank and Ephraim Gallup the exterior of the hotel did not seem at all inviting, for it was a one-story adobe building; but, once inside, they were surprised and delighted to find a series of courtyards, or patios, avenues of trellised vines, aviaries, canalized water courses, and other pleasant features. Here and there fountains played and the colored lights from swinging lamps made the place seem like fairyland to the ship-weary lads.

The boys ate supper in the open air, near one of the tinkling fountains.

"Jove!" exclaimed Frank. "This is great! Now, Ephraim, old man, just explain how it happens that you are here."

"Whut, talk an' eat at ther same time! Hang me ef I kin do it. Jest you wait till I fill my sack some, an' then I'll tell ye all abaout it."

So they waited, and, finally, when the country boy had satisfied his ravenous appetite to a certain extent, he leaned back in his chair and asked:

"Ju ever hear me speak uv my brother Hiram, Frank?"

"I believe I have," nodded Merriwell.

"Wal, it's like this: Hi, he's a smart feller, and he knows haow ter make money an' keep it. When he gits

holt of a silver dollar he squeezes it so hard it makes ther eagle squawk. All ther same, he never wuz ther kind ter stay to hum an' be satisfied. He wuz alwus lookin' out fer ther best place ter make a dollar, an' a friend of ourn got him ter come ter Chili. Marm, she didn't want him ter come 'way aout here, but he would do it, an' he done it. Wal, he's bin luckier than a barrel uv apple-sass—made money hand over fist ever sense he's bin here, by gum!"

"And so you thought you would come here, eh?"

"Hi sent fer me—said as haow he'd put me in ther way of gittin' rich. Marm she didn't want me to come no more'n she wanted Hi to, but dad he said it wuz all foolishness, an' I come."

"But you were at school in Fardale. How did you happen to leave school?"

"Too much fol-de-rol business there. Ef a feller didn't mind his pucker all the time he got the old scratch. I couldn't stand it, an' so I jest got aout. Hi sent money ter pay my passage daown here."

"Where is your brother?"

"'Spected to meet him soon's I got here, but business tuck him orf inter the maountings, an' he left word fer me ter stay right here till he got back."

"Well, I am more than glad to see you again, Ephraim; but I never expected to meet you down here in South America."

"Wal, you kin bet I was glad to see yeou when ye found me standin' orf them fellers what wanted to rob me. An' I never s'pected ter see yeou down here, though I knowed ye was travelin' round. Jest you kinder explain haow it is yeou are here."

So Frank quickly explained how he came to be in Valparaiso, and Ephraim listened with intense interest. The

tale of Juan's woes aroused the warm-hearted Yankee lad, and, at the end, he asked :

"Be yeou fellers goin' right on inter the maountings?"

"You bet!" replied Frank. "We go on to-morrow. No time is to be lost."

Ephraim meditated some minutes, and then cried :

"By gum, I'm goin' with ye!"

"What's that? You going?"

"That ere's jest what I be, by jinks! Hiram won't be back here for ten days, an' I might jest as well be doin' somethin'. Yeou may hev ter fight some, an' yeou know I kin hold up my end, by thutter!"

"You are just the fellow we want," declared Frank, with satisfaction. "Juan, we'll take him into the combine. This is to be a three-cornered partnership, and here's luck to it."

## CHAPTER III.

### TRAPPED IN THE MOUNTAINS.

Frank was well pleased to have Ephraim accompany them, and the following morning found the little party on the way by rail to Santa Rosa.

With the exception of not having horses, they were thoroughly armed and equipped.

It made Frank feel quite at home to find himself traveling on a passenger car that had been manufactured in Wilmington, Delaware.

It happened that on this train there did not seem to be one of the brigandish men with blue-black beards, such as Frank had expected to see everywhere in Chili.

The men and women chatted with a certain refreshing freeness. Many of the men were stylishly dressed, and many of the women wore Parisian bonnets.

Frank was disappointed. He had expected to see much in the dress and manners of the people that was distinctive and characteristic. He expressed his disappointment to Juan, who said :

“It is in the poor people you will see what you look for. They wear the *poncho* and the *manta*. Rich people they like to do like the English or the French. They seem 'shamed to dress like the people of the country where they do belong.”

He then called Frank's attention to a pretty girl who was wearing the *manta*. The girl was sitting near an open window, and Frank watched her some minutes, finally deciding that the *manta* was decidedly becoming. It is always black, and, in this case, was made of fine

material. The folds around the face of the girl were arranged with a certain piquancy, the shape of the coiffure being shown, while a fascinating curl was allowed to escape, apparently by accident. The girl also had a charming way of readjusting the folds of the shawl, which was thrown over the left shoulder.

When Frank had tired of watching the girl he looked out at the landscape, but this, also, became tiresome after a little. Then he turned to Juan.

"We shall leave the railroad at Santa Rosa?"

"Si."

"We must obtain horses there?"

The Spanish lad nodded.

"Do you think we'll be able to get them without trouble?"

"If the money be ready to pay."

"Well, I have enough for that. I rather think I have enough to last till we get back to Valparaiso. Last night I wrote a letter to my guardian, and he will forward funds as soon as he receives it."

"I know a man in Santa Rosa who will get us the horses," said Juan. "He be a friend of my father, but he keep it quiet. He is Don Honorio Rosende, who have made the quickest time any one ever made over the mountains between Santa Rosa and Mendoza. He do it in thirty-six hour and kill two horses. That way he save his brother who was captured by Indians."

"Well, we will call on Don Honorio."

"That's jest what we'll do, by gum! We want some good hosses, too."

"The best we can obtain."

Santa Rosa was reached, and the boys went straight to the Hotel del Comercio, where they obtained accommodations and made inquiries concerning Don Rosende.

It happened that the don had been away at Santiago,

on business, but was expected to return that evening. The boys held a consultation, and decided it was best to wait for his appearance.

After a swimming bath in the hotel, which delighted and refreshed the lads, they walked out to view the town.

Santa Rosa they found surrounded by snow-capped mountains, rising in blue mystery on every hand. To the west the main ridge of the Andes flung itself high into the sky.

"Which way do we go from here?" asked Frank.

"That way," answered Juan, waving his hand toward the northwest.

"I be hanged ef I see haow in thutteration we're goin' that air way," said Ephraim. "We can't git no hosses that kin jump over them hills."

"We will find a pass through them," exclaimed Juan.

"Dad bimmed ef I kin see where!"

"It be not easy to see from here, but I find it. You trust me."

"All right, Juan. I ruther guess you know your business, an' we'll stick by yeou closer then flies stick ter ther bunghole uv a 'larses barrel."

Santa Rosa proved to be like nearly all Chilian towns. The streets were laid out rectangularly, dividing the place into squares like a checkerboard. With very few exceptions, the houses were one story in height, built of sundried bricks, with grayish-tiled roofs, and stuccoed walls, colored rose, yellow, blue and other shades.

The streets were ankle deep in dust. Open channels of water flowed along the sides of the streets. The sidewalks were paved with round pebbles.

The boys visited the plaza, or public square, where there were many benches, and where they found a few citizens lingering in the grateful shadows of the trees.

In Santa Rosa ponchos were plentiful. The poncho is

a blanket with a hole cut in the middle. The wearer slips his head through the hole, allowing the blanket to hang from his shoulders.

Here many of the people wore wide-brimmed white straw hats, held on by black strings, tied beneath the chin.

"Never saw folks dress in sech outrageous styles," declared Ephraim. "It jest beats all natur!"

It did not take the lads long to feel that they had seen all of Santa Rosa they desired, and Frank and Ephraim returned to the hotel.

Juan, however, sought some of his father's friends whom he could trust.

Frank and Ephraim went out into one of the hotel's patios, where they found two hammocks strung beneath an arbor of vines, and there they remained, chatting till they fell asleep.

Frank was awakened by feeling himself violently shaken by Juan.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as he sat up.

"We must get away from here ver' quick-a!" panted the Spanish lad. "We must not stop-a here."

"Jupiter! you are pale, and you seem all broken up. Have you seen a ghost?"

"No; but I have seen something worse."

"What?"

"Bengo."

"Who is Bengo?"

"He is de vera bad cut-a-throat—spy—one devil!"

"But why should we run away from him? He is not likely to molest us, is he?"

"Si, Frank."

"Why should he?"

"He belong to Black Miguel's band-a."

"And Black Miguel is the outlaw you fear so much—"

the one who was offered a pardon if he would capture your father?"

"Si, Frank."

"Well, it is not at all likely this Bengo knew you, Juan."

"Ah, he did! I see it when he look-a at me. I tell you what I t'ink, Frank."

"Go ahead."

"I t'ink he be set to watch-a us. I t'ink he follow us everywhere. We not get away from him so easy."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I am inclined to believe you are frightened over nothing."

"Wait!" cried Juan, desperately. "You see! You find-a I know-a something."

"Swat me ef I don't think it'd be a good plan ter git aout uv taown kinder lively an' quiet like," said Ephraim, who had been listening. "It might be a sight better fer ther general state uv aour health."

So they talked the matter over, and decided that, if they could obtain the horses, they would slip out of Santa Rosa quietly that very night.

Don Rosende returned, and they had no difficulty in obtaining three horses, for which Frank paid.

Late that evening they rode out of Santa Rosa, and, with Juan as guide, headed to the northwest.

For two days they journeyed into the mountains, and during all that time Juan was certain they were followed.

At length they found themselves in a long, narrow valley—a valley that was almost a ravine.

Juan seemed to have lost his bearings for the time, and they finally came to the end of the valley, which closed in an impassable wall of bare, black rock.

"It is the blind valley of Cerillos!" cried Juan. "I know where we be now. We can go no farther; we must turn back."

Turn back they did, but, at that very moment, far

down the valley, a band of horsemen came into view, and rode straight toward the three lads.

Wild-looking ruffians they were, with bright-colored serapes and blue-black beards. They were armed with rifles, revolvers, knives and machetes, on which the sunlight glinted, and they set up a wild cry as they saw the three boys.

At the head of the band rode a dark-faced, fierce-looking man, mounted on a coal-black horse.

"It is Black Miguel and his band-a!" cried Juan, in terror. "I know we be followed! They have us in de trap! They come to kill-a us! We will all be mur-dare!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### THROUGH THE GAP.

The Chilian lad was so overcome with terror that he nearly fell from his horse.

Frank and Ephraim were surprised, but they did not become frightened and lose their wits.

"Darn my pumpkins, ef this don't look like trouble!" drawled the Vermonter, as he quickly unslung his rifle from his back. "Never used this air kind uv a gun much, but I uster do a darn good job with dad's ole muzzle-loadin' army musket when I was to hum. Ef I kin git onter ther way this thing jeogerties, I may be able to hit the side uv a haouse or somethin'."

"Come on!" cried Frank. "Remember the gap we passed back a short distance. We must reach it ahead of them, and ride into it."

"Won't it be a trap?"

"No more than this is, for we have no shelter here, and we are hemmed in. If we get into the gap, those fellows will have to ride in after us one at a time, and we can shoot them as fast as they come."

"Go ahead! We're with ye, by gum!"

"Come on, Juan!"

Frank had unslung his rifle, and the three lads now charged straight toward the oncoming bandits. Juan did not urge his horse into the charge, but the creature kept with the others.

The two American boys flourished their rifles above their heads, uttering a great shout of defiance.

"Come on, you cutthroats!" cried Frank, defiantly. "We'll make it interesting for you!"

"Come on, yeou dirty-mugged heathens!" yelled Ephraim. "We'll give ye hot-shot an' Hail Columby! We'll give yer a taste uv Yankee lead, ye p'izen snakes!"

To the bandits it must have seemed that the three lads were fierce for a fight, for the trio rode at the outlaws as if they were utterly reckless and devoid of fear.

Black Miguel was seen to fling his horse upon its haunches and make a gesture that brought his followers to a halt.

"They ain't goin' ter run, be they?" nervously asked Ephraim, with a queer laugh.

"What's the matter?" asked Frank. "Are you afraid you will not get a crack at them?"

"Oh, that don't worry me a great deal."

"They think we're going to charge them, and so——"

"They're gittin' reddy for us. Where is that gap?"

"Almost halfway to where they have halted. See it there on the right."

"It's a good thing they stopped."

"That's right."

"Ef they hadn't we couldn't got to it."

"No."

"Naow——"

"Get ready to take a flying shot at them as we whirl into the gap. You go in first, and let Juan follow. I will come behind, and I'll make it hot for them if they crowd us."

By this time they were close upon the gap and very near to the bandits. The latter were waiting, with some doubt, for the boys to get yet nearer, holding their weapons ready for use.

"Ready!" cried Frank.

The two lads flung up their rifles.

"Fire!"

The weapons spoke.

"Hooray!" bellowed Ephraim, in delight. "That air's ther way ter give 'em hot-shot an' Hail Columby!"

One of the outlaws had flung up his arms and pitched from the saddle to the ground, while the horse of another had dropped instantly.

For the moment the bandits were flung into consternation.

"To the right!" cried Frank, clearly. "Here is the gap!"

To the right the lads wheeled.

A yell came from the lips of the bandits.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Frank. "They have just tumbled to the trick. Bend low. There'll be bullets in the air in a moment."

Forward the boys bent upon the necks of their horses, and then a rattling volley of shots came from the outlaws, while bullets whistled all about the lads.

"Never touched me, by gum!" chuckled Ephraim, who seemed to have absorbed some of Frank's reckless spirit.

"Give it to them once more!" panted Merriwell.

They were close to the gap, which seemed like a long, narrow crack in the face of the rocky wall. Before dashing into it, Frank and Ephraim whirled and fired again.

There was no time to note the effect of these final shots, for the horses required instant attention.

As they dashed into the gap, bullets were chipping off bits of rock and sending down pebbles and dust from the face of the wall.

In they went, one after the other, and not one of them all had been touched by a bit of lead.

"Well, that's dead lucky!" exclaimed Frank, when he

had asked them if they were hurt, and they had told him they were not. "Those fellows cannot be good marksmen, or they were rattled."

"Shall I keep on goin' as fur as I kin?" asked the Yankee boy.

"Sure; keep right ahead till you have to stop."

The gap was strewn with bowlders, and it zigzagged so they could not ride swiftly, but still they made pretty good time, dashing recklessly along.

Behind them the bandits were uttering wild cries, and the sounds indicated the rascals were in pursuit.

Frank wondered where the gap would lead, and if it would prove anything more than a great fissure in the mountainside. It wound on and on, and it widened in places, while there were places where it contracted till it seemed that a horse and rider could scarcely pass through.

Still it did not come to an end.

Behind the fugitive lads there was a clattering sound and the babel of calling voices, telling that the bandits were coming as swiftly as possible.

Juan said nothing. His eyes were filled with a hunted light, and he seemed quivering with terror.

Ephraim pressed straight onward, while Frank turned now and then to look back.

At one place, where the gap was particularly narrow, Frank said:

"Go on, boys. I'll overtake you pretty soon."

"What be yeou goin' ter do?" asked the Yankee lad.

"I am going to put a checker on those fellows. Go ahead."

Frank stopped, holding his rifle ready for use, and sitting sideways in the saddle.

There was a bend in the walls of the gap so he could not see the pursuers till they reached a certain point.

He could hear them coming nearer and nearer, and he knew just when they ought to appear.

The rifle rose and the butt was pressed against his shoulder.

The nose and head of a horse came into view.

That was all the boy wished to see.

The rifle spoke, and the horse fell, flinging its rider headlong against a boulder.

Swinging around in the saddle, Frank urged his horse onward again.

"That will cause them to hold up a little," muttered the boy, with satisfaction. "It is possible they may not be so fierce to follow, as the one who was in advance will not know but he is liable to be shot at any moment."

Frank knew it was not going to be an easy thing to give Black Miguel the slip, but he also knew he need look for no mercy if he should fall into the hands of the bandit. It must be a case of struggle to the end and never surrender.

It took him some time to come up with Ephraim and Juan. The Yankee boy gave a deep sigh of relief when he looked back and saw Frank.

"Didn't know, fer sure, that was yeou that done ther shootin'," he said. "I was ruther afraid 'twas one uv them p'izen skunks what is after us."

"No, I did it myself."

"What did ye shute?"

"A horse."

"A hoss? Why, that's a clean waste uv paowder and lead."

"Oh, I guess not."

"Why didn't yeou shute one uv them land pirates?"

"I don't like to shoot a man in that way when a horse will do just as well. I have never found any satis-

faction in shooting at human beings, although I have been forced to do so several times in my life."

"Yeou've got a conscience as big as a haouse, Frank."

"Well, there is some satisfaction in having a conscience."

"Them critters won't hesitate abaout shootin' at us, an' mebbe ther very one yeou didn't shute will be ther one to shute yeou."

"Possibly."

"Then I kinder guess you'll be sorry ye let him go."

"Your philosophy is too much for me, Ephraim."

"Wal, it's hoss sense."

They rode onward, and the sounds of pursuit did not press them as closely as before, showing the bandits had taken warning. The boys had expected the gap to end at any moment, but it continued, and, finally, they came out into a beautiful valley through which ran a stream of water. The valley was surrounded on every hand by towering mountains.

"Hurrah!" cried Frank, in delight. "We were not cornered, after all! This is what I call great luck."

"We be not corner in de gap," said Juan, wildly, "but we be corner here!"

"Cornered here? What do you mean?"

"I mean dat zis is de strange vallee where I heard Pepita ansare my call—de vallee where Black Miguel capture me-a! We be lost-a!"

## CHAPTER V.

### THINGS MYSTERIOUS.

"Lost? What do you mean by that? Why should we be lost here? I should say we have had great luck in finding this valley."

Juan made a gesture of despair.

"But we never find-a our way out! Black Miguel be in de pass by which we enter."

"But there must be some other way out of the valley."

"I t'ink not. When I come here before I do not know how get in. Now I remember I come through dat gap. I find no other way out."

"But this stream runs through the valley. It must come in somewhere and go out somewhere."

"That's right, by gum!" put in the Vermonter. "Warter kin run daown a maountain, but I be busted ef I ever saw any runnin' up hill yit!"

"The way it go out it run under de mountain," explained Juan.

"Under the mountain?"

"Si, Frank."

"How can that be?"

"It run into de tunnel—it go under de ground."

"Well, I have seen a case like that," declared Frank. "It was in the Tennessee Mountains, and the stream was known as Lost Creek. It sank into the earth and disappeared. No one knew where it came out."

"Just like a-dis!" cried Juan.

"Wal, it may run in all right," said Ephraim, hastily. "We've gotter git aout uv this mighty sudden, an' I

cal'late it'd be a good plan ter find haow this warter gits inter the valley."

To this Frank agreed, and they rode up the stream.

Juan kept looking up at the high walls, and he finally uttered a cry, pointing to the black face of a steep bluff.

"Dere," he cried—"dere is where I see de black hole in de rock when I hear my sistare call to me!"

The boys looked with interest, but the face of the bluff seemed unbroken, and Frank said:

"You must be mistaken, Juan, for there is no hole there now."

"I see dat hole, den I see it no more. I am not mistake, Frank. Dat is de place. I tell you de hole it disappear-a."

"I ruther guess yeou was twisted, Juan," drawled Ephraim. "Yeou thought you saw the hole."

"I no make a mistake—no, no! I tell you I hear Pepita ansare me when I call to her—I know I hear it."

"Yeou hed bin wanderin' raound in the maountains, an' yeou was half crazy. You thought yeou heard her."

"No, no, no! I know! I know!"

"There is no time to discuss that," cut in Frank. "If those bandits follow us closely they will—— There they come."

Hoarse shouts were heard behind them, and, looking back, they saw the bandits riding out into the valley. The ruffians saw the three lads, and the shouts they uttered were cries of triumph.

"I don't like the sound," declared Frank. "If they did not feel sure of bagging us they would not yell like that."

"Wal, they'll have ter fight like thunder before they bag us, by thutteration!" spluttered the boy from Vermont.

"We nevar get out," declared Juan, in a disheartened way.

The boys rode onward, but the bandits made no immediate effort to follow them, which caused Frank still greater uneasiness.

"That shows, beyond a doubt, that they feel sure they have us," he said.

They rode up the valley for nearly half a mile, and then came in sight of a waterfall. Beyond the waterfall the stream seemed to pour out of the side of a mighty mountain.

The boys halted in dismay.

"That settles one thing," said Frank. "We'll not be able to get out of this valley in this direction. See; it closes in there, and there is no outlet. No wonder the bandits were in no hurry to follow us."

"I tell-a you dat!" cried Juan. "We be in de trap!" Ephraim ground his teeth.

"Air we goin' ter be cooped up like a lot uv chickens! Let's go back and fight aour way right out through them bandits."

"That is a trick we cannot accomplish just now," said Frank. "They will be looking for us to come hustling back, as soon as we find this end of the valley is closed."

"Wal, what be we goin' to do?"

Frank looked the situation over and considered, his face very grave and thoughtful. Near the waterfall a mass of bowlders were piled, and he regarded them with a critical eye.

"Let's go nearer and look them over," he said.

"What for?" asked Ephraim.

"To see what sort of a fort they will make. We may have to get into some situation where we can hold off Black Miguel and his band."

So they rode nearer, and it was seen that the rocks would afford them shelter if they were obliged to defend themselves from the outlaws.

“We will stop right here,” declared Frank. “It is best to do the thing those bandits will not expect us to do, and they’ll be looking for us to come back. Ten to one we’d be ambushed and shot down like dogs if we did so.”

So they dismounted and led their horses behind a mass of bowlders, where they would be well sheltered in case bullets flew thickly.

Frank looked the mass over, and he quickly saw how strong a fort could be made.

“Take hold, boys,” he directed. “We must roll a wall of stones together here. Then let Black Miguel come on.”

They worked like beavers, for they did not know how soon the outlaws would come upon them. In the course of an hour they had a wall erected, and they were ready for the assault.

By this time they were all hungry, and they decided to eat from the provisions obtained at their last stopping place. This supply was small, for Juan had expected to obtain food from the peons who lived amid the mountains.

“We’ll have to go easy with the rations to-night,” said Frank. “It will be better to keep some for to-morrow.”

“An’ haow be we goin’ ter git aour next supply?” asked Ephraim.

“Just now that is an unanswerable question.”

While they were eating all were startled by a heavy rumbling explosion that seemed to be somewhere underground. They looked at each other in a bewildered manner, their eyes full of questioning.

“What in thutteration do yeou think that was, Frank?” spluttered the boy from Vermont.

“It was not an earthquake.”

“Wal, not by a jugful!”

“It sounded like a blast!”

"It surely did, by gum!"

Then Juan was appealed to, but he was as much puzzled as the others.

"I cannot tell," he said, shaking his head. "This vallee is one place of mystery. That is one of them."

The boys began to feel that there was, in truth, something uncanny about the valley. Even the mountains, which towered grim and ominous on every hand, seemed to shut the place in like mighty sentinels, as if the spot were forbidden to man.

The sun dropped down into the west, and shadows began to deepen in the gulches and ravines. With the growing shadows, the uneasiness of the boys increased. Although he would not confess it to himself, Frank disliked to spend a night there.

"Squash me!" Ephraim Gallup finally observed, unsteadily. "I feel jest the same's I did one time, when I went, with some other fellers, to stay in Jed Spruce's ha'nted haouse. I was 'kainder creepy all over my meat, an' I'm that air way naow."

"It would be a relief if the bandits made an attack on us," said Frank.

"They do that after dark," Juan said.

"An' there won't be a bit uv a moon, will they?"

"Oh, yes, there will be a faded old moon in the west the first of the night, but it may not shed much light into this valley. The last part of the night will be moonless."

"That's when they'll come fer sure."

"We will make it hot for them, whenever they come."

About an hour later they heard the underground explosion once more, and this time it seemed louder and more distinct than before. They were upon a ledge, and this was distinctly felt to jar.

"Next time she may be hard enough to knock a cor-

ner off one of these air maountains!" whispered Ephraim, in an awe-stricken way.

"I wonder if that can be anything the bandits are doing?" speculated Frank. "It can't be they are blowing down the walls and blockading the gap?"

After talking this over, it was decided that such a thing was not at all likely, but they arrived at no decided opinion concerning the explosions.

Night came on. The sun faded from the snowy peaks, and the darkness spread and deepened. Stars came out one by one, and the ghost of a moon seemed to rest in the hollow between two mountains.

During a part of the afternoon the horses had been picketed where they could feed on the grass, but they were again brought behind the barrier of rocks.

The boys huddled together, and talked in whispers.

Suddenly, cutting through the night like a keen blade, came a wild cry, chilling the blood. It was full of unutterable despair, and it seemed to issue from the lips of a human being.

That cry caused the boys to shudder and huddle closer behind the rocks.

The waterfall splashed in the wan moonlight. Something caused them all to look at it at once.

Out from the falling water a horse and rider seemed to leap. The horse was coal black, and the rider was covered with something that glistened darkly in the moonlight.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE STRUGGLE OF PHANTOMS.

Three astounded boys crouched behind the rocks and stared at the horse and rider. The trio seemed stricken dumb and motionless with amazement.

Not a moment did the strange horseman stop, but straight down the stream he went.

Juan muttered a prayer in Spanish, crossing himself.

"Wal, ef that don't beat all creation!" gurgled Ephraim Gallup, as soon as he could get his breath. "Where in thutteration did they come frum?"

Frank was silent, being not a little puzzled.

The horseman seemed utterly indifferent to the presence of the boys, or quite unaware that they were there. Away he rode, without being challenged. The horse scrambled from the bed of the stream, and the clickety-click of its hoofs grew fainter and fainter as it went galloping down the valley.

"What do yeou think uv that, Frank?" Ephraim demanded.

"I think it was a horse and rider," said Frank.

"A spirit!" whispered Juan.

"Git aout with yer nonsense!" exclaimed the Vermonter, promptly. "I don't take no stock in that air, yeou bet!"

"There was nothing supernatural about the horse and rider," Merriwell quietly declared. "They were flesh and blood."

"Ah, Frank," sighed Juan; "how do you explain de way they come—out of de water?"

"I am not going to try to explain it; but I believe it was a trick to frighten us. The outlaws are trying to break our nerve, so they will have an easy time when they come in on us."

"Hang 'em!" grated Ephraim. "I don't like this air monkey business, but they'll have hard work ter scare me so I can't shute."

"That's right," nodded Frank, the dim light failing to show the expression of satisfaction on his face; "keep your nerve, old man, and we'll make them fight if they get the best of us."

"But we are in de trap-a!" cried Juan, despairingly. "You do not know-a Black Miguel! He nevare let any one get out de trap. He keel-a for de fun. He like to see de blood run-a—like to hear de victim cry for pain!"

"Evidently he is an inhuman monster," came quietly from the lips of Frank Merriwell. "That is all the more reason why we should die fighting. It is not healthy to fall into his hands."

"Oh, my poor sistare!" sobbed the Chilian boy. "She nevare be save! Poor Pepita!"

Then he fell to repeating a prayer once more.

Frank was surprised at Juan's lack of nerve. The boy had seemed timid in the first place, but he had thought he would show more nerve when Chili was reached and he found himself in his own country.

However, on considering the condition under which Juan had lived—on remembering that his father had been a hunted fugitive—Frank did not wonder so much that the dark-faced lad was not very brave.

"Perhaps he will show up all right in a pinch," thought Frank, who was inclined to be liberal minded.

For a long time they sat and talked of the surprising appearance of the horse and rider. It was plain to all that the head and shoulders of the rider had been cov-

ered by the protecting folds of something, on which the thin moonlight made the water glisten.

"He came aout uv the warter," muttered Ephraim; "but haow in thutteration did he git into it?"

That was a question difficult to answer.

The early night wore on, and the shadowy moon dropped lower and lower into the hollow between the two mountain peaks.

The boys spoke of the wild, wailing cry they had heard, and wondered if it would be repeated. They were listening for it when it came.

The moon had gone, and darkness was heavy in the valley. The cry seemed to float along on the heavy air, and it was expressive of the most unutterable agony.

Then two fiery figures were seen racing along the black wall to the south, swiftly coming nearer the head of the valley, and changing in shape as they came.

"Santa Maria!" gasped Juan, and he covered his eyes with his hands.

"What is it?" asked the Vermonter, in wonder.

"Look!" directed Frank. "They have stopped. Well, this is a free show, and no mistake."

On the smooth face of the precipice two figures had halted. One was a grinning skeleton, every bone of which seemed composed of white fire; the other was a scarlet demon, armed with a flaming sword. The demon had been pursuing the skeleton, but now the latter, seemingly driven to bay, faced about to give battle.

"Say, I want to go right back to Vermont!" groaned Ephraim Gallup, his teeth chattering. "I can't stan' this! It's too much, by thutter!"

Then, before the eyes of the boys, a brief but savage battle took place. The skeleton grasped the demon by the throat, but was cast off, and the demon plunged its

sword through between the skeleton's ribs, which did not seem to harm the skeleton in the least.

Ephraim began to forget his fears, and grew excited.

"Say, which way ye bettin', Frank?" he demanded. "I'll go ye that ther skeleton knocks the Old Boy out in two rounds!"

"I'll stand you on that," said Frank. "The demon is bound to do execution with that sword."

"Oh, that don't caount, for the skeleton ain't got no flesh nor blood. He don't mind it to have the sword poked through him a few dozen times."

"Well, he doesn't seem to mind it," confessed Frank, as the demon jabbed the skeleton several times.

Juan, hearing their voices, lowered his hands, took a look at the awe-inspiring battle, then covered his eyes with his hands again and resumed praying.

"Oh, shut up with yer jabberin'," cried the Yankee lad. "Git inter ther game here, an' back yer man!"

"The saints preserv-a us!" palpitated Juan, in English.

"We'll hev ter do a little preservin' aourselves, ur they won't stan' by us," snorted Ephraim, in disgust.

Now the battle between the two glowing figures became terrific. The demon flung aside its sword, and they grappled. Once, twice, three times the skeleton was dashed to the ground. When it arose the third time it was seen that its left arm had been broken off at the shoulder.

Still the battle raged with unabated fierceness, for the skeleton seemed infuriated beyond measure by its injury. It hurled itself at the crimson demon, which it caught with its remaining hand and tried to strangle.

The demon writhed and twisted in its efforts to fling off its relentless antagonist. Sometimes both bent close to the ground. and then they straightened up. At length

the skeleton was dashed down again, and when it got up one leg had fallen off at the knee.

"Naow I guess he's aout uv the ring fer sure," said Ephraim, regretfully.

But, no! the skeleton hopped around on one foot as lively as a sparrow. It flung itself on the demon, who seemed enraged beyond measure by the persistency of its fleshless antagonist.

The battle ended in a tempestuous struggle, and the demon actually tore the skeleton to pieces, flung it, a shattered mass, to the ground, and then, in an instant, skeleton and demon vanished.

"Great yowling cats!" palpitated the Yankee boy. "That was the wust scrap I ever see!"

Frank laughed.

"Our friends, the enemy, seem to be doing everything possible to make it pleasant for us while we remain here."

"What do yeou think, Frank—haow was that done?"

"They were spirits!" hissed Juan. "Don't arouse the anger of de spirits!"

"Don't——"

"No! Mebbe Black Miguel he be scared away. If so, then we git out—perhap'."

"I scarcely think Black Miguel will be frightened away so easily; I don't fancy he has been alarmed by anything that has happened."

For the third time the wild, wailing cry sounded in the valley, dying out into a faint moan that was nerve shaking.

"I don't understand how such a yell as that can come from human lips, yet it seems like a human cry," said Frank.

"It is a cry from a lost soul!" whispered the Chilian boy.

"Nonsense! I don't take stock in that. You need a tonic, Juan; your blood is in a bad condition."

"Ah, Frank, I know-a—I know-a!"

"If you think you do it is useless to argue with you."

"No use to talk-a."

"Then I will not try it."

"But yeou have got to acknowledge there has bin some queer things took place sence we come here," said Ephraim.

"Some things rather surprising, but nothing supernatural."

"That's your idea, hey?"

"Yes."

"What abaout the hoss an' feller that came aout of the waterfall?"

"Surely there was nothing supernatural about that. It was a trick, and that is all. It was done to frighten us and shake our nerve, as these other things have been done. When the bandits are satisfied that we are overcome with terror, they will come down on us with a rush. We must keep our nerve about us, or we'll all be killed without striking a blow in our own defense."

"By gum, yeou're right! But I'd kinder like to know what them critters will do next."

Barely had the words fallen from Ephraim's lips when a flash of light came down over the waterfall, and a flare of fire ran along the bosom of the stream that flowed through the valley, so the stream itself seemed to be a river of fire!

## CHAPTER VII.

### A SHOT IN THE DARK.

"Santa Maria!"

"Great Scott!"

"Darn my punkins!"

Juan, Frank and Ephraim uttered these exclamations in turn, as they crouched behind the rocks and stared in amazement at the river of fire.

The entire surface of the stream seemed blazing, and the light illumined the valley.

It was a remarkable spectacle, and one well calculated to paralyze the lads with astonishment and fear.

The light showed the black rocks, the jagged walls, the frowning precipices, but revealed no living being to the boys behind the rocks.

"This is rather remarkable, I must confess!" said Frank, staring wonderingly at the fiery stream.

"Darned ef I ever saw warter burn like that air before!" spluttered the Vermont lad.

"It is de end of de world-a!" moaned Juan.

"Dunno but it is," nodded Ephraim. "When warter gits ter burnin', other things oughter ketch purty soon!"

"What's this smell in the air?" asked Frank.

"Dunno. What is it?"

"It seems like burning oil."

"So it does. Mebbe that river runs aout uv an oil factory somewhere."

"The fire is sinking already."

This was true. Near the waterfall it was dying out and floating away on the bosom of the stream, although

it seemed to burn as brightly as ever, further down the valley.

Little patches of fire drifted swiftly down the stream and burned themselves out on the surface of the water. Soon there was no fire in the vicinity of the waterfall, and in a very few minutes there was none anywhere along the stream.

Darkness lay dense and awesome in the uncanny valley.

Now the boys noticed that the horses were snorting and rearing, apparently greatly terrified by what had taken place and by their own struggles.

"They're liable to break away!" exclaimed Frank, springing up. "We must look out for that."

"That's so, by gum!" cried Ephraim.

Together they hastened toward the horses. This was an unfortunate move, for, suddenly appearing as they did in the darkness, they completed the work of rendering the animals frantic.

"Whoa! Easy there!" called Frank, hoping to reassure the creatures with his voice.

The horses were making too much noise to hear him. They reared and plunged, and one of them broke away.

Despite the fact that he was rather awkward in appearance, Ephraim was strong and quick. Happening to be near the horse that freed itself, the Vermonter leaped through the air and caught at the bit of broken rope.

By the rarest chance, Ephraim grasped the rope close to the horse's head. Then, with a leap and a swing, he landed on the animal's back.

"Whoa!" he cried, triumphantly. "Think ye kin git erway frum Ephraim Gallup? Ef ye do, yeou'll make ther biggest mistake uv yeour life, by thutter!"

The horse continued to rear and plunge while Ephraim

was speaking, and then, all at once, the creature seemed to realize that it was no longer held by the rope.

A wild squeal came from the animal's lips, and away it shot down the valley, bearing the boy on its back.

"Stop!" shouted Frank. "Come back!"

"Can't!" was the reply. "This hoss is——"

That was all Frank could understand, for the horse continued to tear down the valley, bearing the Yankee lad along.

Frank did his best to quiet the other animals, and he succeeded in a few moments.

Before he had quieted them to his satisfaction, he heard a series of wild yells far down the valley, followed by three or four shots, and still further yelling.

"Hard luck!" muttered Merriwell, bitterly. "Ten to one Eph has run plumb upon the bandits, and has been killed or captured. Now fate seems dead against us."

The yelling died out, but the final cries were full of triumph, and Frank's heart was heavy in his bosom. Having pacified the horses, he returned to the place where Juan crouched and shivered.

"We be lost, lost!" murmured Juan.

Frank said nothing, for he was trying to think what should be done in this emergency. He had not given up hope, and he knew that it was possible Ephraim had escaped, but his sober judgment told him the situation was one of deadly peril, where there did not seem one chance in a thousand that one of the three lads would ever leave that fateful valley alive.

Frank was much disappointed in Juan, for he had fancied the boy who was seeking to find his lost sister and rescue her, would be brave and daring. Now he did not depend on the Chilian boy in the least, and he felt that Juan was an incumbrance.

But he could not rest without knowing what had hap-

pened to Ephraim, so he determined to creep down the valley. The outlaws were down there, and he might get near enough to them to find out something.

He had turned to tell Juan what move he thought of making when he was surprised and startled to hear a galloping horse approaching.

"Dey coming!" palpitated the Chilian lad. "Dey coming now to kill-a us!"

"Well, we will make it a very interesting job for them!" grated Frank, swinging his rifle around ready for use. "I'll wager something I perforate a few of the villains!"

Nearer and nearer came the galloping horse.

"There can be but one," muttered Frank. "I wonder who that is, and what he wants?"

Then his heart gave a great leap of hope.

"It may be Ephraim!" he gasped. "If it should be——"

He stopped short, for the horse had ceased to gallop. The animal was coming forward at a walk, and was now quite near.

"Halt, there!"

The ringing command came from Frank Merriwell's lips, and it was emphasized by a double click, as he cocked his rifle.

The horse stopped.

"Young señor, I wish to speak with you."

The words, uttered in a smooth, musical voice, came through the darkness, and they seemed like an electric shock to Juan, who started up with a smothered cry.

Frank was a little surprised, but he immediately asked: "Do you mean that you wish to speak with me?"

"Si, señor; you are the one."

"Who are you?"

"That can make no difference to you. At this time I propose to be your friend, if you will let me."

"My friend? Impossible!"

"Not so, young señor. If you will let me be your friend, that I will."

Through Frank's head flashed the thought that this was a trick, and he was wary. To his surprise, Juan was kneeling at his side, fingering a rifle, and breathing heavily. The Chilian seemed overcome with a desire to do some shooting.

"Steady!" whispered Frank. "Don't be in a hurry. Watch out that we are not taken by surprise while I talk with that man."

"That man!" fluttered Juan. "Oh, if I could see-a heem!"

"I cannot understand why you should offer friendship," Frank called to the unseen man. "We have no friends here."

"And you should have no enemies here, young señor. It is the fault of your own that you come into this trap, from which you can never get away without I help you."

"Why should you help me?"

"Because I do no wish to see you killed. You do not belong in Chili, and you do come here on a foolish expedition. I know all about that. Now you yourself do find in a bad trap. Black Miguel have you very fast, and it is the wish of him to kill you quick and soon. I have induced him to hold still for a little time."

Frank was doubtful; he could not believe the man was speaking the truth. Behind all this he felt sure there was a plot to deceive them.

"Why should you induce him to hold on?"

"Why should I wish that you are killed? You have never harmed me in some way, and against you I have not one thing at all. With Black Miguel I have some influence, and I can get him to let you go away without trouble. I will do it on a certain condition."

"Now comes the trap!" thought Frank; and then he asked to know the "certain condition."

After a moment of hesitation, the unseen man said:

"With you you have a boy, Juan Matias by name."

"Well?"

"You have him?"

"Yes."

"There were three of you, but one of you he has become a captive to Black Miguel."

Frank's heart leaped and swelled with a feeling of relief. So Ephraim still lived.

"The loss of him leaves you very weak," the man went on. "You are but two to many. You have no chance to escape. If my offer you do not except, you will all be killed."

"Make your offer."

"It is this: Your friend who was with you is not harmed; but he will be killed right away if you do not accept the terms, which are that Juan Matias you shall give up to Black Miguel. If Juan you give up, the one who is captured shall be set at freedom, and away you may go without being at all hurt. Remember, that it will cost at once the life of him who is captured if Juan Matias you do not give up. What do you answer?"

Then, to Frank's astonishment, Juan screamed:

"I ansare dat you be de human monster! You be de one dat kill-a my fadare—steal-a my sistare! You be de Marques de la Villa del Villar de la Aguila! May de saints direct dis bullet!"

There was a flash of fire, followed by a ringing report, and Frank knew the Chilian boy had discharged his rifle.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### TO THE RESCUE.

This action on the part of Juan had been quite unexpected by Frank Merriwell, so he was unable to prevent it. The moment it happened, however, he clutched the boy, crying:

"Stop! Do not fire again!"

Juan laughed wildly.

"I hope I have no need to do dat!" he returned. "I hear where his voice sound-a, and I shoot toward it. Ha! ha! Mebbe I do not miss."

Frank was astonished, for Juan seemed entirely changed. He no longer cringed and cowered, but he seemed wrought to madness and despair.

The rifle was taken from the Chilian boy, and then Frank called:

"Are you injured, sir?"

"Not at all," was the calm reply. "The bullet passed within a few inches of my head, but I was not at all touched."

This seemed to make Juan frantic. He raved in Spanish for several minutes, showing he had a passionate nature and a fiery temper. He was quite changed from the quiet, timid lad of a short time before.

"Be quiet!" ordered Frank, sternly. "What is the good of all this bluster and noise! Keep still."

Juan became silent, but he was heard to grate his teeth occasionally, and his restless movements told that he was holding himself in check by a great effort.

"Do you accept my proposal?" demanded the man in

the darkness, impatiently. "At once you must answer, for I care not to remain here and be shot at some more."

"Is that the only condition you have to offer?" asked Frank, his heart heavy in his bosom.

"*Si, señor*; the only one."

"If I give up Juan Matias, you will release Ephraim Gallup, and will promise that we shall leave the mountains without being harmed?"

"*Si, señor.*"

Juan breathed heavily. He was awaiting Frank's decision. Frank had expected he would entreat not to be given up, but he did nothing of the sort.

Within himself Frank Merriwell was fighting a battle. Juan Matias was of foreign blood, while Ephraim Gallup, brave and true, was a Yankee, an old schoolmate, a true friend and comrade. When it came to a choice between them there could be no hesitation on his part.

If Juan were not given up Ephraim would be killed immediately, and there could be little doubt but the bandits would afterward complete their work by slaughtering the other boys. By the sacrifice of the Chilian lad the other two might escape.

Frank thought this all over in a moment, and then he despised himself for hesitating. He saw his honor blackened, and felt a thrill of shame because he had hesitated an instant.

"What do you tell him, Frank?"

Juan asked the question, his voice soft and low.

"Tell him!" said Frank, hoarsely; "there is but **one** thing to tell him! I took your hand in San Francisco, and said I would be your partner to the bitter end. Do you think I will go back on my word! No, no—not even to save Ephraim Gallup, my old schoolmate!"

Then he passed a hand across his forehead, groaning:

"Poor Ephraim!"

"Come, come!" called the impatient voice in the darkness. "What is to be your answer, young señor. Will you give Juan Matias up to save the other and yourself?"

"No, never!"

The man uttered an exclamation of astonishment in Spanish.

"It cannot be you are very so much the great fool!" he cried. "Señor Gallup will be killed immediate I carry back your answer. And then you cannot escape. Black Miguel will bring his men and finish the work. All three will fall. Think—think how it can be that you may save yourself and your friend if you but do give up Juan Matias."

"I have thought of it. Go ahead with your murderous work! I shall stand by Juan to the end!"

"If not of yourself, then of your friend you should think. It is your duty to save him."

"If this proposal were made to him, I know what his answer would be. He would despise me if I gave up Juan to save him and to save myself. You have had my answer."

Juan clutched Frank's arm, and his voice trembled with emotion, as he panted:

"T'ank-a you, t'ank-a you! You sure be de true friend-a! But it be not right-a—you must not die for me-a. No, no, no! If you can git away, den I go give-a myself up! I do dat now. My fazare is dead; my sistare is lost; nothing I have to live for! Tell him, Frank—tell him dat I give myself up."

Frank Merriwell was dazed. Could it be possible this was the cringing, shivering, unnerved boy whom he had regarded as a coward a short time ago? Such a thing seemed impossible.

"Are you in earnest, Juan?" he demanded.

"I am, Frank. Tell-a him dat."

"No!" cried Merriwell, fiercely. "Ephraim would despise me still more when he knew all—and I should hate myself! No! We can make no terms with this villainous marques!"

"But, think, Frank, think——"

"Juan, the chances are that this is a trick. We have shown them we can fight, and they fear us, boys though we are. If you were given up, and we submitted ourselves into the hands of the bandits, all would be murdered in cold blood. There may be no hope for us, but, at least, we can fight!"

The man in the darkness heard these words, and he flung back:

"All right! Your own way you shall have. The chance you have been given, and now I can never be able to save you some more. Black Miguel will bring to you your death. *Adios.*"

A moment later the horse was heard galloping away.

Juan tried to use the rifle once more, wishing to send a shot after the man; but Frank would not permit it, as he believed it would be a waste of lead.

"Oh, Frank!" cried the Chilian boy; "you should have let me go. It be no use at all, for we all have to be kill-a at last."

"Juan, it was a trick—I am satisfied on that point. Black Miguel is not going to let any of us escape, if he can help it. If I gave you up and surrendered myself into the power of the bandits, they could kill us all without danger to themselves. But, even if they were honest, I could not think of giving you up in order to escape. I swore to stand by you through thick and thin—I gave you my hand on it. Frank Merriwell never breaks his word."

"Oh, Frank! I think dere never be another boy like-a you! You be so grand!"

"Oh, that is nonsense, Juan! I am doing what any decent fellow would do—that's all. Don't give me too much credit."

But there was a great fear in Frank's heart. Ephraim was a captive in the hands of the bandits, and it was likely he would be destroyed without delay.

Was there no way to save him?

Frank asked himself the question over and over, and then he formed a resolution to do what he could.

"Juan," he said, "I am going down the valley to see if I can find out anything concerning Ephraim."

Juan said nothing.

"I want you to stay here," Frank went on. "I want you to watch the horses and hold this fort, if any one tries to take it."

He expected the Chilian boy would remonstrate, and great was his surprise when Juan calmly said:

"I will do what I can, Frank. I am not so very much of the fighter."

"Keep cool and listen," advised Frank. "When I return I will whistle twice, make a pause, and then whistle once. By that signal you will know me."

"I will."

"If you hear anything suspicious, utter a challenge. If you get no answer, fire."

"I will."

Frank paused, and then his hand found the shoulder of his companion, whom he had come to respect anew within a few minutes.

"I may not come back, Juan," he said, a trifle huskily. "I am going down there to give Ephraim a helping hand, if I can. If he is in danger of being killed, I shall stand by him. The bandits may finish us both. If I do not come back—if we never see each other again—farewell, Juan."

A sob came from the throat of the Chilian boy, and, suddenly, he embraced Frank, clinging to him a moment.

*"Adios! adios! adios!"* May all the saints defend-a you, Frank! While you are gone I will pray, pray, pray. My great sorrow is that I bring-a you here."

"Don't let that trouble you, Juan, my lad. You did not bring me here—I came of my own accord. You have nothing to weigh heavily on your conscience. My regret is that we have stumbled into this trap so soon—that we have been unable to solve the mystery of your father's and sister's disappearance. It was fate. Good-by."

*"Adios!"*

Slowly Frank made his way down the valley, uncertain as to what moment he might walk into a trap.

"At any rate, I will die fighting," he thought.

He held his rifle ready for immediate use, and he could work the repeater with astonishing swiftness and accuracy.

The darkness seemed to deepen. The stream gurgled faintly, and Frank kept close by it, pausing frequently to listen.

It seemed that he had reached the vicinity of the gap by which they had entered the valley when, of a sudden, high up at one side of the valley a light blazed forth.

It seemed that the light was turned upon the boy, and he immediately dropped to the ground.

Not a moment too soon.

Across the valley shot the bar of light, passing directly over him. Had he been standing he must have been revealed.

"Well, this is interesting!" muttered Frank, clutching his rifle in anticipation of an attack. "Can those people see in the dark that they are able to tell some one is moving down the valley? This is surely a valley of mysteries."

For a few seconds the bar of light remained motionless, and then it moved. Away it traveled to the south, glaring broadly on one side of the valley, while it gleamed out like a fiery eye high up in the face of the black wall on the other side.

"That is a powerful reflector," muttered Frank. "If the light should reach me, I would be revealed."

All at once the fiery eye seemed to close with a wink, and blank darkness lay in the valley once more.

Frank felt sure the persons behind the reflector had been surveying the valley to see if any one was moving therein.

Some moments after the reflector was shut off another light gleamed out from the wall, showing an opening in the apparently solid rock.

The light came from a flaring torch, which was held above the head of a man. Other men appeared in the opening, and the light of the torch showed them swinging out over and descending to the level of the valley by means of a rope or a rope ladder.

Frank believed he understood why the reflector had been used. The persons who were coming down into the valley wished to learn if they were likely to be observed by enemies.

"Well, they barely missed me," thought the boy. "If I had not dropped as if I were shot, they would have seen me."

Three persons came out of the opening and descended the ladder, after which the man with the torch retreated and disappeared.

Ten seconds later the reflector suddenly shot a light into the valley once more.

"Great Scott!" gasped Frank, who had arisen to his feet and moved down the stream a short distance. "This is getting decidedly warm!"

There seemed to be no place of concealment near at hand, so he dropped to the ground once more, and lay still.

The light of the reflector played over the bottom of the valley. It came nearer and nearer to the boy, who clutched his rifle and thrust it forward, ready to shoot if forced to do so.

The light fell on the stream, near which Frank was stretched on the ground, and the boy scarcely restrained an exclamation of astonishment.

The stream had dwindled to a mere thread, which was trickling along the lowest part of its bed. It had been from thirty to forty feet in width, but now a person could step over it with the greatest ease.

"Another of the remarkable things which seem to be constantly taking place in this valley," thought the lad.

Then a strange fancy came to him. It was that the stream had been burned up by the fire.

This thought he immediately thrust aside, regarding it as childish and absurd. His attention was once more given to the shifting light of the reflector.

This light finally fell on three persons who were crossing the stream a short distance below where Frank lay. One of the three was plainly an Indian. The other two were half-bloods, and all looked fierce and formidable.

"They belong to the bandits," thought the boy.

When the trio had crossed the stream the light from the reflector suddenly vanished again, and all was darkness in the valley of mystery.

The light had revealed to Frank that he was yet a considerable distance above the gap by which the valley had been entered.

He arose to his feet and moved forward slowly, pausing frequently to listen with great intentness.

He was expecting that the light from the reflector might be shot into the valley at any moment.

This, however, did not occur again for some time, and he was enabled to find the gap without being in further danger from the light.

There were sentinels on guard at the mouth of the gap. He heard them speaking to each other in the darkness and heard them walking to and fro.

At a distance below the gap a light shone out into the valley.

Frank moved toward this point, and, in a short time, he found himself looking into an alcove among the rocks where the bandits were camped.

His heart leaped into his mouth the moment he looked in there, for he saw the ruffians were preparing to shoot Ephraim Gallup, who was standing with his back against a small tree, to which he was tied securely.

The light of a fire revealed the bandits and the unfortunate captive, who had been carried into their clutches by a frightened and unruly horse.

A line of savage-looking men, with leveled rifles, were standing within ten paces of the luckless lad.

In a moment those rifles would belch forth fire and death.

With the quickness of thought, Frank Merriwell's rifle leaped to his shoulder, and he began to work it with such rapidity that there was scarcely a break between the reports.

For once in his life, at least, he did not hesitate to shoot at human beings, for he knew it was the only way of saving his friend.

Two of the six executioners fell immediately, while a third clasped his side, dropped his rifle, and staggered away.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected that the bandits were thrown into the utmost confusion and terror.

Frank leaped forward, swinging his rifle from his shoulder by its strap. Out flashed a knife, and he reached the side of Ephraim Gallup. Two swift slashes set the captive free. Frank's hand grasped Ephraim's wrist, and he literally yanked the Vermonter toward the darkness beyond range of the firelight.

"Run!" he panted.

"Frank!" gasped the Yankee lad.

"It will be a hot race for the waterfall," said Frank; "but we may be able to make it."

"We must make it," grated the other boy. "We'll lose aour skulps ef we don't, an' that's sartin' sure."

The sentries at the mouth of the gap had been alarmed, and they were expecting an attempt would be made to escape from the valley by passing them.

The bandits who had been thrown into confusion by Frank's attack recovered swiftly, and they set out after the running lads, shouting hoarsely and angrily. Sometimes they fired at random into the darkness, hoping to wing one of the boys.

Both youths knew there was danger that they might be hit by a chance bullet, and they bowed their heads and ran for all that was in them.

Ephraim had not been given time to wonder at Frank's unexpected appearance. All the emotion that he could feel was a sensation of thankfulness at his escape from what seemed certain death.

The stream was reached, and Frank thought of crossing over, hoping to deceive their pursuers; but, to his great astonishment, the channel was once more bankful with water.

Such marvelous changes took place in the valley that it was not strange he should feel dazed and bewildered.

Up the stream they went.

The bandits were making a great noise behind them, **but** the lads were holding their own, if not gaining.

Then came something that caused Frank to utter an exclamation of anger and dismay.

The light from the reflector was flung into the valley again.

"That light will be the ruin of us!" grated Merriwell. "If it falls on us it will be kept there, and the bandits will be given a chance to shoot us down."

"That's right, b'gosh!" gasped Ephraim. "But what in thutteration be we goin' to do?"

"Stop! I will try something."

They stopped, Frank dropped on one knee, leveled his rifle, and took aim at the light.

The report of the rifle was followed by a distinct crash, and the light went out.

"Hooray!" cried Ephraim, in delight. "You done it slick!"

"Down!" hissed Frank, catching hold of the Yankee boy, and yanking him to the ground.

Not a second too soon, for the flash of Frank's rifle had been seen, and several shots were fired toward the spot, the bullets whistling over the prostrate boys.

"Up!" panted Frank—"up, and away!"

Then they sprang up and fled onward toward the waterfall.

It was a desperate race for life, but the boys were fleet of foot, and they were not overtaken. The fortress of rocks was reached, and they crouched behind the wall, panting for breath, and ready to defend the spot to the **end.**

But the bandits did not press them, and, after a time, Frank looked around for Juan.

The Chilian boy was not at hand, and in vain they called him. He did not answer. The two horses remained in their places, but Juan Matias was gone.

## CHAPTER IX.

### UNDER THE WATERFALL.

"Gone!"

The boys uttered the word in unison, staring at each other through the darkness.

"Gol dern me ef I kin understand where he kin hev gone to!" exclaimed Ephraim. "Did yeou tell him to stay here?"

"Sure; and he said he would do so."

"Can't never put no dependence on the word of a Spaniard."

"There is where you are wrong, Ephraim. There are Spaniards who are honest as anybody. It is the half-bloods you cannot trust."

"Wal, wasn't Wand a half-blood?"

"In one sense he is, but the mixture is good—half Spanish and half English. By half-bloods I mean the Spanish-Indians. They are treacherous."

"Wal, Wand didn't hev any nerve."

"I don't know about that. I think he did have nerve."

Then Frank told of the proposal made by the Marques Aguila, and how Juan had offered to give himself up that the other boys might go free.

"That clean beats me!" acknowledged Ephraim. "I wouldn't hev believed it ef anybody but yeou hed tole me."

"It is the truth, and I am sure the boy was in earnest."

"Then yeou don't think he was skeered away from here by the saound of the shutin' that has bin goin' on daown below?"

"I do not think so, but he may have been."

"He didn't take either one uv the hosses."

"No."

"Mebbe he kinder thought he could git away better 'thout 'em."

"I do not believe he would try to get away till he knew what had happened to me—I will not believe it."

"Then where has he gone?"

"That is more than I can tell."

"What'll we do?"

"Wait a while and see if he does not turn up."

So the boys settled behind the rocks and waited.

A profound silence seemed to rest over the night-shrouded valley. Some way there was something ominous in the silence. The boys felt creepy and uneasy.

"Seems like them critters is crawlin' up on us," whispered the lad from Vermont. "Can't hear 'em, kin ye?"

"No; I can hear nothing—except a galloping horse."

"Hoss is comin'."

"That's right."

"Who kin be with the critter?"

"The Marques Aguila, perhaps."

"Comin' here agin'—for what?"

"That remains to be seen. Keep still."

Nearer and nearer came the galloping horse, till it was quite close at hand. The boys held their weapons ready for use, and Frank was on the point of uttering a challenge when the horse was heard to take to the stream.

"Halt, there!"

The cry came from Frank's lips.

There was no answer. The horse continued to splash along the stream, being now near at hand.

"Halt, or we fire!"

The horse seemed to spring forward, there was a break

in the sound of the waterfall, and then the horse could be heard no more.

"Great gosh!" gurgled Ephraim.

"Gone!" muttered Frank.

"Mebbe that's right; but where has the critter gone?"

"Under the waterfall."

"Under the waterfall! Git aout! Haow kin that be?"

"The falling water must conceal the mouth of a cave."

"Smotherin' smoke! I never thought uv that!"

"I thought of it when the horse and rider appeared some time ago, and now I feel almost certain of it."

"Ef yeou're right, it beats all natur, that's all!"

"I will wager I am right, and I am going to prove it."

"Haow?"

"By looking for the cave—by going into it."

"Haow ye goin' into it?"

"Through the waterfall."

"Thutter!"

"I should not be surprised if it proved to be one of the entrances to the bandits' cave, for I am certain the bandits have a cave near at hand."

The Vermonter was silent a moment, and then he said:

"Frank."

"Well?"

"Yeou've got the longest head uv any feller I ever saw, b'gosh! Yeou simply beat all creation!"

Frank laughed a bit, softly.

"I don't care about beating all creation," he said. "If I could fool these bloodthirsty bandits a bit, about now, I would be well satisfied."

"Fool 'em! Yeou've nigh done better than that already, by gum! Ef yeou didn't lick the hull gang fer a minute, I don't know a thing."

"But we are still trapped in this valley. I want to

fool them and get out. That's what I am figuring on just now."

"Wal, figger erway, an' I hope ye'll figger it aout."

A moment later Frank directed Ephraim to follow, and then climbed over the rocks and started toward the waterfall. Frank had reloaded his rifle, and Ephraim's rifle, which had been left behind the rocks, was recovered and in the possession of its owner.

Frank crept down close to the edge of the waterfall, passed his rifle to his companion, and said:

"I expect to be well drenched, but it will pay if I discover what I am looking for. I don't mind the wetting."

He stepped into the stream and waded out a bit. All at once he paused, a low exclamation breaking from his lips.

"What is it?" asked Ephraim, softly.

"A light!" exclaimed Frank. "Can't you see it shining on the water? It is beyond the waterfall."

Ephraim saw it, and it gave him an uncanny sensation. He felt as if something cold were creeping along his spine.

"What's it mean?" he hoarsely whispered.

"It means there is somebody in there with a light," replied Frank, exultantly. "It means that I was right in thinking there is a cave beneath this waterfall. It means — The light is gone!"

Quick as a flash Frank plunged through the sheet of falling water. A moment later he came back, shaking the water from his clothes.

"Quick!" he gurgled, "give me my rifle! Come on!"

"What do you mean to do?"

"Go in there."

"What did you find?"

"A cave, as I thought I should."

"Anything else?"

"Didn't stop to look for anything else, then. Come on."

Frank tucked the butt of his revolver up under his coat, and plunged through the waterfall again.

Ephraim had waded out into the stream, but he hesitated a moment. Then he set his teeth, muttering:

"Here goes!"

Through he went.

It was no more than a thin sheet of water, and they were on the other side in a moment. Ephraim felt himself grasped, and Frank's voice whispered in his ear:

"Be still! The man who came in here ahead of us is not far away."

Clinging to each other, they moved forward.

The place was very damp, and the walls dripped moisture, for the water forced itself down through cracks in the rocks.

In a few minutes they came to a point where a passage led off to the left, and there they halted abruptly, for, in the distance, gleamed the light of a torch.

That light showed them a man, who suddenly disappeared as if he had stepped through an open doorway.

"Come on!" hissed Frank, and he skurried along that passage, with Ephraim close at his heels.

By rare good fortune, they made little noise, and they quickly reached the place where the man had disappeared.

There they paused and looked into a large, dry chamber, which seemed to be well aired, as if it opened to the outer world some way.

At the farther side of this chamber were some rude stalls, and two of these stalls were occupied by horses.

In the middle of this chamber, or underground stable, a man was rubbing the water from another horse.

Frank knew this was the man who had just ridden into the cavern.

Both boys were filled with astonishment, for of all the

wonderful things they had beheld since entering the mysterious valley, this seemed the most remarkable.

They could not express their feelings by words, but Frank's hand gave Eph's arm a pressure that meant much.

They took good care not to be seen.

The man did his work thoroughly, drying the horse well, and then covering the animal with a warm blanket, after which the creature was led into one of the stalls and fed.

When this matter had been attended to the man picked up the torch, which had been thrust upright into a rift in the rocks, and started to leave the stable.

The boys drew back hastily, crouched in an angle of the passage, and prepared to meet the man, if he should come upon them.

But he left the stable and turned the other way.

They followed, keeping within view of the flaring torch.

"He will lead us to the hiding place of the bandits," whispered Frank.

"Sure as preachin' is preachin'," returned Ephraim.

The passage did not lead straight ahead, but turned and twisted in many directions, so the boys sometimes lost sight of the torch for a moment.

Once or twice the man seemed to halt and listen.

At length a flight of rude steps, hewn from the solid rock, was reached.

Far above them they saw the man climbing upward.

The wonders of that underground place were astounding, but the boys had no time to stop and think of that.

As soon as they dared, they started to climb the stairs. The torch vanished, and they knew the man had reached the top.

"Be lively!" palpitated Frank, as he scrambled up the steps.

They made some noise, and Frank feared the man would hear them; but nothing of the kind took place.

At last the top of the flight was reached.

Far away the torch gleamed and vanished.

Regardless of any danger that might await them in the darkness, they rushed toward the spot where it had been seen.

The passage widened, and then it turned suddenly and came out into a mighty chamber.

Frank clutched Ephraim, and the boys stopped abruptly on the brink of an underground lake that lay spread before them.

At a distance on the bosom of this lake a boat was moving from them. In the boat the flaring torch was set. The man they had followed was paddling the boat away.

The light of the torch gleamed on the bosom of the water that lay like a great pool of ink, covering the entire floor of the chamber.

Overhead was such dense darkness that the roof could not be seen.

In a moment Frank saw the man in the boat was getting away, for the great body of water would keep them from following him, as no other boat seemed at hand.

Frank was desperate. He had believed they would be able to follow the man to the outlaws' den, and he did not fancy being baffled in such a manner.

"I must stop him!" he grated.

He dropped on one knee, flinging his rifle to his shoulder. But just as Frank was going to utter a challenge a most surprising thing took place.

A figure suddenly uprose from the bottom of the boat, grappled with the man, and a fierce battle began.

"Great gosh!" gasped Ephraim Gallup.

"What in thutter is ther meanin' uv that?"

Frank was no less astonished than the Yankee boy, and he stared in wonderment at the struggling forms.

The torchlight was such that it did not show them plainly.

The boat rocked violently, threatening to upset.

Exclamations in Spanish came from the lips of the combatants.

All at once there was a sharp cry of pain, and then one of the two toppled backward and struck the surface of the water with a splash, disappearing from view.

The other, with the torchlight showing a knife clutched in his trembling hand, leaned over the edge of the boat and peered down into the inky water, as if waiting for his enemy to rise, that he might finish the job with another stroke.

Frank and Ephraim knew they had beheld an underground tragedy, and they felt the blood rushing through their veins and their hearts fluttering.

The one who remained in the boat cried out something in Spanish, quickly flinging down the deadly knife as if he had been seized by a sudden horror for it.

That voice sounded familiar to both lads.

The boat swung around a bit, and the light of the torch shone upon the victor in such a way that they could see him distinctly.

"Gol dern my boots!" gasped the boy from Vermont. "Why, that's—that's Wand!"

"It is Juan, sure enough!" exclaimed Frank.

The occupant of the boat heard them, and he suddenly grasped the paddle, starting to paddle away.

"Juan!" called Frank.

It was the Chilian boy, and he paused, with the paddle uplifted.

"Juan!"

"Who call? Dat you, Frank?"

"Yes."

"De saints be praise! I fear it be Black Miguel! It sound-a like your voice, but I could not think-a you be here."

"I am here, and so is Ephraim. Come back."

## CHAPTER X.

### INTO THE FIGHT.

Juan dropped the paddle into the water and turned the boat about. Then he paddled back to the shore, sprang out, and greeted his American friends with demonstrations of unspeakable joy.

"I be 'fraid we never see each odar any more," he said. "I be 'fraid we separate for good."

"We did not expect to see you again," confessed Frank. "We could not conceive what had become of you."

"After you go the water—the waterfall—it stop to run."

"I know that."

"I cannot hear it some more, and so I go to see what the matter can be. I find it has stopped to run."

"Yes, yes?"

"Then I find the great black hole under the place where the waterfall have been. I light some matches, and I see it is the mouth of a cave. Then into it I will go, and so I do. With my matches it is able for me to get along. I find the passage, the horses, the steps, and, last, I find the lake. All this take me very long time, for I have to move slow, slow. I do not know how long I have been here, but it seem that I have been two or three day. I know it be not so, for I should have starved. But I find the lake at last, and I find the boat. I am afraid to go out on the lake—I am afraid I never get back. It is pretty bad to be lost on a lake like this, you must think. I stay here 'long time and think on what I had better to do. Then I heard somebody coming. I

know not how I can hide. In the bottom of the boat I see one blanket that have been left there by somebody. It does not take me long under that to get myself, and I think perhaps I may keep still and be taken to the place where I shall find Pepita. Ha! The man—the bandit—he get into the boat. Ha! I keep all curl up under de blanket. I know he paddle de boat out-a. Bimeby pretty soon he put his foot on my hand, and his boot jam my fingers flat. I can stand it not any longer—I shall cry with de pain. I get mad-a. Then I take out my knife, jump up, and fight with de man. I take him so by de surprise dat I get de best of him. I strike him with de knife—he fall over—he sink! Dat is de end.”

Juan had grown very excited toward the end of his story, and he was shuddering with horror when he had finished.

“By gosh!” cried Ephraim Gallup. “I kainer thought yeou didn’t hev no sand, but I take it all back, by thutter! Yeou’re all right, Wand!”

Frank then explained how he had been able to save Ephraim, ending by saying:

“It seems to me that we have reason to hope, for fate has aided us to a great extent, and we may yet be able to outwit Black Miguel and escape.”

“I nevar go away now till I know something of Pepita,” declared Juan, fiercely. “Don’t stay with me—go, go! If you find any way to get out, go! I may die here—I expect dat!”

“Juan, we are with you. We will stand by each other to the end!”

“You are very good friends—true friends! I wonder if all American boys be like you?”

“Not all, but most of them.”

“Down here we have been taught to hate the Americans. Once we thought there would be war with America.

"We think we are able to beat the Americans, for everybody say they are cowards all. If they be like what I have seen of them, what fools Chilians would be to try to fight them! America would be able to beat little Chili in so very short time that it would be a great astonishment."

"There will be no war between the United States and Chili; but this is no place to talk of such things. At present we must look out for ourselves. What is to be done next?"

"The den uv the bandits is somewhere on t'other side uv this pond."

"That must be true. But how large is this lake? That is an interesting question. The stream that flows through the valley must be the outlet of this lake. Can we find the proper landing place of the farther shore?"

"We can try."

"And if we get lost on the lake—what?"

"We'll have to take aour chances on that."

"I think you are right. I think there are two outlets to this lake, and that the bandits are able to turn the water from one channel to the other. That would explain why the stream ceased to run through the valley, for the water had been turned into the other channel."

"But it won't explain ther fire that run daown the stream, or the fightin' skelerton an' demon."

Frank laughed softly.

"Those things are easily explained."

"Then yeou jest explain um."

"The fire was caused by burning oil. Oil will float on the surface of the water, and a large amount must have been poured into the stream and then ignited."

"Never thought uv that, an' I smelt oil when she was burnin'. But haow about t'other thing?"

"That was a magic lantern trick. It is likely you have

seen one of these magic lantern shows that travel around through small country towns?"

"Yes, but great jee-thutter! haow could they do that air trick here? Jest yeou explain that."

"The persons who worked the lantern were hidden in this cave, high up at one side of the valley. There must have been an opening in the wall, like a window. From that opening the figures were flung on the opposite wall."

"An' I was scat! But yeou ain't told whut them thunderin' noises was what we heard."

"They were blasts somewhere in this cave. What they were for I cannot say."

"Wal, hang a fool! It's easy enough to see through things after they're explained. I don't know so much as a turkey gobbler!"

After a short time it was decided that they had better embark on the bosom of the lake and try to find a landing place on the farther shore.

Frank took the paddle, and the boat was sent skimming over the black water in the same direction that had been chosen by the unfortunate bandit.

After a pull of about fifteen minutes they came to the opposite shore, and before them, to their satisfaction, they saw the great opening to a passage.

They landed, and were about to proceed into the passage when Frank stopped them, saying, quickly:

"Be still! Listen!"

They listened, and, from far along the passage, sounds of voices came to them. They distinctly heard a muffled shot and wild cries. The sounds became more and more distinct, and the boys looked into each other's faces in alarm.

"Out with that torch!" hissed Frank. "We are likely to be in a heap of trouble right away! Out with the torch, I say!"

The torch was quickly extinguished.

The sounds came nearer, and the cries were hoarse and fierce.

Then there was more shooting, being this time a succession of shots.

"Into the boat!" commanded Frank. "We will row out a short distance."

"Hang me ef I don't think we'd better row out a thunderin' long distance!" spluttered Ephraim.

They quickly entered the boat and rowed out on the lake.

Soon glimmering lights were seen far along the passage, and then the lights revealed running figures. From these figures little flashes of fire leaped out, followed by the reports of firearms.

"Who be they shutin' at?" asked Ephraim, wonderingly.

"Somebody in advance," replied Frank. "See—see those others who have no torches. There are two of them—no, three! See, one of them fires back! His aim was good, for down goes a torch! That is a race for life!"

"Dat be right!" came excitedly from Juan. "Look—see! One of dem dat run away be a girl. I believe dat be Pepita."

"It may be!" cried Frank. "Paddle in nearer shore. If it should happen to be, we must take a hand in that business."

He clutched his rifle as he spoke, and Juan grasped the paddle and moved the boat toward the shore.

Onward came pursued and pursuers, the girl seeming to run as easily as any of them, sometimes giving assistance to one of the men. The other man, who appeared younger and livelier, now and then turned to shoot at the pursuers.

In a few moments the fugitives had reached the edge of the lake, and a cry of despair came from them when they found the boat was not there.

"It be Pepita!" wildly exclaimed Juan—"it be my sistare!"

One of the men had turned again, snapping his revolver, which failed to go. It was empty!

The pursuers came on with savage yells.

"Hold the boat steady," directed Frank Merriwell, calmly. "I am going to do a little shooting. Juan, tell your sister and her companions to lie down."

The Chilian boy did so, speaking in Spanish. The fugitives heard, the girl gave a cry of joy, and the three flung themselves on the ground.

Then Frank gave an exhibition of shooting that was quite astonishing. He worked his rifle swiftly, and every bullet seemed billeted.

Three of the pursuers fell with the first three shots, and the others turned in consternation and fled, bullets whistling about their ears.

"Paddle ashore," directed Frank. "This boat is large enough to hold three more. Do not lose time."

The boat was run into the shore. Juan leaped out and embraced his sister, who was nearly overcome with joy. Then one of the men, the one the girl had helped along, grasped the boy, and Juan gave a wild shout of gladness, crying, in Spanish:

"My father—it is my father."

"Don't waste time," swiftly said Frank. "Moments are precious. Get into the boat. We must be away."

He hurried them into the boat, and they pushed out upon the lake.

"Where in thutter be we goin'?" asked Ephraim. "Ef we go back to the valley we will be in jest as bad scrape as we was."

Then the young man who was with Pepita and her father spoke up quickly:

"I know one way to get out. Let me have the paddle. Trust to me."

"Yes, trust to Alvarez," urged Pepita.

Frank did not hesitate.

"Take the paddle," he said. "If you can get us out of this trap, you shall be well paid."

Alvarez, who was a dark, handsome young fellow, took the paddle and sent the boat forward with powerful strokes. All at once he told them to put out the torches, and they did so, none too soon, for two shots rang out and two bullets skipped past.

Still Alvarez pulled forward through the darkness. It seemed that he paddled thus for more than thirty minutes before he would allow them to light the torches again.

"There is two channel to the stream that run from this lake—two stream," Alvarez explained. "One run through the valley. When that be turned the other run through the channel under the mountain. We must go through that channel. It is the only way to get out. We may do it all right, but nobody know about that. Nobody ever go through that way."

In a short time they came to a strip of sandy shore. Here the boat touched, Alvarez got out, told them to wait, passed around a point and disappeared. In ten minutes he came back.

"I have turn the river into the channel through the mountain," he said. "Now we try it. We may drown, we may escape. Anyway, it be better than to fall into the hand of Black Miguel."

They felt a strong current bearing them onward. In a short time they came to where a stream was pouring into

a black opening. Into this opening the boat shot on its way to destruction, or to—what?

It was morning, the sun was shining, and the birds were singing, when the boat came out where the stream poured from a cavern opening. The boat contained all the fugitives, and they shouted with gladness when they saw the light of day.

They had escaped, for they were no longer within the snare of the bandits. They came to the shore, and Alvarez, who knew the country, guided them to a place of safety.

Alvarez was in love with Pepita. He had been one of Black Miguel's men, but the girl had won his heart, and he had offered to save her from the outlaws. She had agreed to go with him if he would rescue her father, who was a captive in Miguel's power, the outlaw being paid for keeping him by the Marques Aguila.

The young bandit had released Señor Matias, choosing his time when he believed the outlaws were giving their entire attention to the boys in the valley. But he had not selected a favorable moment, and the trick had been discovered. Then the bandits pursued, and the three hurried to the lake, hoping to find the boat and get away. The reader knows what followed.

Aided by friends, Señor Matias and the little party succeeded in crossing the mountains into the Argentine Republic.

But Matias declared that some day he would return and recover his property, which was a rich mine located in the outlaws' cave. This mine he had originally discovered, but the outlaws were working it, and it was the sound of their blasts that startled the boys shortly after they entered the valley of mystery.

"Aguila shall not escape me," declared Señor Matias.

"I have slipped through his fingers, though he told me a hundred times that I should die a captive in my own mine. I will return, and he shall die."

"I hope somebody will kill Black Miguel," grinned Alvarez. "If he ever sees me again he will kill me."

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE FUGITIVES.

The Rio Salado is formed by the Desaguadero, Diamante, Latuel and other healthy streams, which might themselves be called small rivers. Above Tripague the Salado is broad and sluggish, at times flowing through dense forests. And yet it finally sinks and dies in the heart of the pampas, long before the coast is reached, emptying at last into a small lake that has no known outlet.

The Salado is one of the strange freaks of nature in South America.

Down the Salado, near the close of a beautiful day, a large, flat-bottomed boat was drifting. The boat contained six persons, together with packs and weapons.

Two of the six passengers on the boat were Frank and his friend, Ephraim.

Of the remaining four, two were full-blood Spaniards, one being a man with white hair and beard, while the other was young, dashing and handsome in a reckless, devil-may-care way.

The older man was Señor Muerto Matias, now a fugitive from Chili. The younger man, who was very proud of his black mustache, was Alvarez. If he had another name, he was the only person who seemed to be aware of it.

The entire party had succeeded in beating back the outlaws, and escaping, after which, aided by friends of Señor Matias, they had crossed the Andes and reached Mendoza.

But they were followed. Black Miguel was furious

over the treachery of Alvarez, and Aguila swore that the man he hated should not escape. The two came to Mendoza, and Matias was obliged to flee for his life, as Aguila was rich, and hired scores of ruffians to do his command.

Hearing a plot to assassinate Señor Matias on the way to Buenos Ayres, the party of fugitives resolved to cross the pampas, through the heart of the Indian country.

So we find them floating down the Salado in the flat-bottomed boat, looking for a place to land and encamp for the night.

On either side of the river was a jungle of dense verdure, flaming with gorgeous flowers.

"What we must do is to land so very soon," said Juan. "The night will come on quick."

"But it is still light—the sun is up," said Frank Merriwell. "Surely, we have plenty of time."

"By this you should know that the sun it will go quick, and the night it will come at once."

A cry came from Alvarez, who was in the prow of the boat.

"There is the place by which we can land!" he exclaimed, pointing to an opening amid the trees.

In was, in truth, a favorable spot, and the boat was headed toward it. In a few moments the shore was reached, and then, before they could disembark, the day passed into night. There was no twilight. The sun seemed to drop beneath the horizon, and darkness came on at once.

"What to you did I tell?" was Juan's triumphant exclamation. "Here in the forest it is to be all the time like this."

Wood was gathered and a fire lighted. Then they brought the packs from the boat, which was drawn up and made secure.

All at once they were startled by hearing what seemed to be the tolling of a church bell near at hand.

"Great gosh!" exclaimed Ephraim Gallup. "We must be right nigh some taown. Who'd thought it!"

"It must be a town is close at hand," said Frank, "for there cannot be a solitary church here in the woods. The bell is tolling vespers."

"That is not any bell," laughed Juan.

"Not a bell?" cried Frank. "Of course it is a bell! What do you mean?"

"What it is that I do speak. That is not any bell."

"Then what is it?"

"It is one bird."

"A bird? Oh, say, Juan, that's too much!"

"It is the truth I do speak, Frank—it is the convent bird. The English do call it the bell bird. I never hear it before to sing when the sun have gone down. It is stop now. It is not some time often to be found so far south. On the Amazon it is very many to be found."

"But a bird, Juan—a bird! Why, you must be joking! No bird could make a sound like that!"

"Not by a gol dern sight!" put in the Vermonter, wagging his head. "Yeou can't fool us, Wand, old boy."

But the Chilian lad insisted that he had spoken the truth, and he told them something of the remarkable bird that had deceived them. From the top of the bird's bill, he said, there grows a curious fleshy protuberance, similar to that of a turkey gobbler. Unlike the turkey's, however, this is hollow, and sparsely covered with hairs. The tube, which is black, connects with the interior of the throat, and it is through it that the bird makes the sonorous sound from which it takes its name. When in use, the tube stands upright from the bill, and, as it is an inch to two inches in length, has the appearance of a horn. From this

the bird takes another of its many names, the "rhinoceros bird."

This piece of information was very interesting to Frank and Ephraim, the latter observing:

"I'd like to ketch one uv them birds an' take him home. He'd make more fun than a bar'l uv monkeys in aour taown."

One of the packs had been opened, and Pepita was preparing supper for them, having spread a cloth on the ground near the fire. Soon she called them, and they sat down on the ground about the cloth.

Señor Matias was very quiet. He seemed to be thinking. In fact, he seemed to be thinking nearly all the time since his escape from the power of his enemy.

Pepita laughed and chatted, Alvarez seemed well satisfied, Ephraim grinned and made some drawling observation, while Frank was full of life and animation.

A stranger would never have fancied they were fugitives, for they seemed more like a party of pleasure-seekers, who were bent on having a good time.

All were hungry, and they ate heartily. When supper was over, Pepita and Alvarez washed the dishes at the river's edge, while Señor Matias rolled and smoked a cigarette, still silent and thoughtful.

Frank and Ephraim chatted.

"Soon ez I kin git to Bonus Airy I'm goin' to write ag'in to Hiram," said the Yankee boy. "It's kinder mean to treat a brother ther way I have him. There he is makin' heaps uv money in Chilly, an' he sent me money to pay my passage there, an' I've never seen him yit, as he was away when I arriv'. You came along, an' I went off with you on ther jump. Sence that I hain't bin able to git back to Valparaiso, an' I don't know when I will git back there."

"Why, you know you have agreed to travel with me,"

said Frank. "The will of my eccentric uncle provided that I might take along a schoolmate as a traveling companion, besides my guardian. I have told you how I met Juan in San Francisco, and came to South America with him, when he had interested me in his wrongs. Professor Scotch, my guardian, will wait to hear from me again, I think, and then he will join me somewhere by appointment. Hans Dunnerwust was the first to travel around with me, and he got enough of it while we were in Mexico, where we nearly lost our lives at the hands of the bandits. Barney Mulloy tried it a while, but went back to school, and now I do not see but it is your turn."

"Wal, Frank, gol dern me ef I don't do it! Hiram kin kick, but I have got a good chance to see some uv the world, an' I'll see it, ur bu'st a suspender!"

"You may write your brother to that effect."

"I will, by gum!"

"When you are tired of traveling, I will pay your way back to Chili."

"That's fair. Where be yeou goin' after we git to Bonus Airy?"

"I have not yet decided. In the course of time I mean to visit every country on the face of the earth."

"Great gosh! That'll take ye more'n nine hundred an' seventeen year!"

"Oh, not quite so long as that, for the introduction of steam and electricity has made this world a very small place."

"Git aout! Haow could steam and 'lectricity make it small?"

Frank laughed.

"I am speaking figuratively," he said. "A person can travel around the world now in such a brief space of time that it makes the old globe seem very small."

"Oh, that's what yeou mean! Wal, I believe in sayin' things jest ez I mean 'em, by gum!"

Pepita and Alvarez came up from the river laughing. Matias was still smoking. The fire smoldered, sending out a dull, reddish, half light.

Pepita had secured a mandolin in Mendoza, and this she now brought out and put in tune. Then she played and sang a Spanish love song, in which Alvarez joined when it came to the chorus.

It was a scene of peace and happiness, but there was a black shadow hovering over the bivouac on the Rio Salado.

The fire sank low. Slumbering forms lay about it, wrapped in blankets. With his back against a tree, looking like a bulging portion of the trunk, stood the guard. All about was silence, save for the continuous droning of nocturnal insects.

The river flowed on sluggishly and reluctantly to its fate, in the heart of the pampas, seeming to dread its doom. There were stars in the sky, and a slice of a moon low down, but the shadows were deep in that forest nook on the river's bank.

Somewhere from the river came a "plunk," as if an alligator, or some other creature, had dropped from the bank into the water. An ember on the fire snapped in two with a crackling sound, sending out a glow for a moment. But even that gleam of orange light did not show a pair of burning, deadly eyes that were searching the darkness.

The guard did not stir. For a long time he had stood thus, with his back to the tree. His head was bowed on his breast. At last his hat dropped off and fell at his feet.

Still, the guard did not stir. He slept as he stood, and the falling of the hat had not aroused him.

There was a stir in the shadows—a sudden, sweeping movement.

A ray of light from the embers glinted on something that flashed like a bright bird through the air.

Chug! A sound of something striking and piercing.

The guard awoke, with a start, and a low cry, catching up his rifle and looking around for some moving thing, but seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

Then another cry came from his lips. He had felt something strike his shoulder, and now he found himself pinned to the tree.

This second cry aroused two of the sleepers. Ephraim Gallup started up, crying:

“Frank—Frank Merriwell! What’s the matter?”

Juan said something in Spanish.

“Come here,” called Frank, who was on guard. “One of you start up the fire, the other come here.”

Juan threw some light wood on the fire, while Ephraim hurried to Frank. The others were aroused, the questions were asked.

“What is the trouble?” demanded Ephraim, as he reached Frank’s side. “Is there any——”

“Look here! I am held to this tree by my sleeve! Something has wounded my shoulder!”

“Great gum!”

“See what it is. Set me clear, if you can.”

The fire caught in the dry bits of resinous wood and flared up, showing Ephraim something that held Merriwell to the tree. He grasped it and drew it forth.

“Give it to me!”

Frank took it from the fingers of his friend and strode toward the fire. The others gathered around him, and he exhibited the object.

Cries of horror and fear came from the lips of Señor Matias, Juan, and Alvarez. They drew back.

"Well, this is a queer knife!" exclaimed Frank, as he stared at the object in his hand. "Black handle, with hand-guard, and a blood-red blade, tipped with green. I never saw anything like it before. It is a genuine curiosity."

"Where did it touch-a you?" cried Juan. "On de shoulder? Let me look-a! Keep-a still!"

When the Chilian boy was excited his English was of a decidedly broken sort. With frantic haste, he now tore off Frank's coat, ripped open the sleeve of Frank's shirt, and looked at the exposed shoulder.

Señor Matias and Alvarez looked on, talking swiftly in Spanish, while Pepita stared in horrified silence.

Frank and Ephraim wondered why there was so much agitation exhibited over the nature of a wound which was shown at first exposure to be a mere scratch.

"Oh, that won't hurt ye none, Frank," said the Vermonter. "It's no wuss than a pin scratch."

"Won't hurt-a him?" cried Juan, wildly. "Dat be de 'snake knife!' It be deadly! Dat be de snake knife!"

"Wal, what's the snake knife?"

"Poison, poison, poison!"

"What's that?" shouted Frank, starting back. "Do you mean to say this knife is poison?"

"Si, Frank."

"And I have been cut with it! Is it deadly?"

"Sure death!"

"Great gosh-all-hemlock!" gurgled Ephraim Gallup, horror-stricken.

Frank did not seem so agitated as were the others.

"Is there no antidote?" he calmly asked.

"None," was the answer.

"Then I may as well make my will without delay."

Juan was examining the deadly knife, and he followed it by taking a look at the slight scratch on Frank's shoul-

der. Something like an exclamation of hope came from his lips.

"What have you discovered?" asked Merriwell, quietly.

"Dere be one chance-a!" shouted the Chilian boy. "Look-a here! It was not de point of de knife-a dat touch you!"

"Well?"

"See, it was de side of de blade-a!"

"Yes, I can see the bit of fresh blood where it touched. What of that? Is there any difference between——"

"De poison be on the point-a! Dere be no poison on de side of de blade-a! De point-a not touch Frank!"

"*Caramba!* So that is!" cried Señor Matias, who was also looking at the knife. "One chance there may be the boy for. If no poison there be on the edge, then he is save."

"Well, that is certainly some relief!" laughed Frank, nervously. "I will confess that I have no fancy for cashing my chips just now, as a gambler in the United States would observe."

"One bit of poison of de edge of de blade-a be enough," swiftly said Juan. "If dere be none dere, then you all right. Pepita, she will do up de wound-a."

"Why, if there is no poison in it, it is not worth doing up; if there is poison in it, it is not worth while doing it up."

But Juan insisted that Pepita should do up the wound, and Frank did not insist on declining to have it banded.

Juan took a brand from the fire and went into the woods, from where he soon returned with a green leaf, and, having washed the blood from the wound at the river, this leaf was bound on it.

"Now," said Frank, "I suppose I'll have to wait to see if I drop dead or continue to live."

"If there is poison in the wound, your arm and shoulder will to swell commence within thirty minute," said Señor Matias. "But now it is that we should know how you come to have so near escape from getting the knife in your heart."

"I don't know," admitted Frank. "I must have fallen asleep as I leaned against that tree. The last I remember I was listening to the song of the insects in the forest, and then it seemed that the very next instant I felt something touch my shoulder."

"And nothing you saw of the one who struck the knife at you?"

"It could not have been struck at me; it must have been thrown."

"No, no! This is not the knife to throw."

"Still, father," said Juan, "you should do well to remember that the snake knife is nearly always thrown."

"That is true."

"What about this snake knife?" demanded Frank.

"It is use by the Indians when they have some enemy that very much they do hate. A prick the poison point of sure death to come must bring."

"But I have no enemy among the Indians who hates me very much."

"The Indians were first to use it; now some time it be used by half-bloods and by the ruffians of a low nature."

"But still I do not understand it, for I know not what enemy I have who should use the snake knife on me."

"You for some one else may have been mistaken," said Alvarez. "It may to be that the one who sent the knife thought you myself was. Ha! It may to be that some deadly enemy of mine have followed me here! I do not like that to think of!"

Indeed, the young Chilian became very nervous and ex-

cited all at once, seeming to fear that another knife might come whistling out of the darkness and reach him.

A feeling of dread and horror came over the entire party, and, although the shadows were full of terrors, they shrank from the glow of light made by the revived fire.

Ephraim Gallup wiped beads of cold perspiration from his face.

"This is ruther too interesting for me!" he said. "I don't like it, by thutter!"

"Black Miguel may have followed us here!" said Señor Matias, with increasing excitement. "Before morning should to come the snake knife might reach us all!"

This seemed to add to the terror of Alvarez, and the entire party was in the greatest consternation.

"Get into the boat everything," directed Matias. "It is a move we will make without delay."

So everything was packed into the boat, with great haste, and then they got in themselves, pushed out, and went floating down the Rio Salado, keeping well in mid-stream, for fear of the sudden death that seemed to lurk in the black shadows of the night-enshrouded forest.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE GAUCHO.

Morning found them still floating down the river, but the forests had grown thin, and they were now being carried out into the heart of the pampas.

Frank was still alive. In fact, his shoulder had given him no trouble at all, which indicated beyond a doubt that he had not been touched by the poison.

Frank was thankful, for he realized he had had a very narrow escape from a most horrible death.

"I'll keep the snake knife as a relic," he said. "When I settle down, I'll have a houseful of curiosities gathered from every part of the world, and this will not be the least among them."

The sun came up with a jump, and the night changed to day in a most astonishingly brief space of time. Birds sang in the groves along the river. Pepita, who had slept in the bottom of the boat, watched over by Alvarez, also sang.

The sunlight gave Señor Matias new life and courage. He smiled, and addressed his companions as his children.

The forests grew thinner yet. There was foliage along the river, but the open pampas lay beyond.

They were discussing the advisability of halting for breakfast, when, of a sudden, Juan uttered a cry of joy.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing. "The hut! See it? It is the home of some gaucho."

Through an opening in the foliage they could see a

rude hut, that was thatched with long grass. From a point close to the hut arose a column of blue smoke.

"The gauchos are wild and reckless men," said Frank, who had read much of them.

"Wild and reckless, perhaps," confessed Juan; "but they all treat you right-a if you take care not to offend. Show you feel no better than they do, be polite, and they use you right."

"Then, we had better stop here. Look—there, beyond the hut are horses feeding. This may be the best point to leave the river and strike across the pampas. We may be able to buy horses of the man who lives there."

So the boat was guided to the shore, and three of the party—Frank, Ephraim, and Señor Matias—approached the hut. As they came near, a man came out through the low doorway, smoking a short-stemmed pipe. He stopped abruptly when he saw them, staring in astonishment.

He was dressed in a singular manner. His hat was a wide-brimmed affair, and his woolen shirt was open in front, exposing his throat and hairy breast. Around his waist was a belt that held a knife with a blood-stained blade, that was at least a foot in length. The handle was of gold and silver, finely chased.

At first glance, the stranger seemed to have on brown zouave trousers, with white leggins at the ankles, but a closer inspection showed they were rather close-fitting cotton drawers, instead of trousers, and, in addition, his legs were clothed from the ankles up with a length—say three yards—of wide brown cotton goods.

This stuff bagged down between the man's legs, making him look very ridiculous to Frank, who repressed a smile with difficulty.

On the man's feet were boots, made from the skin of the legs of a colt. When he walked, he had a nautical

roll, like a Nantucket whaler, fresh from a three years' cruise in the Pacific.

After the man had stared some moments, he scratched his chin through his thick beard, and exclaimed:

"Twist my buttons!"

The words gave Frank and Ephraim a shock, and the latter cried:

"Gol dern my hide! He speaks United States!"

"That's what he does!" said Frank, delightedly. "We're in luck!"

The astonishment of the man seemed increased.

"Do I hear right, or do I not?" he mumbled. "Shiver my timbers if I can tell! Do you boys talk the white man's language?"

"We speak English," assured Frank, advancing; "and it seems that you do the same, which gives us unbounded pleasure."

"Well, dash my toplights!" shouted the stranger, rushing forward and grasping Frank's hand. "I dunno who you are, but I'm thundering glad to see you! I ain't heard anything but Spanish and Injun talk for a year and a half."

He gave Frank's hand a crushing pressure, and then grasped Ephraim's hand, and worked the Yankee boy's arm like a pump handle. Looking on from a distance, one must have thought it a meeting of old friends. An expression of satisfaction settled on the face of Señor Matias.

"My name's Smith," said the stranger—"just plain John Smith, of Salem, Massachusetts. That is, I was from Salem, but now and forever after I hail from South America and the pampas."

Frank introduced himself, Señor Matias, and Ephraim. Smith shook hands all around once more.

"Well, it is good to turn my lamps on a couple of gen-

uine Yankees from Yankeeland," declared Smith, heartily. "Thought I didn't care about ever seeing anybody again, thought I was a regular old barnacle stuck fast here on the pampas; but it makes me laugh all over from stem to stern to see you youngsters."

He invited them to come around where he was cooking, which proved to be just around the corner of the hut. A little fire was burning in a stone fireplace, and a pot of *mate*, the tea herb of Paraguay, was bubbling on some coals.

Smith questioned them, and Frank explained, as briefly as possible, how they came to be there.

Then Frank asked Smith if he had horses to sell, and if he would guide them across the pampas.

"Well," said the strange man, after some hesitation, "I've got plenty of hosses, and I can act as pilot for ye; but it's against my principle to take a job of any kind that's at all like work. Here in the desert no man has to work, and all are free to go and come as they please. The gaucho is the free lance of the pampas. He passes the day in galloping easily across the desert, with occasional mad dashes here and there, as he starts up game of some kind. He stops where night overtakes him, and he eats such food as he may find. It is a life such as no man may find elsewhere on the face of the earth. I have been a sailor for twenty-three years, and a gaucho for four years. Give me the life of a gaucho; the sea no longer has any attraction for this chicken. Here there is no master or mate over me; I am captain, mate, and crew, and I run the ship just as I please, twist my buttons if I don't!"

"How did you happen to change from sailor to gaucho?" asked Frank.

"Got shipwrecked on the coast of Patagonia, and fell in with some gauchos. That's all."

"And you think you will never leave the life you are now leading?"

"Not till I leave it for the last cruise to that port from which no sailor ever comes back."

"Well, that is strange, but I suppose there must be something fascinating about the life. Still, you are much alone—you are practically a hermit."

"Oh, no, mate, I'm not alone. I have my hosses and other critters. I have all the wild things of the pampas for companions. Shiver my timbers, I have company enough!"

Then Smith seemed to remember that they had spoken of the others who were in the boat, and he said:

"Bring up the rest of the crew, my hearties. They're all welcome here. Bring 'em up, and we'll have breakfast, such as it is."

So Frank hastened down to the river, and brought the others up to the gaucho's hut, where Smith was introduced to them all, whereupon he regarded Pepita with open admiration, exclaiming:

"Dash my toplights, if that ain't a trim-built little clipper! And she's the daughter of Senyaw Matias? Well, senyaw, you are to be congratulated. Now that I have seen her, I'll stick to this crew, through fair weather and foul, till we reach the port you're bound for. You may lay to that, my hearties."

So it was settled, although Alvarez scowled a little on hearing Smith speak so plainly in praise of Pepita's charms.

A short time later all were eating breakfast together in the open air, chatting socially.

The flat-bottomed boat was abandoned at that point, and the fugitives took to the pampas.

They decided to rest a day at that point, all terrors seeming to be left behind them in the dark forest.

Smith himself was restless, and Frank longed to hunt upon the pampas with a genuine gaucho. That afternoon Frank, Ephraim, and Smith started out to see what they could find in the way of sport.

All were mounted on fine horses.

The two boys were armed with Winchester rifles and Smith & Wesson revolvers.

Smith's consisted of a horsehair lasso, called a bolas, and the long-bladed knife with the silver handle, which he constantly wore in his belt.

"Where are your weapons?" asked Frank, as they started out, having waved a farewell to the others, who were gathered near the hut.

"Here," answered the Yankee gaucho, as he touched the lasso, the bolas, and the knife.

"But do you not carry a rifle or revolver?"

"What's the use?"

"I should think you'd want something to kill with."

"What's the matter with the knife or the bolas, mate?"

"I do not know much about the bolas, but I should not think you'd be able to get near enough to your game to kill it with the knife."

"The lasso helps me get near enough. As for a rifle, dash my toplights if it ain't more bother than it's worth! I can kill at sixty yards with the bolas, and that's range enough."

"Sixty yards?" cried Frank, incredulously.

"Cocksure, mate."

"Wal, I be gol derved ef I wouldn't like to see yeou do it!" cried Ephraim. "I uster read abaout them bollys in the jography, but I never took much stock in such yarns."

Smith laughed.

"Wait till we sight something worth cruising after, and then I'll show you what it is I can do with the bolas. Up

here the ostriches are not so plenty as they are farther south, but we sometimes see one of 'em. If we do to-day, I'll break his back with the bolas."

The pampas grass was thick about the feet of their horses, and the wind blew strong from the southwest. The sun was shining brightly.

The boys felt a wild thrill of freedom as they galloped away across the plain. They took deep breaths of the air, which seemed to send the blood coursing like wine through their veins. They began to understand the wild delight of a free life in the desert.

Smith had eyes like a hawk. Now and then he would see some small animal skulking swiftly away through the grass, and he would dash after it with the bolas, much to the amazement of Ephraim.

A herd of deer was started. Yelling like a maniac, Smith went after them. But they were out of range so far as the lasso or bolas were concerned, and they would have escaped with ease but for Frank, who brought down two of them while riding at top speed.

It was the gaucho's turn to be amazed.

"Look here, boy," he said, as he reined in his horse and stared down at one of the deer, "you're either a howling wonder with a rifle, or you're the luckiest Jack I ever saw do shootin'!"

Frank smiled.

"You have been showing us tricks, and it was our turn to show you something. I will acknowledge they were lucky shots, but hardly accidental. Now you see the use of a rifle."

"It kills," confessed Smith; "but did you feel the bullet sink into the flesh?"

"Of course not."

"Then you missed all the fun of the thing, twist my buttons if you didn't! When I throw a creature with the

lasso, I feel the strain. When I drive my knife home, I feel it sink through flesh. No, no, boy; no rifle for me."

"Every man to his taste."

"What be we goin' to do with these deer?" asked Ephraim, with anxiety. "Kin we tote 'em along?"

"Tote nothing," said Smith. "We don't want to be bothered with any cargo on this cruise."

"Will we find 'em here if we leave 'em?"

"I should say not! Look—yonder, high in the air, you may see a tiny speck swinging around and around. Can you see it?"

After some difficulty, the boys saw the speck indicated, which seemed to be swinging in a circle high up against the blue of the northeastern sky.

"That is a vulture," explained the gaucho. "Some say the vulture can smell a dead creature on the desert for scores of miles. It has wonderful eyes. It can see much farther than it can be seen with a powerful glass. That one has seen the fall of these deer."

"An' it will come here?"

"Look, it is circling no longer—it is coming."

"Wal, hang the critter! It can't hev them deer. I'm hungry fer deer meat, by gum!"

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

"Tote them deer back to the hut."

"You can't find the way."

"Yes, I kin."

A long discussion followed, and Ephraim insisted in doing as he liked. At length, Smith said he would direct Ephraim so he could not fail to find his way by the aid of the sun.

The hindquarters of both deer were removed, and slung on either side of the Yankee lad's horse, after which Smith gave Ephraim minute directions, and the Vermonter started for the river and the home of the gaucho.

Frank saw him depart, with some misgivings, but Ephraim seemed to feel certain he could find the river, and Smith said he would be able to do so without trouble.

Then Frank and the gaucho rode on.

"We will look for ostriches," he said.

At last the grass grew thinner, and finally they found themselves entering a desert of gray and yellowish sand, with red and brown pebbles everywhere. Knolls and ridges arose before them. On every side were scattered clumps of stiff, gaunt, gray bushes.

Riding onward into this desert land, and mounting to the crest of a high ridge, it seemed that the same knolls and ridges, and the same clumps of bushes had moved onward with them. Ahead, to the right, the left, behind them, everywhere, the landscape presented the same monotonous appearance.

Into this desert they rode. The wind blew strong in their faces, but it did not whistle, nor did it make a rustle in the bushes. The faint chirp of the desert sparrow did not reach the ears of the two horsemen. A flitting desert hare was not seen. All seemed silent, monotonous, lifeless.

Frank began to feel insignificant. He seemed lost and lonely there in the desert, for all of his companions.

A herd of guanacos started up, and fled away across the desert. The man and boy pursued.

It was wild sport. John Smith whooped like a wild creature, and he rode his horse as if a part of the animal itself. Out from his shoulders flapped his *quillango*, a fur robe, made from the skins of young guanacos. Around and around his head he swung the bolas, one free while swinging, while the other was held in his hand. He made the throw, releasing the one in his hand. The free one came down on the back of a guanaco, and the other came

down on that with a crack. The animal dropped, its back broken.

John Smith whooped wilder than ever.

Frank felt his blood seething in his veins. Surely, this was life and sport. He had never struck anything like it before. He felt that he had lived a year of pleasure in that one day.

Crack—crack! It took two shots to bring down one of the guanacos. The creature turned over and over as it fell, and stopped at the foot of a ridge.

A long, gaunt creature sprang up and parted the herd. Smith went after this creature, which was a panther, and Frank continued after the flying guanacos.

On and on rode the boy. Now and then he fired. Sometimes he missed, and sometimes he did not. He took no note of time or space.

Finally the ridges hid all the fleeing animals that had not fallen, and Frank drew rein.

“Ha! ha!” he laughed. “Talk about fun! This beats everything!”

He turned back. Ridges, knolls, bushes, sand, red and brown pebbles on every hand.

The sun was low in the west. Soon it would sink from view, and he would be alone in the desert.

Where was Smith?

He rode to the crest of a high ridge and looked around. All he could see were other high ridges, bushes, sand, and pebbles.

Frank began to feel uneasy. He shouted, but the strong wind seemed to tear the words from his lips and bear them away almost soundless.

“I must find my way back.”

He started to retrace the trail left by his horse. It was no easy task, as he soon discovered, and he was not long

in deciding that night would fall before he could reach the spot where the herd of guanacos had been started up.

Frank became fearful, and he tried to hasten forward. As a result, he soon lost the trail entirely. Then he took the sun as a guide, keeping it over his left shoulder all the time.

The sun sank lower and lower.

Several times Frank fired his rifle, hoping Smith would hear the report. He had begun to feel very desperate.

An ostrich started up, and dashed away, but the boy did not follow.

At last the sun dropped beneath the horizon, and night came down swiftly on the desert.

Frank rode aimlessly onward, lost in the desert!

## CHAPTER XIII.

### LEFT TO HIS FATE.

The moon had not arisen, and night lay grim and heavy on the desert. Everywhere was a great silence, a profound loneliness.

"It is useless, old horse—we may as well stop here. To continue to wander onward would be folly."

It was the voice of Frank Merriwell.

The horse stopped willingly, and Frank dismounted.

Any one who has not been lost on a vast plain, or in a great forest, is quite unable to comprehend the terror of the shock that comes to the lost one when he first realizes he is completely bewildered in regard to his bearings. Such a discovery benumbs one with horror at first, and then makes him frantic to hurry onward somewhere, anywhere. For the time, reason and cool judgment give way to fear.

It was with the greatest difficulty that Frank repressed his desire to hurry onward through the darkness.

"I might wander so far into this desert that I could never find my way out," he said.

And then came the thought that the pampas lay around him, stretching away hundreds of miles in some directions. If he were not careful and cautious, he might remain a wanderer on the desert till hunger and thirst ended his life.

"I'll need my strength, and I will rest," he said.

So he lay down in a little hollow, where the force of the cool night wind was broken by a ridge. His horse was tethered from a picket-pin.

Strange as it may seem, Frank was able to go to sleep readily, being in a healthy condition, and wearied from the wild sport of the afternoon.

He must have slept some time. He was awakened by a shock. Some one or something pounced upon him heavily.

In a moment Frank was wide awake, and he struggled to fling off his assailant, but he had been taken at an advantage, and he did not readily succeed.

It did not take the boy long to discover that his assailant was a man, and not a wild animal, as he had at first supposed. The unknown fastened a hand on Frank's throat, and shut off the boy's wind.

Frank realized his strength would go quickly with his breath, and he tried to tear that hand away.

He succeeded, and the unknown uttered an oath in Spanish, making another fierce effort to close on the boy's windpipe.

As our old readers know, Frank was an athlete, and, feeling that he was fighting for his life, he strained every nerve and muscle.

With a sudden flip, the boy turned his foe, and they rolled over and over, panting, squirming, uttering explosive grunts.

The lad was beginning to get the best of the fight.

"*Caramba!*" hissed the unknown, and then, of a sudden, he raised some weapon, and brought it down, with a crack, upon Frank's skull.

Bright lights flashed before the boy's eyes, making it seem that a thousand rockets had exploded in his brain, and he fell over limply, knocked out.

When Frank recovered consciousness, he found himself bound hands and feet, and lying on the ground. Near him a black form squatted in the darkness. It was a man, sitting on his heels, and smoking.

Frank peered keenly at the figure, and he saw that the man's head and face were muffled with some kind of a cloth, which served to conceal his features. There were eye-holes and a slit for his mouth.

The man seemed to realize immediately that Frank had revived, for he said:

"Ha! So you have come around, eh? Well, I wait. I think that I had best to plant you, but I wait."

The voice was not familiar to Frank, and he did not think he had ever heard it before. That it was the voice of a Spaniard, the peculiar accent and expression seemed to indicate.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

A low, hoarse chuckle came from beneath the muffling folds of the cloth about the man's head.

"Who that I am? I will tell you. I am to you one deadly enemy."

"Why should you be that? What have I ever done to you?"

"What have you? Never mind. It is what I know. If you have done nothing at all, you are yet my enemy."

"Why?"

"Shall I tell? No. Let you die and never know. That will make to you the worst misery."

"Then you mean to murder me?"

"Oh, no; I mean no more than to let you die."

Despite himself, Frank shuddered, the manner in which the words were uttered turning his blood cold.

"Then you intend to leave me here as I am, bound hands and feet—leave me for the wild beasts of the desert?"

Once more that low, hoarse chuckle came from beneath the cloth.

"I shall not leave you as you are—no, no."

"How, then?"

"To find that out you are in great haste. You will know soon enough; do not be in so fast hurry."

The fellow was tantalizing, and Frank suppressed his anger with an effort. He knew the man expected an outburst of rage or supplication, and would gloat over his helplessness.

"I have been in scrapes that were as bad as this, and I still live," thought the boy. "'Never say die' is a good motto."

There was a little silence, and the unknown smoked on. By the glow of the cigarette the helpless youth could see two gleaming eyes beyond the twin slits in the cloth.

Frank resolved that he would not be the first to speak, although he would have given much to know who this mysterious foe was and why he concealed his identity.

All at once a thought came to Frank:

"This is not the first time he has tried to kill me!"

"Yes," said the unknown, as if he were a mind reader, "it was myself who did throw the snake knife. Such fortune you did have to escape being touched the poison by!"

"I knew it!" exclaimed the boy. "You are a human monster! You are worse than the savages—worse than the brutes!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Now it is that you get yourself excited. Ha, ha, ha! Now it is you know what a deadly one I am."

Frank bit his tongue, regretting that he had given the man so much satisfaction. He spoke calmly.

"If you were anything but a dastardly coward, you would set me free, and give me a show for my life. I will fight you with any sort of weapon."

"Fight! Ha! A fool I would be! I have you where I can crush you with one blow by. A fool I would be!"

"Now, you are showing yourself a dog—a coward!"

A snarling sound came from the unknown's lips, and

he suddenly launched himself upon the lad. Frank saw something bright glint in the glow from the cigarette, which had been dropped to the ground, and then felt that something touch his throat.

"*Caramba!*" grated the man, crushing his knee into the lad's breast. "At your throat my knife is! With one swift stroke your life I can let out!"

"Go on; finish your vile work," said Frank, hoarsely.

"No, boy; it would be too quick. You would not be so you would wonder who had killed you as you died. I want you to have time to think of it—to wonder."

"Then you mean to kill me slowly—by inches?"

"You will take a long time to die, and you will be alone."

"If you mean to leave me here to starve in the desert, why don't you do so? I shall not miss you when you are gone."

"Ha! I wonder at your hurry. It is so much to the strange. If the time I had I would stay with you longer; but there is a ride before me."

"Good-evening."

"Why you say that?"

"I thought you were going."

"Not so soon. Before I go I fix you so there will be no chance for you to come away. My foot fall in the place; I know where it is."

Frank wondered what the fellow could mean, and he was soon to find out. The unknown put up his knife, grasped the boy, and dragged him along over the ground.

Frank made a desperate effort to break his bonds, but he strove in vain. The cord was strong, and the knots well tied.

For a distance of thirty feet the man dragged the boy, and then from beneath the baffling cloth came the words:

"It is here. If it is deep enough, that is all."

And then, before the lad could understand what was to be done, he lifted Frank, whose feet slipped into a hole in the ground, the burrow of some wild creature.

When it was too late the boy made a struggle to prevent his foe from accomplishing his design. Down to his shoulders—to his neck—he dropped, and there he stood.

Once more the unknown laughed, in a blood-chilling way.

“It is the very good fit,” he said. “It is as if it had been made to the match.”

“And you mean to leave me here?”

“Is it not a fine place? Oh, it will be what you like when you have been there a good time. I will make it some better.”

He took out his long knife, with which he loosened the earth and thrust it in about the boy. In a few minutes Frank was standing there, buried to the neck, scarcely able to move a muscle.

“Is it much bad?” asked the unknown, tauntingly. “It must be so easy. If there would be some more light I could look at you. Ah! I know you must look strange. You must look like some vegetable that grow from the ground. To-morrow the sun will come and beat on your head—to-morrow you will be crazy. You will shout and make the loud noise till your voice you have lost. That you will do, if something does not come to eat your head off before to-morrow.”

Frank ground his teeth, but spoke no further words.

For some time the unknown crouched there beside his victim, taunting and tantalizing him. At last, finding the boy said nothing, he arose.

“The night goes on,” he said. “I must ride far. Your horse will be for me an easy one to ride. And it is much time you may have to think who I am. *Adois.*”

He paused to light another cigarette, said "*adois*" once more, and turned away.

Frank listened. He heard the man mount, heard two horses go galloping away, the sound of their hoof-beats growing fainter and fainter, till they died out in the distance.

The stars were out, and there was a hint of a coming moon in the eastern sky. The silence of death hovered on the desert.

Frank was alone and helpless, buried to the neck in the ground. The dirt had begun to press upon him, and he felt darting pains in every limb.

He did not cry out, did not shout for help, knowing how useless such an effort would be. There was not one chance in ten thousand that his cries could be heard by human ears, and he might bring some wild beast down into the hollow to destroy him.

Would it not be better to die from the attack of some wild beast than to remain there and perish of hunger and thirst, and the glare of the sun?

A frantic longing to burst his bonds, to struggle out of that hole in the ground, came over him, but when he tried to move he cried out with pain.

His situation was horrible enough to appall the stoutest heart—to turn warm blood to ice water.

Frank's life, since leaving school, had, as we know, been one of perilous adventure; but he felt that he had rather face any peril previously encountered than the one that now hovered over him.

In almost every other case there had been a chance for him to fight for his life, but now he could do nothing but await his doom.

The minutes seemed hours. It seemed that the moon should have arisen long, long ago, for surely it was near morning.

Morning! Would he ever see the light of another day? Would the night pass and no wild beast come to destroy him?

He thought of his home, his friends far away in a northern land, and he wondered if they would know what fate had befallen him. It was not likely any one would ever know. John Smith, Juan, Ephraim, and all the others might search for him, and never find a trace.

A human head rising above the desert sand would be a small thing to attract the eyes of passing travelers. And by another dawn his head might not protrude from the ground; his bones, stripped of flesh, might lay bleaching on the desert.

Nervy lad though he was, Frank could not repress a groan.

Before his fancy the faces of his schoolmates thronged. Bart Hodges, Barney Mulloy, Hans Dunnerwust, and scores of others seemed crowding about him.

They would speak of him when it was known that he was gone. They would speculate as to the fate that had befallen him. They would say he had always been "white," and some of them would drop a tear for him.

Then came other faces—sweet, girlish faces. Inza Burgence, dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked Inza, smiled upon him, and then seemed to float away, casting encouraging glances over her shoulder.

May Blossom followed Inza, tossing her yellow curls, seeming ready to laugh or weep, and uncertain which she would do.

Then Elsie Bellwood drew near, and held out her hands to him, pleading in her eyes, her face sad and sweet. He longed to touch those outstretched hands, to whisper something in her ear that would bring a smile to her face.

There were others whom he had met in traveling about the world—Kate Kenyon, the moonshiner's daughter;

Vida Melburn, whose half-sister was "Queen of the Counterfeiters," and last came dark-eyed, little Pepita, who had thanked him a hundred times for his friendship toward her brother, for what he had done for both of them. She had even kissed his hand.

Never again would he see any of them; he must die in the desert, and become food for vultures or wild beasts.

The moon was thrusting its rim up between two swells; its white light would soon flood the desert.

What was that?

A strange, wild cry rang through the night.

Frank's flesh crept upon his bones, for he knew the cry came from the throat of some wild beast.

"Some creature has scented me," he thought. "My time is not long! The end is very near!"

The moon pushed up swiftly. Frank could see it over his shoulder.

He saw something else, for, between himself and the moon, crept a long, cat-like figure of gigantic dimensions.

A panther was crouching there, and peering down into the hollow!

Frank did not stir, hoping the beast had not seen him, and would go on.

Vain hope. Down into the hollow crept the great cat, uttering another long, low cry. Nearer and nearer the beast came, and the boy felt that his minutes were drawing to a close.

"It will be over very soon!" he half whispered.

Nearer, nearer, nearer! The panther came forward, slowly, very slowly, as if in doubt concerning the nature of the object it had discovered protruding from the earth. At times it stopped for some moments and lay close to the ground, its gleaming eyes fastened on the eyes of the helpless boy.

Finally the panther began to walk about the boy, sniff-

ing at the head which protruded from the ground. Plainly it was puzzled by what it saw.

Having made a complete circle, the beast paused before Frank, crouched low, and seemed to be gathering itself.

Frank felt that his last minutes had come, for the creature was preparing to leap.

Then the boy found his voice, and uttered a cry:

"Get out!"

The panther did not spring. Instead, it began to frolic and gambol about the boy, purring loudly. It rolled over and over, rubbed itself along the ground, rolled a small stone between its paws, and acted exactly like a huge kitten at play.

Great drops of cold perspiration stood on the boy's face, and he scarcely dared draw a breath. He had seen a cat toy with a mouse before crushing and eating it, and he felt that thus the panther was toying with him.

"It will soon get tired, and then I must die!" thought Frank.

But the moon rose higher, and still the panther continued to gambol and frisk about.

Then came another sound from far across the desert—another cry.

"It is the panther's mate!" thought Frank.

But the great cat did not answer the cry. Instead, it suddenly stopped playing, bristled up fiercely, and uttered a low growl.

Then Frank thought another male panther must be approaching, and the first one feared it would lose its prey.

"If they will meet and fight to the death!" was the boy's mental exclamation.

In a short time the cry was repeated, sounding much nearer than before.

Somehow, it did not seem like the cry of the panther

which the boy had heard in the first place ; it was quite a different note.

The panther was lashing the ground with its tail, seeming to grow more and more enraged with each passing moment.

A third time came that cry, and it was close at hand. A moment later a long, slim, supple form came into view over a ridge.

It was not a panther, as Frank immediately saw, but it was a jaguar. Between the panther and the jaguar there exists an undying enmity.

The jaguar crouched on the ridge, peering into the hollow. It saw the panther, and snarled and spit.

The panther was hugging the ground, and it growled in return.

"If they will only fight!" thought the boy. "If they will kill each other!"

The jaguar hesitated about entering the hollow. It sniffed the air, and then, of a sudden, sprang down from the ridge.

Two supple figures sprang toward each other, met, grappled, tore, bit, snarled, and howled. Over and over they rolled, flinging up dirt and pebbles from the ground, while the helpless lad watched the battle with the greatest anxiety.

The struggle was not a long one, for the panther was heavier and stronger than the jaguar, which was finally crushed to the earth and held there. The panther tore open the jaguar's throat, fastened its lips there, and drank the dying beast's blood.

"It is my turn next!" muttered Frank, hopelessly.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A FRIEND.

At length it was all over. The jaguar lay dead on the ground, and the panther seemed satisfied, for it sat up like a cat and licked its paws.

For some time the victorious creature sat there licking itself, seeming to have forgotten the boy.

"If it would forget and go away!" thought Frank.

The helpless lad remained as quiet and motionless as a stone, hoping the panther would forget him; but such a thing was not to happen.

After a time, the panther approached the boy once more, walked around him, as if inspecting the thing it saw protruding from the ground.

"Get out!" shouted Frank, as the beast sniffed at his face.

The panther jumped away, and then jumped back, exactly like a huge cat. It did not seem so lively as it had been before drinking the blood of the jaguar.

All at once a singular thing occurred. The panther crept near enough to touch Frank's face with its nose, and it actually licked the boy's cheek with its great, rough tongue!

Frank was paralyzed with amazement. The great cat purred loudly, and continued to lick the boy's face.

This continued for some time, and then the panther deliberately curled itself on the ground near at hand, purred softly some minutes, finally became silent, closed its eyes, and went to sleep!

The moon climbed into the sky, and the night crept on, with leaden feet. The sated panther slept.

"He is waiting to make a meal off me in the morning," thought Frank. "This simply prolongs the agony."

It is impossible to tell what strange, wild fancies flitted through the brain of the unfortunate lad during the tedious hours while, helplessly buried to his neck, with the gorged panther sleeping less than ten feet away.

Although he was one of the kind who never cease to hope as long as life remains, still he knew he had not one chance in ten thousand to escape death.

The stars were beginning to pale, and morning was not far distant, when he fancied he heard a sound far away on the desert.

The panther heard it, for he awoke, lifted his head, and listened.

"Something has aroused him, and now he will finish me," said the boy, mentally.

The sounds—a faint, irregular thud, thud—became more and more distinct. The panther started up, saw the head of the helpless lad, stared at it a moment, as if surprised, and then began to purr once more.

The great cat seemed very good-natured. It advanced, and sniffed at Frank, and seemed on the point of beginning to gambol again, when it paused to listen once more.

Nearer and nearer came the sounds, and a wild thrill stirred the boy's heart, and sent the sluggish blood hurrying through his veins, for he fancied he recognized the sounds.

"Horses!" he panted, forgetting himself, and speaking aloud. "Horses, and coming this way! Are they ridden?"

That there was more than one he was certain. He could tell that much by the beating of their hoofs.

The panther was uneasy. It moved to and fro, pausing now and then to listen. It had ceased to purr.

A sudden desire to shout as loudly as possible came over Frank, but he choked back the cry that arose in his throat.

"If I shout it may enrage the panther, so the creature will leap upon me," was his thought.

If he did not shout, the horsemen—in case the horses were mounted—might pass without knowing any one was near.

The horses were coming directly toward that spot, and now came another thought that was far from pleasant.

"Perhaps it is my mysterious foe returning with companions? If not, why should they come directly toward this place?"

The panther whined uneasily, crouched close to the ground for some moments, and then started up of a sudden, and hurriedly skulked away. Frank watched the beast till it disappeared over the crest of a ridge.

The boy could hardly realize that the fierce creature had departed without doing him the least harm.

Nearer and yet nearer came the horses. They were close at hand—they were passing!

"Never mind if they should prove to be enemies," thought the boy. "Any death is preferable to the one to which my unknown enemy has left me."

He opened his mouth to utter a shout—he sought to cry for help.

To his horror, the sound that came from his lips was scarcely louder than a whisper. It seemed that he had suddenly lost the power to utter a loud cry.

Again and again he tried, but the same husky sound issued from his throat.

The horses had passed, and their hoof-beats were sounding less and less distinct. He caught a glimpse of two

fleeting forms that passed over a rise, and a groan of despair came hollowly from his dry throat :

“Lost!”

Now he felt certain the horsemen were not his enemies. They had known nothing of his presence.

Fainter and fainter sounded the hoof-beats.

“Help! help! help!”

Frank had found his voice at last, but it was too late to make the horsemen hear. Onward they went, through the night, and the sound of their horses’ feet died out.

At that moment Frank came nearer giving up hope than ever before in his life. It seemed that fate was against him—that he was doomed. He raved at himself because of his inability to shout, and then he became silent and unconscious, for the time, of his surroundings.

Something aroused him once more. It was like a faint shout, far away. There was another sound, a faint thud, thud, growing louder and louder.

The lad’s heart leaped into his throat, and he gasped :

“Are they coming back? Can it be? Is it possible?”

It seemed most improbable and unlikely. Why should they come back? And yet the sounds were becoming more distinct with each moment.

Spang!

It was the report of a rifle. Of that there could be no doubt. And now he plainly heard shouts, which came from human lips.

“They are coming!”

His voice should not fail him this time; he would make them hear. He reserved all his energy till they came yet nearer.

Once more a rifle shot rang out.

“It cannot be the gauchos,” decided the helpless boy, “for they do not use rifles. Who is it, then?”

This time the horsemen came straight toward the spot

where Frank was buried in the ground to his neck. They were urging their horses fiercely, now and then uttering shouts.

Suddenly over a ridge came a supple creature that seemed to limp as if injured.

It was a panther!

The animal ran down into the hollow close to Frank, and there it crouched, whining piteously and lapping at a wound in its shoulder.

"Great Scott!" gasped the boy. "I believe it is the same panther—my panther!"

The beast whined again, and crept nearer Frank's head.

Over the ridge dashed two horsemen, with a led animal in tow. They saw the crouching panther, and uttered cries of satisfaction. Around the head of one of them whirled the noose of a lasso.

"Stop!" shouted Frank Merriwell, with all the force he could command. "You must not harm this beast! It has saved my life! Stop, I say!"

They heard him; they saw his head protruding from the ground, with the moonlight falling full on his face, and great was their amazement. In a moment the horses were flung on their haunches, while one of them lifted a rifle to his shoulder.

"Stop!" screamed Frank. "You must not shoot! Stop, I tell you!"

The rifle dropped, and a cry of joy came from the one who held it.

"Gol dern my skin ef it ain't Frank!"

It was Ephraim Gallup!

"Shiver my timbers if it ain't the boy!" roared the other, who was John Smith, the gaucho.

The panther began to creep away.

"Let the creature go," commanded Frank. "It has saved my life. You must not kill it."

"All right, my hearty," said Smith. "This youngster here has socked a bullet into the critter; but we'll let it go if you say so."

"I do say so. Let it go, and get me out of here as quickly as you can."

Smith sprang down, drew his knife, and was soon digging away the earth about Frank. Ephraim dismounted and aided, the panther having disappeared.

In a short time the boy was dragged from the ground and set at liberty, but he was so benumbed that he could not stand. When he had rubbed his limbs till the blood circulated freely once more, he sat up, and told them his story, to which they listened in great amazement.

"Gol dern ef I ever heard uv a panther actin' that way before!" cried Ephraim.

"That is nothing," declared Smith. "The natives here give the panther a name that means 'friend of man.' Panthers never attack men, unless first attacked. Even then they are likely to run away till cornered, when they may crouch and whine and cry till killed. They have a way of playing around travelers in the desert and on the pampas. Barnyard cattle have killed a sight more humans than panthers ever did, twist my buttons if they ain't!"\*

This seemed so improbable that the boys were inclined to believe Smith was drawing the long bow, but he insisted that he spoke the simple truth.

Frank questioned the others as to how they happened to be there at that time.

The gaucho explained that he had searched for Frank after they had become separated during the hunt of the guanacos, but finally decided that the boy must have re-

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\*This is true of the South American panther. When it is in a playful spirit, if a lone traveler comes along, it is as glad to see him as a petted cat is to see its mistress, and just about as likely to do him harm.—AUTHOR.

turned to the river. But when he arrived at the camp Frank was not there, and his report produced great excitement.

Ephraim Gallup insisted on starting at once to search for the missing lad, and, having secured a fresh horse, Smith started out with the boy from Vermont.

The search had been at random, to a great extent, and the gaucho had felt that it was hopeless, but Ephraim would not rest. At last they had found a saddled and bridled horse wandering on the desert, and the animal proved to be the one Frank had ridden.

This discovery had caused them both to believe there was little hope of ever seeing Frank again, but the frantic Yankee boy had insisted on continuing the search, and the reader knows the result.

## CHAPTER XV.

### OLD ENEMIES APPEAR.

Morning came.

The gaucho and the two boys were riding hard for the Rio Salado, and the line of timber along the river was in sight.

"Listen!" cried Frank. "Did you hear anything?"

"Dash my toplights if I didn't!" returned Smith. explosively.

"What did it sound like?"

"Shooting."

"That is what I thought I heard."

"You fellers hev got the longest ears I ever saw!" exclaimed Ephraim. "I didn't hear nuthin'."

The horses were urged to a still faster pace.

"There!" shouted Frank. "I heard it again!"

"So did I," nodded Smith. "Wonder what it means?"

"Something is wrong at the camp, that's what!"

"Look there! What is that black smoke that's rising above the trees—what does that mean?"

Smith did not speak again, but he rode like a fiend.

All three horses were tough and hard, so the gaucho did not ride away from the boys.

"Perhaps my unknown foe is behind this," thought Frank. "It is possible he means to clean out the entire party, and is trying to continue his work at the camp."

As they came nearer, repeated shots could be heard, and it seemed a regular battle, or a skirmish, at least, was taking place. The soft grass and earth partially muffled the

sound of the horses' feet, and no sounds came from the lips of the riders.

At last they came in sight of the hut, and saw that the dry grass roof was all aflame.

In a little grove at a distance a number of men were hugging the trunks of trees, from behind which they were shooting at the door of the hut, which was closed.

As Smith and the boys stared in astonishment, a puff of smoke leaped out from the side of the hut, and the report of a rifle followed, showing that some one had fired a shot from within.

"Our friends are penned in the hut!" palpitated Frank. "The moment they appear at the door they will be shot down like dogs. In some way these ruffians have fired the roof, and it is but a question of time when those within the hut will have to come out, or roast."

"Twist my buttons, but you're right!" nodded Smith.

"Who be them fellers behind the trees?" asked Ephraim.

"I know them!" guardedly cried the other lad. "Although I have seen his face but once, I know that big man with the fierce black beard."

"Who is it?"

"Black Miguel."

"The Chilian bandit?"

"Sure."

"Wal, I declare! Who'd ever thought he'd follered us here!" gasped Ephraim. "It beats all natur'!"

"See!" palpitated Frank. "See that other man, who is keeping in the background? Take a good look at him!"

"Wal?"

"Ten to one that is the Marques Aguila, Señor Matias' deadly enemy! If so, he is the one who has urged Black Miguel to follow us—he is the one to fear above all others."

"Hang them all!" grated John Smith, harshly. "They've set my house afire! I'd like to get square!"

"Follow me!" directed Frank. "Get ready to shoot, Ephraim, and open on them when I do. Now, Mr. Smith, you will see the value of a rifle."

"Oh, well, I dunno. I may be able to create some disturbance myself. I am with you, youngsters."

Straight toward the besieging party they charged, and the attention of the men was so much given to the hut and its inmates that the trio were able to get close upon them before being discovered.

The moment the bandits saw the three horsemen, Frank gave the command to open fire.

Ephraim could not work his rifle nearly as fast as Frank could, but he did well, and, between them, they sent a hail-storm of bullets whistling about the ears of the astonished and dismayed outlaws.

One or two of the bandits were seen to fall, and the others were thrown into the utmost confusion.

A short distance away, beyond some foliage, were horses, and the outlaws, after firing a few scattering shots, made a rush for the animals.

The door of the burning hut was flung open, and Juan Matias sprang out, uttering wild cries of joy.

"Give-a dem fits, Frank!" screamed the Spanish lad. "Shoot de villains—shoot dem all!"

Pepita, Alvarez, and Señor Matias followed the boy from the hut, all seeming overcome with joy by the opportune appearance of Frank and his companions.

The bandits, although they outnumbered their assailants, were so overcome with astonishment and consternation that they mounted their horses in hot haste and made off.

"The blamed greasers are a brave lot!" observed John Smith, sarcastically. "They sometimes do things that

give people the impression that they are utterly reckless, and don't care a hoot for their lives, but they'll run four times out of five when attacked by an inferior force."

"We have no time to pursue them," said Frank. "We must see if we cannot save the hut."

"Shiver my timbers if that ain't right, boy! All the same, there's little show to save it, for the whole roof is burning."

They wheeled and rode swiftly toward the hut, from which the little party that had been imprisoned there was now bringing forth whatever things of value they could find.

When the hut was reached, it was seen that there was no way to save it, the fire being too far advanced.

"Oh, Frank!" cried Juan. "It is glad we are to see you alive! We did think you must be dead."

Señor Matias was greatly agitated.

"You saved us when you did come as you did come," he said. "My enemy have followed me to this place. Aguila does not mean ever to take one rest till I am dead. He is a monster!"

"Then you are sure Aguila was with that party?" asked Frank.

"I am that sure, for him I did see with my eyes. He has paid Black Miguel to make the pursuit—he has hired the ladrones who with him were. They are not so brave as Black Miguel's men he did have beyond the mountains, or they would have fought, and would not have been made to run away so easy."

"They are cowards and curs!" said Frank. "We should not fear them."

"Ah! but it is like the snake they can creep upon one, and like the snake they can strike. That is why they should be so much feared. They will follow us—Aguila

will find the time which is right to do his way, and I shall die!"

Pepita flung her arms about her father, speaking swiftly, passionately, in Spanish, her pretty face upturned. He stooped and kissed her, trembling a little with fear and excitement.

Juan turned away, murmuring to Frank:

"My poor fardare! He be not like dat before Black Miguel hold-a him in de cave. He be ver' brave, but dat ladrone, dat wretch, he made my fardare what he is!"

"How did the ruffians happen to find you?" questioned Frank.

"That I do not know," answered the boy, growing calmer, and speaking more distinctly. "They must have followed to this spot in some way, Frank. It was after Alvarez had returned from his search for you on the pampas that they appeared, just as the morning was breaking. Alvarez saw them; they saw him. They pursued him here. We got into the hut, which we did defend. With them was one Indian, and a blazing arrow the Indian did shoot into the dry grass on the roof. It burned. If you did not come so as you did, we must have come to the outside of the hut, and the ladrones would have shot us all."

"Well, fortune has not gone back on us yet," laughed Frank, thinking of his own marvelous escape. "Aguila may think he is dealing with children, but he will discover his mistake."

"Ah! but Black Miguel!" fluttered Alvarez, who seemed in great fear. "He is come to be after me! He will not rest at all till me he has killed!"

"In the meantime, you might be able to do some killing yourself."

"True that is!" cried the young Chilian, savagely. "He

may want Pepita, but he will never take her again while I do live! I will fight for Pepita!"

He hissed forth the words, his hand quivering on the haft of a ready knife.

"A very bad fellow to anger," thought Frank. "The girl will have to marry him, however much she may dislike to wed an ex-outlaw. She cannot shake him."

Pepita had succeeded in calming and reassuring her father, in a measure.

The hut was now enveloped in flames, and John Smith, regarding the work of destruction, was expressing his feelings in very vigorous and forceful language.

Fortunately, among the things brought from the hut was a quarter of deer meat and a long steel rod.

Having expressed himself to his entire satisfaction, Smith thrust the rod through the deer meat, and then planted one end in the ground, so the meat hung near the fire, where it began to roast.

"This will save building up any other fire," said the sailor-gaicho. "Just scrape together some fuel to keep her going near the meat, and we'll have breakfast ready pretty soon. I'm hungry as a shark, an' I can't do business till I fill my sack."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### PEPITA'S SECRET.

"We are followed!"

Frank Merriwell uttered the exclamation, bringing his horse to an abrupt stop.

The rest of the party drew up. All were mounted and making their way across the pampas, guided by John Smith.

Smith uttered an ejaculation of impatience.

"Have you just found that out?" he demanded. "Why, I have known the sharks were in our wake for hours."

"And you said nothing about it—why not?"

"What was the use? It would only make ye nervous, and it wouldn't stop the critters back there from follering."

"We should have known they were there, and——"

"What good would that have done?"

"We could have been prepared for any attack."

"They will not attack us till they think they can take us by surprise and overcome us with a rush."

Smith was cool and confident, and the agitation of the party subsided. The gaucho continued:

"Night is the time when them sharks will come at us. We must be on the watch for them then. They may not attack us the first night, but they won't let us finish the cruise across the pampas and run inter port 'thout tryin' us a crack. When they do come, we want to be ready ter give it to them hot and heavy."

"Is there no way we can keep them from following us?"

"Just you name a way."

"I can't."

"There ain't none. They kin trail us, keeping away back all the time. We ain't likely to see them again till they attack us. You wouldn't seen them this time if you hadn't looked back just as they came over that swell."

Frank acknowledged that this was right. He had discovered the pursuers by accident, and they were so far away that he had not felt sure they were pursuers when he first saw them.

Señor Matias was agitated with fear, seemingly having lost his nerve entirely.

"My enemy! My enemy!" he groaned, in Spanish. "Will he never give me peace? A thousand curses on him!"

"Be calm, father," urged Pepita, pressing close to his side. "Remember how easily Frank Merriwell and his two American companions put your enemy to flight. They are brave, and they will defend you."

"It is always the Americans!" exclaimed Alvarez, bitterly. "Do you forget I am here? I can fight, as well as Frank Merriwell."

"But you, too, fear Black Miguel," said Matias. "He is on your trail to kill you, and you know it."

"Which is the greater reason why I should be ready to fight him. All I ask is a good opportunity to finish Black Miguel. I am satisfied it is his life or mine."

"And I am satisfied," said Matias, "that I must kill Aguila, or he will kill me. Still, I dread to face him. Once I feared no man, but the darkness and the terrors of my cavern prison made a coward of me—made me an old man, broken down and white haired. While confined there, I swore a thousand times that, should I ever get free, I would know no rest till Aguila lay dead at my feet. He used to come around and laugh at me, spit on me, kick me! Then I would curse him—I would try to get at

his throat with my hands—I would pray for life, that I might have revenge. But the sunlight, the free air, my children, all made me long for peace. It is plain there can be no peace till one of us is dead.”

Juan's hands fell on his father's arm, and he firmly said: “Your enemy shall die—I swear it! It is my duty to see that the wrong to my father is avenged, and that I shall do.”

Matias smiled faintly on his son, clasping the hand that touched his arm.

“You are brave, my boy—but you are young. I fear you do not know what you say. You can be no match for the Marques de la Villa del Villar de la Aguila, one of the craftiest and most bloodthirsty scoundrels who ever lived. He has friends——”

“So have I,” declared Juan, proudly. “Frank Merriwell and Ephraim Gallup are my friends, father. They have stood by me through many dangers, and either one of them is more valuable than all the friends Aguila can buy with his money.”

John Smith uttered an exclamation of impatience.

“We are wasting time, mates,” he growled. “We must hoist anchor and get under way again.”

So they rode onward across the grassy plain. Wild creatures started up before them and fled, the most of them escaping unharmed. Enough were shot to provide meat for the party.

At midday they halted and ate from the food they had brought along, but hurried onward again when they had finished. Toward night they halted again, and cooked enough meat for supper; but they did not camp on that spot, knowing their enemies would have them located.

When darkness had settled on the great plain they gathered everything and went onward through the night, making as little noise as possible.

Before it was time for the moon to rise they found a sheltered hollow in which they resolved to pass the remainder of the night.

Frank was chosen as guard for the first part of the night, Ephraim to follow him.

The gaucho would not allow them to speak aloud, and he cautioned Frank not to leave the hollow while on guard, and to be constantly on the alert.

All seemed tired. Smith rolled his *quillango* about him, and seemed to fall asleep at once. Alvarez smoked a cigarette, and then wrapped himself in his blanket, soon seeming to sleep. The others, with the exception of Frank, lay down, and their heavy breathing soon told they were in the land of dreams.

Frank crept to the crest of a rise, where he lay on the ground, his rifle at his side, listening and watching.

All was still on the vast plain. The moon would soon rise, away in the east.

Frank lay there thinking of the adventures through which he had recently passed. He fell to wondering concerning the identity of his mysterious foe.

The boy had remained thus for some time, when, of a sudden, he felt a touch upon his shoulder. In the twinkling of an eye he had grappled with a person who was at his side, easily forcing the individual back upon the ground.

"Don't hurt me!" was panted in his ear. "I did not come to harm you."

"Pepita!"

Frank was amazed, for it was indeed Juan's sister.

"Yes, Pepita," she whispered, falteringly. "I could not sleep, and I came here."

"I was thinking of the man who has twice tried to kill me," said Frank. "I grasped you, thinking you might be the wretch. I beg your pardon, señorita."

"It you do have, Señor Frank. I was thinking of the danger to my father from his enemy. I did not know that enemy come upon the camp to-night."

"But you knew I was on guard. Could you not trust me?"

"I could, Frank—I could trust you! I could trust you!"

She seemed strangely agitated, and Frank felt somewhat abashed. The situation was not at all to his liking.

"Then, if you could trust me, why did you come here?"

"I wanted to speak with you."

"You should have chosen some other time. If Alvarez should know——"

"What do I care!" came fiercely from her lips. "What is Alvarez to me! He is not the guardian of me."

"But he is your sweetheart."

"No!" she panted. "He forced himself upon me, Frank! I do not love him. What can I do?"

"By Jove, that's a poser! If you do not love Alvarez, you are in a bad box, for he loves you, and he will not readily give you up. You owe him much——"

"That is the truth," she confessed, hesitatingly. "I feel that I am bad when him I do not love, but I do not be able to force myself to care for him. I have made the try. What more can I do, Frank?"

"Try again."

"It is not easy. I remember that he has been a ladrone. As my husband, my father would look on him with shame. He says not so—he says nothing—but I know."

"Do you remember that it is quite likely that Alvarez saved your life and your father's life?"

"I remember."

"And still——"

"Oh, Frank!" she sobbed; "how is it possible that I should love him when it is another that I love?"

Frank felt more uncomfortable than before.

"Great Scott!" he mentally exclaimed, "can it be she is in love with me? Is it possible that she is going to make a declaration of her love?"

"Pepita," he whispered, "you must go back with the others—you must not remain here longer. Alvarez is likely to be jealous, and, if he should awaken, it might cause trouble."

"I can't go back till you I have told, Frank."

In vain he urged her; she insisted that she had more to say, and she must say it. She was so close that he could feel her warm breath at his ear, as she panted forth the words. Her eyes glowed through the darkness, and he knew her red lips were quivering with the intensity of her feelings.

"There is another that I love, and he does not know," she went on, her hand closing on Frank's wrist. "Till now I have not dared let him know. I have feared that he does not care one thing for me—that I do still fear."

It was with no little difficulty that Frank repressed a groan of dismay. He saw that nothing could check her. She was excited, her hot Spanish blood was aroused, and she would speak.

"If I am the one, my only course is to tell her frankly and fairly that I do not care for her," he thought. "She is pretty, and I might get broken up over her if I did not remember another whose face I see so often in my dreams. Pepita can be nothing to me."

"Listen, Frank, I must tell some one—you I must tell! The one for whom I do care does not know. He is not from my own country and my own people."

"It's coming!" thought the boy.

"He did come from far to the north," the girl continued. "He is brave—very brave. And I do love him, Frank!"

"But he may not care at all for you, Pepita."

"That is what I do fear."

"Then you will be true to Alvarez?"

"How can I that when Alvarez I do not love?"

"Your duty——"

"Duty—ah! what is duty to love? With Alvarez all my life may be so very miserable! With the one I do love, all my life would be so very happy!"

Again Frank tried to tell her that the one she loved might not care for her, and it was folly for her to think so much of him till she knew, but she seemed quite unable to listen to reason.

"If I could tell him!" she whispered, passionately. "I know it is not the thing that a girl should let herself do; but how is it that I must keep my love a secret in my heart. If he knew he might love me. He shall know! I must tell you, Frank."

She leaned still closer, bringing her lips near to his ear and panted:

"The one I do love so much is—Señor Gallup!"

## CHAPTER XVII.

### WHEN MORNING CAME.

Frank came near uttering a cry of astonishment and relief.

"Jupiter!" he gasped.

Pepita said something in Spanish, but Frank did not understand what it was.

To confess the truth, Frank was not only relieved, but he was a trifle chagrined.

"I came very near making a fool of myself," he thought. "I fancied the girl had fallen in love with me, and I nearly betrayed it to her. I am glad I am not the one; but I wonder what Ephraim will think about it."

There were a few moments of silence, and he could hear the girl breathing quickly at his side.

"You are to him a friend," Pepita finally said. "I felt that I must tell you. Perhaps you know if he does care for me at all."

"If so, he has kept it a secret. He has never said anything to me about it."

Pepita fell back a little, seeming disappointed.

"Perhaps he would not be so ready to speak," she murmured. "Perhaps he is—what you call it? bashful."

"I should not be surprised," softly laughed Frank. "He is the sort of a fellow who is rather backward."

"Then what can I do. In Chili the young men are never bashful. They are bold—too much bold. If he does not know that I care for him, he might never say that he did for me, if it were so that he did."

"Perhaps it is best that he should not know, for he might find Alvarez after him."

"Oh, is it that Alvarez must forever to be in my way! I tell you for him I do not care at all."

Frank saw that it would be useless to try to convince her that it was her duty to care for Alvarez. Her warm Spanish blood was aroused, and she was not prepared to reason calmly.

"It is best that Ephraim does not know," he mentally decided. "I must manage to keep the truth from him."

"Pepita," he said "you must keep your secret."

She sighed.

"How am I to when I see him so much? Why should I?"

"I will tell you why. Alvarez has a madly jealous disposition, and it might not be healthy for Ephraim Gallup if the ex-outlaw dreamed you cared for my friend."

"That is true—that is true!" breathed the girl. "Alvarez is ver' quick with the knife."

"Exactly, and he might use it on Ephraim."

"He would be so very mad that he might kill Señor Gallup."

"That's what might happen."

"Santa Maria! It must not!"

"Then you must keep your love for Ephraim to yourself—you must not betray it. Not even by a word, a glance, must you let Alvarez suspect. If you do, you may bring about a tragedy—a murder. If you love Ephraim, Pepita, you will keep your secret."

"It is hard—it is hard!" she half sobbed; "but I will do as you say that I must—I will keep my secret."

"That is where you show your good sense, little one."

"But it may be that he shall never know at all."

"What is to be will be. I have come to believe that myself. Any one who has passed through such dangers as

have befallen me must believe it. If it is destined that you and Ephraim are to be anything to each other, nothing can keep you apart. Believe in that, and trust to fate."

"I will—I must."

"That is good! Now you had better go back and sleep, for Alvarez might become jealous of me, if he were to awaken and know you were here. I do not care to have him for an enemy."

"I will go; but, Frank, remember that I love Señor Gallup, and—and, if the time should come that you could, perhaps you might—let—him—know—a—little."

"Perhaps. Go, Pepita."

She slipped away to where the others were sleeping in the hollow, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Frank was somewhat dismayed when he came to think it all over. He knew it was too true that Alvarez would be insanely jealous if he dreamed that Pepita cared for another, and Ephraim's life would be in danger.

"It is not at all likely that Ephraim would care a snap for her; but that young fire-eater must not know she cares for Ephraim. It is plain that the sooner we get away from Pepita and Alvarez the better it will be."

He wondered how long they would be crossing the pampas, and if the party would hang together till Buenos Ayres was reached.

Then he thought of Aguila and Black Miguel, the two villains who were following them across South America with relentless and deadly determination.

"Each day and every night we must be on our guard," he muttered. "We shall encounter them again."

The moon came up and flooded the great plain with its mellow light. It was so silent on the pampas that one could not fancy any living thing was astir there.

When his watch had terminated Frank aroused

Ephraim. The Vermonter arose, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Hang it all!" he grumbled. "I was jest snoozin' at the rate of forty knots a minute. It's hard to hev to git up an' keep awake."

"It may be difficult, but take my advice and be sure that you keep awake, Ephraim," said Frank.

"Yeou ain't seen northing, hev ye?"

"No."

"Then what's the matter that you want me to watch out so sharp?"

"There is not a moment when we may not be in danger. Aguila has shown that he is relentless, and Black Miguel is with him."

"But they don't know where we be."

"Perhaps not."

"'Course they don't."

"Still, they may be searching for us on the plain. It is your place to make sure they do not come this way without we know it."

"All right; I'll do it."

Then Frank directed Ephraim to creep up to the top of the swell, where he could lay in the grass and look out on the plain, as from that position he could surely see any one who approached. The Yankee boy took his rifle, and went away grumbling, while Frank wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down.

For some reason Frank did not fall asleep immediately, although he was weary. He lay a long time, strange fancies flitting through his brain. Just as he was begining to be drowsy a sudden feeling of danger came over him, and he started up, wide awake in an instant.

All was quiet in the camp. The sleepers were breathing regularly, as if all slumbered.

"It was nothing but a foolish fancy," thought Frank, as he lay down again.

But it had aroused him thoroughly, and he again found it difficult to sleep, although he knew he needed rest.

"I shall feel the lack of sleep in the morning," he said.

After a time the drowsy feeling came stealing over him once more. And then he fancied that his mysterious enemy was creeping, creeping, creeping upon him. The man's eyes shone like balls of fire, and a long knife was held in his teeth. Frank struggled to start up, but seemed held by a spell.

"He will kill me this time!"

That was the thought which passed through his brain.

Nearer and nearer came the man with the knife. Soon he was close at hand, and the knife raised for the fatal stroke.

Then Frank started up again, choking and gasping.

Not a living thing seemed to be stirring about the camp.

"What a fool I am," he grated, softly. "My nerves are in bad shape. I must sleep, for I need it. Ephraim is on guard, and everything is all right."

He lay down and slept. When he awoke it was morning, and the camp was in confusion. He started up crying:

"What is the matter?"

"Pepita!" sobbed Juan—"Pepita, she have gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, Frank, gone."

"Where?"

"That is what nobody can come to tell-a."

"When did she go?"

"Nobody know-a."

"When was it first discovered that she was gone?"

"When the morning did come."

"But where was Ephraim?"

"Ah, Frank, he was sleep—fast sleep."

"What's that?" cried Frank, angrily. "Did he sleep after what I said to him—after my warning?"

"Soak me ef I didn't!" admitted the Yankee boy, looking penitent and ashamed. "Got up there in the grass, an' it was so swizzlin' comfortable that I jest dropped off. Never knowed a thing till it was mornin', an' Juan was shakin' of me. Then I hopped up, an' he asked where his sister was. I hedn't seen her, an' I didn't know northin' about her."

"Oh, Ephraim!" came reproachfully from Frank's lips; "I am sorry to hear this of you."

"An' I'm sorry ter have ter tell it to ye, by gum!"

"Then Pepita must have disappeared in the night?"

Alvarez had been listening, a mad fire in his eyes, his white teeth showing. From his look it seemed that he suspected at first that some one in the camp knew what had become of the girl; but he saw that he was mistaken in this, and he snarled:

"Fool—fool to sleep and let her go! If something happen to her—if she do not come back all right, the fool that sleep when he should be awake shall feel my knife!"

"Look here!" cried Ephraim; "ef anything happens to the little gal I'll feel as bad as yeou do; but ef yeou try to stick yeour knife into me, I'll be swuzled ef I don't knock abaout seventeen bales uv hay aout of yeou!"

"*Caramba!*"

"Wal, I dunno abaout that, but yeou don't want to stick no knife in me, dad bim ye!"

Alvarez looked as if he longed to rush on Ephraim at that moment, but did not dare to do so, which was quite the case.

"Stop your growling," commanded Smith, sharply. "We must find out what has become of the girl, and that we cannot do by quarreling among ourselves."

"That is right," agreed Frank. "It is not possible that Pepita was abducted from our midst while we slept, and it is not likely she ran away of her own accord."

As he said this, he thought of the conversation between himself and the missing girl during the early part of the night. She did not love Alvarez, and she feared him. Was it possible she had been foolish enough to run away from him while they were in the heart of the desert?

"If so," thought Frank, "the chances are that she will be killed by wild beasts, or starve in the desert. Foolish girl!"

Had there been any other explanation of her mysterious vanishing, Frank would not have believed such a thing possible. Now it seemed to him that, thinking of her situation, she might have grown desperate and done something she would not have contemplated in quieter moments.

The gaucho had left the party, and was slowly circling around the camping place, his back bent, and his eyes fastened on the ground.

"What's he doin' of?" asked Ephraim.

"Looking for the trail," answered Frank. "Wait and see what he discovers. It is possible he may find—Ha!"

Smith had stooped suddenly and was closely examining the ground. It was evident that he had found something. In a few moments he moved away, keeping his eyes on the ground, and went to the crest of the rise where the boys had remained concealed in the grass while on guard during the night.

Frank felt the color rushing into his face, for he realized the gaucho had followed the girl's trail to that spot.

Smith remained on the crest of the rise a minute, and then he came back, still keeping his eyes on the ground.

When he reached the place where the little party had slept he paused and looked at Frank and then at Ephraim.

Alvarez was watching every move with burning eyes, and he snarlingly demanded:

"What you have found?"

Smith calmly replied:

"Nothing."

Frank drew a breath of relief. Not that he was in the least afraid of Alvarez, but he felt that it was best the hot-blooded fellow should not know that Pepita had visited one of the guards.

Once more Smith began to walk about the spot where the party had camped.

Alvarez watched him, muttering softly in Spanish.

Within a few minutes the gaucho paused again, then turned and hurried away, stooping and keeping his eyes on the ground. He passed over the crest of a rise, and disappeared from view.

Shortly after Smith came running back, crying:

"Saddle and mount! I've found the girl's trail, and we must follow it immediately."

Señor Matias tried to question the gaucho, but all Smith would say was that the girl had left the camp alone. He hustled to bind the packs upon the backs of the pack animals, and the party was ready to move in a very short time. No one thought of breakfast.

Soon the party was ready to move, and Smith was followed. Away he went on foot, bending forward, his nose down, like a hound on the scent.

Alvarez was quivering with excitement. He fired a score of questions at the gaucho, but Smith answered not one of them, much to the fellow's disgust and anger.

For at least a mile the gaucho followed the trail of the girl. Suddenly he stopped, whirling on the others, and flinging up both hands.

"Avast there!" he roared. "Heave to!"

"What is it you do find?" fluttered Juan.

"That I'll tell ye later."

He got down on his hands and knees and examined the ground, creeping about in the grass. He got upon his feet, and trotted off a short distance, where he stopped to kneel and examine the ground again. Then he arose, turned and came back. The expression on his face told that he had made a most unwelcome discovery.

Without speaking, Smith looked to his horse, which one of the party had been leading. He made sure the saddle was secure, and everything was all right. Then, gnawing a chew from a big twist of tobacco, he said:

"I don't know why the girl came here, but she did. Here she was met by a party of seven, and they took her away—or she went away with them of her own free will."

Alvarez raved like a maniac. A dozen times his hand sought the haft of his knife, a dozen times he vowed some one should taste the steel.

Señor Matias seemed stunned.

"I cannot be able to believe it," he muttered. "Why should she come to do such a thing?"

"Have you no idea who composed this party of seven?" asked Frank, of John Smith. "I s'pose it was Aguila, Black Miguel and the rest of the gang with them."

"Gol dern me ef I kin understand why Pepita should want to go back to that craowd," said Ephraim Gallup.

"Perhaps she have a lover there of which I do not know," hissed Alvarez, his face black as a thundercloud. "Perhaps she is tired of me, and she go back to him. Ha! if I meet them—ha!"

But Señor Matias would not believe such a thing of his child. He was sure she had been decoyed from the camp

in some manner, and had fallen into the hands of her former captors.

Frank knew not what to think.

"There is but one thing to do," said Smith, "and that's to get under way and be after them. Come on."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE STRUGGLE.

Night again.

All through the long day the little party had followed on the trail. Toward night John Smith had said :

“They are making for Castro’s saloon.”

To Frank it seemed remarkable that there should be a saloon anywhere on the pampas, and he asked what the gaucho-sailor meant, whereupon Smith explained that saloons or taverns were to be found at convenient distances across the pampas and at every railway station. Some of them did a thriving business, being favorite resorts for the gauchos.

When night came on they were within a few miles of Castro’s saloon. Smith disregarded the trail, for he felt certain the party they were pursuing had made straight for the saloon.

Pressing onward, a light was seen gleaming across the Pampas. Toward this they made their way.

At a considerable distance they halted, and they were able to hear sounds of singing and carousing.

“Gol derned ef they ain’t whoopin’ her up!” said Ephraim.

It was arranged that Smith and Frank should go forward boldly and enter the saloon. The others should get as near as possible, and should be ready to rush in when they heard a signal whistle or if there was any shooting.

Smith led the way, and Frank followed at his heels.

The saloon was a mud-walled hut, a story and a half in height. It was surrounded by a few trees.

Smith dashed up with a shout that caused the door of the saloon to be flung wide open.

"Ho, there, Johnny Castro!" roared the gaucho. "It's been a long time since I struck into this port, but here I am again."

A little, dark-faced man stood in the glare of light that came from the doorway. There was a belt around his waist, and that belt contained no less than five deadly-looking knives.

"Ho, Señor Smith!" cried this man. "When you come-a here, you be ver' much welcome. Come in!"

The horses were quickly hitched to a tree, and Smith boldly entered the saloon, Frank still following.

Inside the hut the walls were covered with various government ordinances relating to affairs in the district, and especially to the sale of liquors. There were also great crude lithographs, representing events in the last revolution, or some other fighting scenes. Mingled with both ordinances and lithographs were the tiny pictures which come from packages of cigarettes. There was a bar, some chairs, and a table. At the table four men were playing cards. They were savage-looking desperadoes, with black beards and armed with long knives.

These fellows stopped to stare at the man and boy, scowling in anything but an agreeable manner.

Another man was sitting apart, smoking a cigarette. He was not so wild and savage-looking as the others, but he had the face of a villain.

"Tèn to one he is the Marques Aguila," thought Frank.

The hut was divided into two rooms, and the door to the rear room was securely closed.

"If Pepita is here, they have her in that room," Frank immediately decided.

Two of the seven men were missing. Black Miguel and one other were not to be seen.

Smith made himself very much at home. He laughed and talked with Castro, and for fully twenty minutes they gossiped about persons they knew.

Frank was careful to place himself where no one could get behind him.

It was plain that the ruffians regarded Smith and the boy with suspicion, but they endeavored to keep it concealed.

Finally the sailor-gaicho invited every one present to have a drink. The men left their game and ranged up at the bar. Rum was ordered by every one of them.

The glasses were filled and lifted, and then an unexpected thing happened.

The man nearest Smith dashed the contents of his glass into the gaicho's face, crying :

"Dog! spy!"

Gasping and blinded, John Smith snatched out his knife, but he must have been stabbed to the heart but for Frank Merriwell's presence of mind and quick action.

The man who had flung the rum into Smith's face had drawn a knife, lifted it, and struck at the gaicho's breast.

The knife did not reach Smith, for Frank had a revolver in his fingers, and he fired, the bullet shattering the hand that grasped the haft of the knife, causing the weapon to fall to the floor.

A shriek came from the rear room—the shriek of a female in great terror.

This cry was followed by a crashing sound, a shot and a struggle.

"Pepita is there!" shouted Frank Merriwell.

Yells of dismay broke from the ruffians. They were on the point of making a rush for the back room when the door was burst open with a crash, and two desperately fighting men reeled into the front part of the saloon.

Those men were Black Miguel and Alvarez!

Each was armed with a long, blood-stained knife, and both were bleeding.

"The girl!" cried Black Miguel, in Spanish—"they are getting away with the girl! Stop them!"

Once more the ruffians started for the back room, but, before they could reach the door, Ephraim Gallup appeared in the opening, a brace of revolvers in his hands.

"Git back, yeou sarnips!" he shouted. "Git back, ur chaw bullets!"

At this instant Señor Matias entered the saloon by the front door, exclaiming:

"My daughter—I heard her call!"

"It is the last time you will hear her call!" grated Aguila, leaping forward to drive a knife into the man he hated.

Frank Merriwell saw the move, and, swift though it was, the boy was equally quick. Dropping one of his revolvers, Frank struck Aguila a smashing blow on the jaw, knocking him down.

The chief villain of the lot fell on his own knife, which was driven deep into his body, and, with a hollow groan, he rolled over upon his back, scowling malignantly at Matias and gasping for breath. He did not live three minutes.

In the meantime Alvarez had cut Black Miguel down, but he had paid dearly for his victory, being mortally wounded himself.

When they saw their chief fall the remaining ruffians were seized with the utmost consternation, and they rushed, shouting and cursing, from the saloon. They lost no time in mounting their horses and getting away.

The fight was over, and the ruffians had been put to route; but Alvarez, his hand pressed to his bleeding side, was propped in a chair, calling faintly to Pepita.

Ephraim led the girl from the back room. She was

quite unharmed, but greatly frightened. Ephraim and Alvarez had entered the back room by way of a window, and the Vermonter had disposed of Black Miguel's companions, while Alvarez engaged Black Miguel himself.

"Pepita!" gasped Alvarez, in Spanish, "I am going! Black Miguel has killed me! Now you will be free to love the Yankee boy, Merriwell."

"Señor Merriwell!" she cried, astonished. "Why, I do not love him! How could you think that, Alvarez?"

"I thought I saw it in your eyes, and I hated him for it. You are sure you do not love him? You will swear it?"

"I will swear it, Alvarez—poor, brave Alvarez!"

"Then I thank the saints I did not kill him! Twice I tried, once with the snake knife, and once when I left him buried to his neck in the desert. Oh, how I hated him! But I am glad I did not kill him!"

Frank understood the fellow's words, and he was amazed to learn that his mysterious foe had been Alvarez; but he saw how the fellow could have cast his knife and escaped detection, and how he had found him by accident in the desert while he slept.

Alvarez had not many minutes to live. He was swiftly growing weaker, and he soon breathed his last, with Pepita's arms about his neck, and his head on her bosom.

Aguila and Black Miguel were dead, so Señor Matias had nothing to fear, and the entire party made for the nearest railroad station, from which, with the exception of John Smith, they proceeded to Buenos Ayres. Smith could not be induced to abandon the wild life of the pampas.

"It's good enough for me," he declared. "I'll live and die a gaucho, dash my buttons if I don't?"

So he went back to the grassy plains.

Long before Buenos Ayres was reached Ephraim and

Pepita were very friendly, and the Yankee boy found an opportunity to secretly inform Frank that he thought her a "slappin' pritty gal, by gum?"

"Well, you don't want to make any rash promises to her," said Frank.

He saw that his chum was much smitten and resolved to continue his tour without delay.

Only a few days later he fell in with a certain Captain John Scudd, master of the American schooner *Sea Fox*.

The *Sea Fox* was bound for South Africa, and the appearance of the saucy craft pleased Frank greatly.

"I am going across the ocean on her," said Frank. "And you, Ephraim, must go with me."

"By gosh, Frank, do ye mean that?" burst out the Yankee boy.

"I do. Will your brother care, do you think?"

"Don't believe he will—said in his letter that I could do as I pleased so long as my money——"

"So long as I'd foot the bills, eh?"

"Persackly, Frank. But I don't want you to——"

"But I will. I have money and all bills come to me. So it's settled that we go."

The *Sea Fox* sailed two days later, with Frank and the Yankee lad aboard.

Pepita hated to part with Ephraim, but Frank managed to separate the pair without a "scene."

Juan was almost in tears.

"I neva forget you, Frank," he said. "You de brave boy, de best boy in the whol' world, yet!"

"Some day perhaps we'll meet again," returned Frank.

By nightfall the *Sea Fox* was out of sight of land, and the voyage to South Africa was begun.

Little did Frank dream of the many startling adventures in store for him.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE WRECK OF THE SEA FOX.

It was night, and a frightful storm swept the South Atlantic, carrying in its seething heart the disabled and helpless schooner, the *Sea Fox*.

Just before nightfall the storm had come on with astonishing suddenness, giving the sailors but a few seconds to get the vessel in readiness for the ordeal.

Sails had been ripped away, rigging tangled, the rudder "jammed," and the schooner nearly wrecked in the twinkling of an eye.

The sailors lost their heads and their hearts in a moment, and men who had cursed and blasphemed a short time before fell on their knees and prayed.

Captain John Scudd was filled with despair when he found the rudder was useless.

"We are lost!" he groaned. "She can never ride out this gale in such a condition!"

As the gale came on, Frank and Ephraim had lashed themselves to one of the masts, and, for all of the roaring of the fearful tempest, they were able to talk with each other by shouting their words.

"I be gol derved ef this don't beat all natur!" cried the Yankee lad. "Never see northin' like this daown aour way. I wish ter gosh I was back hum on the farm!"

"This is life on the ocean wave, Ephraim," laughed Frank. "How do you like it?"

"It's too much fun fer me, by gum! Why didn't the cap'n run into that island we saw this afternoon? Ef we hed that atween us and this breeze we'd be all right."

"You know why the captain did not land. The island disappeared in blue mist. He says it is not located on the regular chart, but that he has heard of it before, and it is known as Phantom Island. It is not known that any person has ever landed there, and some think it is a mirage."

"That's one uv them things that appear to be somewhere when they ain't anywhere at all."

"Yes, a mirage is an hallucination, and Phantom Island seems to be an hallucination."

"Then there ain't any danger uv aour runnin' her daown."

"Hardly. Our danger is of being swamped and going to the bottom. See how the schooner rolls."

"I can't see northin' except when it lightens, an' then's when I'm lookin' at the big waves. Say, Frank, I'm awful scat! I never was so scat before in all my born days. I wish——"

He was interrupted by a blaze of white lightning that seemed to sear the eyeballs and illumine the entire heavens, as if they were one vast sheet of flame. The roar of thunder which followed could scarcely be heard above the roar of the tempest at that moment.

The wind shrieked and howled through the broken and tangled rigging like ten thousand fiends. All the demons of the deep seemed to have broken loose and attacked the *Sea Fox*.

The glare of lightning showed green mountains of water, capped with snow-white foam, racing past with the speed of an express train. The mighty waves threatened to overwhelm the schooner, which was foundering about helplessly, and it was something amazing that they did not succeed without delay.

Sometimes a great wave would break over the vessel, and it would seem that she had been buried in an instant,

never to rise again; but she would struggle up to the surface and continue the battle for life.

Frank was astounded by the vitality of the schooner. A hundred times he had fancied all was over, and just as many times the *Fox* had come through the swirling waves and refused to go to the bottom.

As was natural with Frank, he seemed utterly regardless of the great peril, for he laughed and joked whenever the tempest lulled for a moment so he could make his companion hear.

Those who are often in peril of their lives, come, after a time, to regard the most deadly dangers with seeming indifference. Not that they always are indifferent, but they are almost certain to be fatalists, and they feel sure they will not die till their time comes. In such a case, it is as easy to relieve the nerves by laughing as in any other way, and so they laugh.

Frank asked Ephraim if he did not fear the motion would unsettle his stomach, asked him if he considered a deep sea voyage beneficial to a person in robust health, offered to bet even that the third wave to break over the vessel would swamp her, offered to go two to one that she would ride through two more heavy seas, told Ephraim he was no sport, and then sang a stanza of "I Love the Rolling Sea."

"Hang me ef yeou don't beat the band!" cried the Yankee lad. "Yeou don't seem ter understand we ain't likely ever to set foot on dry land again."

"Oh, yes, I do, and I'd be willing to travel around in the mud a while if I could get ashore."

"Wal, I never heard uv a feller singin' just when he was in danger uv goin' to the bottom uv the sea."

"It's likely there are very many things you never heard of, old man. Here's a song appropriate to the occasion.

Then the boy sang a snatch of "My Funeral's To-morrow."

"Keep still, Frank," cried Ephraim. "What be them fellers doin' of over there?"

He pointed through the darkness, and, at this minute, there was a glare of lightning which revealed several sailors at work near one of the boats.

"The fools are trying to launch a boat!" exclaimed Frank, amazed. "A boat cannot live in this sea."

"They must be fools to leave the vessel in this storm!"

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

"Can you hear that roaring above the sound of the storm?"

"Seems to me that I kin hear somethin' uv the kind. What is it?"

"I don't know, but it sounds like—— Breakers ahead!"

Another glare of lightning had revealed the foaming mass of breakers which were dashing over a reef, also showing land beyond the reef, upon which the schooner was helplessly driving.

"Wal, dern my skin!" yelled Ephraim Gallup. "I didn't know we was so nigh land! What place kin it be?"

"It must be an island. Loose your lashings. We must take to the boat. The schooner will go down quickly when she strikes. Look!—those sailors are quarreling over the boat! See that monster wave! We'll be swamped this time sure! Hold fast!"

As he cried "hold fast," the mountainous billow came rolling across the deck, sweeping everything before it. The schooner shuddered, creaking and groaning in every joint and seam. She seemed beaten under, never to rise again.

But the end had not come, for the mighty wave rolled

on, and the vessel struggled desperately in the hollow of the sea, like a wounded creature battling for life.

"Ephraim."

"Wal, Frank?"

"I never felt greedy before, but now I want the earth. We're still here. But where's the boat those sailors were trying to launch?"

"She's gone!"

"Sure as fate!"

"Where?"

"Swept away by that big wave!"

"That's right, by gum!"

"Some of the sailors must have been swept away, also, for I can see but four fellows left, clinging to ropes."

The glare of lightning which had revealed this much to them died out and the night seemed blacker than the remote depths of a bottomless pit. The wind raged furiously, tearing great flaps of water from the crests of the waves, causing the broken masts of the schooner to creak and bend, and driving the schooner completely under now and then.

From some point a man staggered out and caught hold of Frank.

"She is lost!" said a deep, hoarse voice. "She will go to pieces in a minute on the reef!"

"Captain Scudd!" shouted Merriwell.

"Ay, ay," returned the old sailor, for it was the captain of the *Sea Fox*. "Who hails? Who have I made fast to?"

"I am Merriwell, one of the passengers."

"Ah, yes, my lad. "And you are made fast to the mast. You'd better cast off before the vessel strikes, for you may not have time afterward. She will go down in a hurry."

"Is there no show of escaping, captain?"

"The last boat was swept away by the big sea that struck us a moment ago. The men were trying to launch her."

"What land is this we are driving on?"

"It must be the island we sighted this afternoon."

"The one you called Phantom Island?"

"Yes."

"So I thought."

A bolt of lightning rent the sky asunder and showed them the *Fox* was now right upon the breakers. The seething water was hurling itself into the sky every time a great wave struck the reef, and the roar of this tumult became so loud that no further words could be heard.

Frank saw that there was but a moment before the vessel must strike, and he quickly unloosed all the lashings which held himself and Ephraim to the mast.

They had taken care to fasten life-preservers about their bodies before securing themselves to the mast.

The boys clung to each other in the awful darkness, deafened by the roar of the breakers, the shrieking of the wind and the detonations of the thunder. They were waiting for the crash that should tell the schooner had struck.

It came!

The shock was frightful, and a glare of lightning showed they were in the very heart of the breakers, the white waves surging, plunging, and leaping about them like ten thousand mad ghosts in revel.

That was all they saw, for darkness came in a twinkling, the sea rolled across the deck of the *Fox*, and both lads were swept away in the grasp of the triumphant vortex.

Frank found himself utterly helpless in the grasp of the sea, tossed about like a feather, flung high on the crest of a billow at one moment, submerged beneath tons of water—as it seemed—the next moment, whirled about, beaten upon by giant hands, torn and hurled and swung and toyed with.

For a little time he floated gently on a swell, and he was just beginning to believe it was all over, and was congratulating himself on his fortune in escaping from the mad vortex about the reef, when it began over again, and he was used worse than before, if possible.

No creature of flesh and blood could endure much of that. It beat strength and hope and life out of a person very swiftly.

Frank was dazed and bewildered. He had thought he might be able to swim toward the island if he were fortunate enough to get through the breakers; but now he had not the least idea in which direction the island lay.

Strangled by the salt water, coughing and choking to clear his lungs, he made no struggle, save to keep afloat, letting the sea bear him as it would.

He wondered what had become of Ephraim Gallup. They had been torn apart by the great wave which swept him overboard. Was Ephraim battling with the waves, or had he gone to the bottom, to rise no more?

One thought troubled Frank for a moment, and that was that he had lured the young Vermonter to accompany him in traveling about the world, and had thus brought him into frightful peril—to almost certain doom.

But this thought was banished in a moment, for he felt himself caught in a whirling eddy and sent spinning around and around till all creation seemed whirling, too.

Something was dragging at his feet—sucking him down!

“It is death!” he thought. “If I am dragged under here, I shall be flung up a corpse. The whirlpool will hold me under till I am finished.”

Once more he fought with all his energy, although somewhat weakened by what he had passed through.

He seemed to feel a great weight upon his feet, but he struggled to cast it off.

Frank was a splendid swimmer, and he did not waste his strength in a wild and fruitless struggle. Every stroke of foot or hand was to a purpose.

Twice he went under, twice he came back to the surface through his almost superhuman efforts.

Then, all at once, the whirlpool ceased to whirl, a great billow rolled smoothly over the spot, and the boy was gently carried away on its swelling bosom.

Once more it seemed that he had escaped the turmoil about the reef, and that he would be able to keep afloat with ease. There was something gentle and restful in the swell of the great billow.

As he arose high on the swell, lightning again illumined the sky. He looked around for the schooner, but saw nothing of it.

It had been shattered on the reef, and had gone down!

Then he looked for the island. He saw it, and he was about to head toward it when he noticed, close at hand, a floating spar.

Three or four strong strokes carried the boy to the stick, over which he flung one arm.

"Thank Heaven!"

The words came thickly from his lips, and then he heard a hoarse yell near at hand.

Another human being was there!

"Who say dat?" demanded the same hoarse voice that had uttered the cry.

Frank recognized the voice as belonging to one of the sailors, a Portuguese, Vendas Sardago, by name.

Sardago was a villainous ruffian, a drunkard, and a brute. But, worse than anything else, he hated Frank Merriwell with the most deadly hatred.

Sardago, partly intoxicated, had insulted Frank, one day, and the boy had boldly resented it. The dark-faced fellow had slapped Frank with his open hand, and, to his

unutterable amazement, had been knocked down in a twinkling.

Completely losing his head, the ruffian snatched out a wicked-looking knife and rushed at the unarmed boy.

By a nimble duck and dodge, Frank avoided the deadly stroke of the knife, although the keen point ripped open the sleeve of his coat from shoulder to elbow.

Then the lad snatched up a belaying pin, met the enraged brute fairly, rapped him on the wrist and benumbed his hand so he dropped the knife, after which the belaying pin descended on Sardago's skull and stretched the wretch flat on the deck.

For this offense, the Portuguese had been placed in irons and confined in the hold, to be turned over for trial at the first port.

When the storm came on, knowing the schooner might be wrecked, Captain Scudd ordered Sardago released from irons, that the fellow might have a chance for his life.

The moment Frank knew Sardago was clinging to the spar he felt that he was in danger of an attack, for he was certain the Portuguese was one who never forgot or forgave.

## CHAPTER XX.

### SARDAGO.

Frank remained quiet, but he soon felt a hand that clutched his arm, and once more the voice of the Portuguese demanded:

“Who say dat? Who spik?”

Still the boy remained silent.

“Dat you, Dalfors?” snarled Sardago. “Why do don’t spik to me? You lost-a dat tongue you be so sassy wid?”

Dalfors was a Danish sailor, a rascal, like Sardago, but something of a coward when he could not be a bully. Sardago had used the Dane as a tool in many ways, and they often quarreled.

In a moment Frank decided what he would do. He was a capital mimic, and he could imitate the voice of any person he had heard speak a few times. He determined to imitate the voice of the Dane, who spoke very good English.

“Yes, it is me,” he answered, thickly. “Are you Sardago?”

“I t’ink you know-a my voice by dis time-a. Why you no answer quick?”

“I was afraid—didn’t know who was there.”

“Dat it? You have-a de chicken heart, Dalfors. You no-a good at all.”

“This storm is enough to make anybody have a chicken heart. The schooner went down in a minute.”

“To blazes wid de schooner! What you care if dat schooner go down, ha? You don’t have-a somebody you love-a on dat schooner, eh?”

"No; I hate them all!"

"Me-a, too. Dat Merriwell boy I hate-a worst of all. Next to dat boy I hate-a Cap'n Scudd-a. Dey all go down wid de schooner. Let dem go."

"Yes, let them go."

"All dat mek me feel bad-a is dat I no-a gitty chance to cut de t'roat of dat Merriwell boy."

This was pleasant information for Frank. If Sardago escaped to the island, and Frank was fortunate enough to reach the same land, it would be necessary for the boy to look out for the Portuguese.

Merriwell remained silent till Sardago demanded:

"You dere, Dalfors? You no-a slippy off?"

"No; I'm here."

"T'ink we gitty shore?"

"Don't know."

Sardago snarled like an angry dog.

"'Course you don't know! What you tink 'bout it?"

"We may."

"If we do dat it may be we——"

Sardago was interrupted by a vivid blaze of lightning and a rending peal of thunder. The lightning lasted several seconds, and the Portuguese sailor looked across the spar and saw Frank clinging there. He looked around in astonishment for Dalfors, but saw nothing of the fellow with whom he had fancied he was talking.

When the thunder died out Sardago screamed:

"You mek fool of me-a, ha! You mek me-a t'ink you be Dalfors, eh! Ha! ha! ha! Dat lightning gif you 'way. Now I know-a who you be. You dat Merriwell boy dat I hate."

"That's right, you old pirate," returned Frank. "I am the very boy. I did fool you for a short time."

"You pay for dat!"

Frank shifted his position quickly, knowing the Portu-

guese was trying to clutch him in the darkness. But the seething sea was dragging at him, as if trying to pull him from the spar and carry him to the bottom, so he dared not let go his hold on the stick for a moment.

He felt that Sardago was following him up, and he retreated to the very end of the timber. Just as the end was reached he felt himself clutched by powerful hands, and the hateful voice of the villainous sailor triumphantly cried:

“Now I haf you, Merriwell boy! Now I feex you sure!”

The lightning blazed again, and the thunder roared. The glare of light showed Frank the distorted, ferocious face of his enemy close at hand—showed that Sardago held a long, bright knife in his upraised hand.

“Now I feex you, Merriwell!” howled the sailor.

Then darkness fell again on the storm-tossed sea.

Frank had seen Sardago strike, and he felt himself unable to break from the man’s clutch. Upward he flung one hand, and, by rare good fortune, he caught the wrist of the Portuguese sailor.

That saved his life.

Realizing how fortunate he had been, Frank gave a sudden twisting wrench, seeming to have the strength of a Samson.

A cry broke from Sardago’s lips, and the knife dropped and sank into the sea.

For a single moment Frank seemed unable to realize that he had escaped the stroke of the knife. Then he heard Sardago howl:

“I killy you yet! I choky you, Merriwell!”

One of the fellow’s pudgy hands fastened on Frank’s throat with a vise-like grip, seeming to crush flesh and bone.

In a moment the boy found himself vainly striving to breathe.

Frank grasped the man's wrist with both hands, gave a great surge, and tore the fingers from his throat.

Sardago snarled and raved, trying to renew the clutch.

"I killy you yet!" he kept repeating, shrilly.

"It's a battle for life!" thought Frank.

The Portuguese seemed insane with fury; his one thought seemed to be to destroy the boy he hated so intensely.

Frank was waiting for another flash of lightning, hoping to strike his enemy a blow that would turn the battle.

The flash came, and the boy struck at the temple of his furious foe; but Sardago struck at the same time, his hard fist landing fairly between Frank's eyes.

The boy fell back and seemed to sink beneath the waves, the prolonged glare of lightning gleaming on his white face as it vanished in the water.

"Ha! ha! ha!" screamed Sardago. "Dat feex him! If I no-a gitty ashore, I am sure dat Merriwell boy no-a gitty dere. He is deat!"

But Frank was not dead. He had been slightly stunned, and a sort of undertow had sucked him beneath the surface for an instant; but he wore a life-preserver, and that quickly brought him back to the air.

Darkness encompassed him, and once more he felt the sea buffeting him about in a merciless manner. His sole effort was to keep his head above the surface and wait for another flash of lightning.

When the lightning came he looked about for Sardago and the spar, but saw nothing of them.

He saw something else, however—something that filled him with hope and joy.

The shore of the island was near at hand.

Heading toward the beach, upon which the surf was rolling in mountainous combers, Frank swam for his life.

In a very short time he was in the surf.

But right there began the most desperate struggle of all, for the undertow dragged him back whenever the great rollers carried him up on the beach.

Three times he was carried far up by a great roller, and three times the receding water dragged him back and tried to suck him away beneath the surface of the angry sea.

His strength was almost gone. He felt that he must succeed next time, for he would not have energy enough to try it again. The undertow would accomplish its murderous design if it dragged him back again.

Frank never gave up as long as life and strength remained, and his unconquerable spirit had carried him through many deadly perils. Even now, although he had failed three times, he felt that he must safely reach the shore next time.

Strange as it may seem, while this desperate struggle for life was going on, the boy's thoughts were not entirely of himself. He wondered what he should find on the island, if it were inhabited, if he would be the first white person to come ashore there, and many other things. At last he thought of Ephraim, and reproached himself that the boy from Vermont had come to his death through his instrumentality.

Then the lightning came again, and Frank found himself swept toward the shore by another great wave. He reserved all his energies for the last fierce struggle, and, as the water turned, he strove to get his feet beneath him and cling to the sand.

Never in all his life did Frank Merriwell put forth greater exertions, but the power of the water was too much for him in his battered and breathless condition.

His feet were torn from the sand, and he was dragged back for the fourth time.

That seemed the fatal time, for the undertow swirled about his legs and seemed to tie him in a helpless condition amid a maze of shifting cords. It held him powerless for all of his efforts ; it drew him under, and it held him down.

Then he fancied he saw a most amazing spectacle, for, although darkness and storm were on the surface of the sea, it seemed that light and calm lay down below. All about him were rainbow colors, shooting stars, flowers of fire, and living things of light. He heard sweet music and soft bells ringing gleefully. A feeling of peace and contentment came over him, and he struggled no more. The music became sadder, and the sweet bells changed to a funereal tolling far, far away.

"This is a delightful death," thought Frank Merriwell.

The music died away, the bells ceased to toll, the beautiful lights faded, and darkness and oblivion came to the boy who had succumbed to the exulting, triumphant sea.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### EVIL FACES.

“Frank!”

A low moan was the answer.

“Frank, wake up! I’ve rolled barrels of water out of ye alreddy, an’ I be gol derved ef I believe I kin git any more aout.”

“Oh, why didn’t you let me stay dead!”

“Not by a blamed sight! What do yeou take me for, Frank Merriwell! I ain’t that kind uv a feller.”

“But it was so easy, so beautiful—and you have made me suffer so much!”

“That’s all right, by gum! Yeou was deader’n a door-nail when I pulled ye aout; but resussytatin’ persons who was draownded was one uv the things we learned at Fardale, an’ I jest went at it to see if I could make it work. I done it all right, by thutter!”

The boys were beneath the shelter of a ledge far up the beach, and there Ephraim had built a bright little fire, which was protected from the force of the wind by a projection of the rocky bluff.

Frank lay groaning on the sand, while the Vermonter sat near him, getting as much benefit as possible from the warmth of the fire.

“Oh, it was so beautiful down there under the sea!” sighed Frank.

“An’ yeou wanted to stay! I be hung ef that air don’t beat my time!”

“How did I get out of the water, anyway, Ephraim?”

“I pulled ye aout.”

"And you—how did you reach shore?"

"Dunno. I swum fer all I was wuth, an' a blamed sight more, I guess. Fust wave that flung me up on the shore was a ripper, an' it jest lammed me high an' dry, an' left me there. I got aout uv the way frum the water soon's I could."

"You were fortunate. I tried four times to reach the shore, but was sucked back every time. The last time the undertow dragged me down, and I could not reach the surface. I saw beautiful sights and heard sweet music. The next thing I know you were at work on me, and I was suffering the most intense agony."

"An' yeou kicked, cause I didn't let ye stay dead!"

"At first—but I am beginning to be glad you brought me around, old man. I am feeling a little better."

Frank sat up, placing his back against the ledge, and stretching his feet out toward the fire.

"As I went under," he said, "I was reviling myself for having brought you into such danger; but now I am well satisfied to think I did so, for I'd remained drowned if it hadn't been for you."

"By gum! that's right."

"You are a great traveling companion, Ephraim, even though you did get smashed on that little Chilian girl, Pepita, and make it necessary for me to almost kidnap you in order to get you away from her."

The boy from Vermont laughed in a bashful way.

"Why, hang it, Frank!" he said, "she was the most bewitchin' little black-eyed minx I ever saw. I jest couldn't resist her."

"That was evident. She'd had you hitched to her if it hadn't been for me."

"Wal, you can't say much, fer yeou cut a purty wide swath with the gals yourself. Ev'rywhere yeou go you

have gals arter ye, an' ef there's any on this air island, you'll have one arter ye afore ye leave here."

Frank laughed a bit.

"It's not always my fault, Ephraim," he declared.

"I know that. Hang ef it don't seem funny haow the gals git smashed on ye. I can't understand it, though I will admit you're a rattlin' good feller an' handsome. It's a wonder to me that Pepita didn't take to yeou, instead uv me."

"It is well she didn't, and it was well for you that I dragged you away from her."

"Oh, I dunno. Pepita was a mighty fine gal."

"That may be true; but you're altogether too young to get hitched to any girl. That's what I think of myself."

"An' goodness knows yeou've hed chances enough. There was Inza Burrage, Elsie Bellwood and any amaount uv other ones."

"Don't speak of them!" entreated Frank. "It makes me homesick!"

The thunder and lightning had almost entirely ceased, but the surf was booming on the shore with a constant roar, and the wind howled across the sea. The dripping lads shivered and drew still further back into the lee of the projecting ledge.

They removed some of their clothing, wrung out as much water as possible, and hung the garments near the fire.

"How did you succeed in lighting this blaze?" asked Frank.

"I alwus kerry a waterproof matchsafe, and my matches warn't even damp, by ginger!"

"That was good luck, and I have some of my own. We must treasure them, for they may prove far more precious than gold. It is possible we are on a deserted island."

"Ef that's so we'll take possession uv it in ther name uv ther United States uv Ameriky, by gum!"

"And it may be inhabited by a tribe of savages."

"Mebbe Austin Ross' lost heiress is on this island."

"I fancy his lost heiress was a myth—a fancy of his cracked brain, for he never seemed more than half sane, poor fellow!"

"Wal, he's gone to the bottom with the rest, an' he won't search no more for Ethel Driscoll, the lost heiress."

The boys were speaking of a third passenger on board the *Sea Fox*, an eccentric man of about thirty, who told a strange story, which, on account of the man's peculiar manner, no one fully believed.

Ross had claimed to be in search of a girl by the name of Ethel Driscoll, the daughter of a sea captain. Boman Driscoll had been a wanderer on the face of the deep, and his daughter had accompanied him. For a number of years nothing had been heard of Captain Driscoll and his daughter.

At last, Jared Stone, brother to Captain Driscoll's dead wife, and uncie to Ethel, had died in California, leaving a great fortune to the girl if she could be found. In his will he had offered a large reward to the one who should find her, and prove her identity.

Austin Ross, a roving sort of fellow, had fancied he saw his opportunity to make a big haul by finding the girl and obtaining the reward. He had traced Captain Driscoll to Buenos Ayres, according to his statement, and had found the captain had sailed for China by way of South Africa.

Ross' capital was limited, but his faith and determination were great, and so he took passage with Captain Scudd, resolved to keep up the search as long as there was any chance of finding the lost heiress.

Thus it came about that the self-constituted detective was on the *Sea Fox* when the schooner was wrecked.

Frank told Ephraim of his struggle with Sardago.

"Gol ding that critter!" cried the boy from Vermont. "I hope to thutteration he was drowned!"

"It would be no loss," said Frank. "He and Dalfors, the Dane, made a pretty pair. Sardago was the leader, but Dalfors was bad enough."

Ephraim felt around in one of his pockets and brought forth a revolver.

"Come nigh fergittin' it," he said. "Guess I'll clean her up an' dry her off."

"That's right," nodded Frank, feeling in his own pockets, and taking out two revolvers. "We may need these weapons, and need them bad. Have you any cartridges?"

"Only what's in the revolver."

"And I am in the same fix. We must treasure them with the matches, for they may save our lives. We must fire a shot only when driven to the most desperate strait."

At this moment there was a scraping sound on the ledge above, and a loose stone came bounding downward, falling between the two lads who leaped to their feet, weapons in hand.

Looking upward, the firelight showed them two evil faces peering down over the ledge—the faces of Dalfors and Sardago!

"Gosh!"

Ephraim flung up his hand and pointed his revolver straight at the face of the Portuguese.

"Hold!"

Frank clutched the hand of his friend, preventing him from firing the intended shot.

"What's the matter with ye, Frank?" demanded Ephraim, excitedly. "Can't ye see what's up there? It's them two skunks!"

"I see."

"Wal, why didn't ye let me shoot?"

"Remember what we were saying, just now, about treasuring our cartridges. You might waste one of them."

"Not ef I shot one uv them snakes!"

"But you might miss at that distance, and when you shoot at either one of them you want to be near enough to make sure of your man."

"By gum, that's right! You're 'most alwus right, Frank. But jest you think uv it—Sardago an' Dalfors was both of um there."

"Dat is right-a," called a harsh, hateful voice, and the face of the Portuguese appeared again over the edge of the ledge. "Sardago and Dalfors bote is here, ha! You t'ink Sardago drown? Not water 'nuff in de ocean to drown Sardago."

"That's right, gol dern ye!" flung back Ephraim. "You're born ter be hanged, an' so ye won't be drowned." Sardago snarled.

"If I be hanged, you never see me. Ha! We gif you hot time-a on dis island. Dat Merriwell boy de one I look-a for."

"And I shall look for you," declared Frank. "You will find me ready for you when we meet again."

"Dat so? Well, Dalfors did not lost-a his knife. I let him get me to take-a dat knife. Ha! Nex' time I feex you!"

"You will have to do it when I am asleep."

"I do it some time, you bet!"

"That's right, Sardago," growled the voice of Dalfors. "We'll need meat to eat on this island, and them boys will make us good supply."

"You'll make two first-class cannibals; but, so far as we are concerned, you'll have to catch your birds before you cook them."

"Ah, you make-a me-a sick!" howled Sardago, rising a bit. "Mebby I feex you now!"

His hand swung over his head.

Whizz!

Frank dodged, and barely avoided a stone as large as a man's fist, which the Portuguese had flung with great force and accuracy. If the boy had not dodged, the stone would have struck him on the head, and it must have cracked his skull.

Dalfors rose up, and flung one at Ephraim, but his aim was not as good as that of his comrade in villainy, and the Yankee boy was not obliged to dodge.

Frank held his revolvers in his hands, and he immediately took aim at Sardago, who uttered a defiant cry, and dropped out of sight.

"This is gittin' kinder warm!" observed Ephraim.

"Come on!" cried Frank, loudly. "We'll find a way up the rocks, and we'll shoot the ruffians if we come upon them."

He shouted the words for the two ruffians to hear, and then he led the way around the point and up over the rocks.

It was a severe climb, and not a trace of the two scoundrels could be found when the top was reached. They had taken the alarm and fled from the spot, not caring to face the boys' revolvers.

"We have not seen the last of them," said Frank, regretfully. "They'll give us no end of trouble."

"They're sure to give us trouble," agreed Ephraim.

"And it is not going to be healthy to return to the fire and remain there, for they know where we are."

"Naow you're talkin'."

"They might come back, creep close upon us, and make a sudden attack, with the chances much in their favor."

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE BLACK MEN.

It did not take the boys long to decide to move from that locality. They returned to the fire, gathered up their clothing, and moved without delay.

It was a long, weary search for shelter, but they finally found a favorable spot, and there they remained during the rest of the night, although they did not dare light a fire, as the light from it would be very likely to betray them to their enemies.

Frank was thoroughly disgusted, but he kept still and allowed Ephraim to grumble, which the Vermont lad did, to a very large extent.

Both boys were much relieved when morning came.

"Now," said Frank, "we will light a fire and keep watch for those two snakes. They will see the smoke and locate us, but we'll make the fire where they'll not be able to creep upon us without being seen."

"An' we've got ter have something fer breakfast," groaned Ephraim. "I'm as holler inside as a bass drum, by gum!"

"I feel the need of sleep more than anything," said Frank; "but I will admit that I am decidedly hungry."

The sun came up and shone upon the still tossing sea, which was covered with white caps, but it showed no sign of the unfortunate schooner, save some tangled wreckage flung high upon the sandy beach.

Back from the shore the island seemed heavily wooded, and a lofty, barren mountain arose some miles inland.

"This is Phantom Island, sure enough," declared

Frank. "Don't you know how we looked at that mountain through the captain's glass?"

Ephraim nodded.

"It's the same mountain, sure shootin'," he agreed.

"Then it is quite likely we are the first white men to set foot on this island, if what we hear about the place is true. It seems that it has a habit of disappearing in a cloud of mist whenever a vessel tries to approach it."

"We may be the only livin' critters on here, except Sar-dago and Dalfors."

"Oh, I am sure there are birds and beasts in those forests."

"Wal, I feel as if I'd like ter have a few dozen roasted birds ur beasts jest ababout naow," groaned the Yankee boy, with his hands pressed to his stomach.

"Let's go down and see what we can find along the shore."

"We can't find northin' to eat there."

"But we may be able to find something. Come on."

Along the beach they went, searching amid the wreckage flung upon the sand. It was some time before they found anything of value. At last, however, a shout of satisfaction came from Frank, and Ephraim saw his companion bending over a barrel.

"What is it?" eagerly cried the Vermonter, as he rushed toward the spot. "What have you faound, Frank?"

"Something that will keep us from starving," was the exultant reply. "I can't conceive how this barrel reached shore without losing its entire contents, for one end is out."

"What's in it?"

"Look and see."

Ephraim peered into the barrel, and then he whooped with delight.

"Salt pork, by gum!" he yelled. "That settles it! We'll have somethin' to eat to-day, by thutteration!"

The barrel had two or three layers of pork in the bottom, and this had served as ballast, so it had ridden out the storm and been flung upon the shore.

"Where'll we git our water, Frank?" asked Ephraim. "We'll need some fresh water."

"Build a fire," directed the other boy. "I will agree to find water. Get a move on now, for I am beginning to feel a bit hungry myself."

They had rolled the barrel up on the beach, and Frank selected several pieces of pork, with which he ran toward the rocky ledges. Amid the ledges he found numerous hollows filled with rain water, and the pork was soon soaking.

Then Frank went back to help Ephraim about the fire.

In a short time the boys had a blaze going, and they were discussing how they would cook the pork when, of a sudden, a most startling and unexpected thing occurred.

At least two score of black men burst from the forest and came rushing toward the lads, brandishing spears, bows, and arrows, and other weapons, while they yelled loudly.

"Great Scott!"

"Gosh all thutter!"

Frank uttered the first exclamation, and Ephraim followed closely with one of his characteristic ejaculations.

"We're ketched!" panted the Vermonter, utterly dismayed.

"Right," nodded Frank.

The nearly naked black men had spread out in a semi-circle, completely cutting off flight inland, and the trapped lads could not take to the sea.

"Shall we fight?" fluttered Ephraim, fingering his revolver.

"It would be useless," Frank quickly said. "There are so many of them, and we have so few shots, that they would overpower us any way. We must not anger them."

"But they'll run us through with their spears, sure as shootin'."

"Up with your hands!"

So both lads flung up their hands, as a token that they surrendered.

The black men were headed by a gigantic fellow who seemed to be their leader, and who was a magnificently built giant. At a signal from him, the spears were lowered, and then the boys were most astounded to hear the giant say:

"Um white boys heap good sense. White boys fight, um both be killed in no time."

"Jee-rusalem crickets!" squealed Ephraim. "He kin talk United States! Who'd a thought anything like that!"

"It is rather surprising," admitted Frank, coolly. "He must have learned it of the white men he has eaten."

"What's that?" squawked the Vermont boy, in terror. "You don't mean that these air critters is cannibals?"

"They may be."

"Great gosh! Why didn't we run fast as we could!"

"We weren't given a chance to run. They had us foul."

The black men were jabbering among themselves, pointing at the boys, and laughing with satisfaction.

"I should judge by appearances that they are very fond of white men," said Frank, in his usual bantering manner when in peril. "They seem to admire us very much."

Ephraim groaned.

"These critters is wuss than Sardago and Dalfors," he said.

All at once, at a signal from the giant leader, the lads were seized, held helpless and searched. The revolvers

were found and taken from them, and everything that could serve as a weapon was appropriated.

Ephraim made a slight show of resistance, but gave in quickly, seeing that Frank submitted quietly.

"What ye goin't to do, let 'em butcher ye 'thout doin' a thing?" he asked, in a shaky voice.

"What can we do?" asked the other boy. "We are helpless in their hands, and it is folly to struggle."

"Um white boy got great heap sense," said the giant leader, with approval. "Him fight, him git killed now. Him be quiet him git killed when Musweno say."

"Are you Musweno?"

"No. Me Bondalwe."

"Who is Musweno?"

"King."

"Where is he?"

"Him at village."

"Where is the village?"

"See mountain?"

"Yes."

"Village near mountain."

"You will take us there?"

"Yes."

"What will you do with us then?"

"Musweno say."

Frank had been studying the giant, who was rather good looking, although he had fierce eyes. The boy decided that Bondalwe must be a great leader among the savages, if nothing more, for he was quite intelligent, had a well-shaped head, and was at least eight inches taller than the tallest among the other savages.

"Are you relation to the king?" the boy coolly asked.

"No relation."

"But you must be one of the chief men?"

"Um big war chief," answered Bondalwe, swelling with

pride. "Um great fighter. Make many captive; get much provision for my people."

"Make many captives and git much provision for his people!" gasped Ephraim Gallup. "We're done for, by thutter! Them critters is cannibals an' no mistake!"

Ephraim wondered that Frank had surrendered without a struggle, for such an act was quite unlike him.

The boys were not bound; but, the savages surrounding them, they were marched toward the forest, Bondalwe having first questioned them as to how they came on the island.

Some of the black men remained behind to search amid the wreckage along the shore and to look for other persons who might have escaped to the island.

Frank asked for food, and Bondalwe told him he would be given enough when the village was reached.

Merriwell tried to question the giant savage about his people and how it happened that he could speak English, but Bondalwe suddenly seemed suspicious, and refused to answer.

The forest was dense and heavy, and the party moved along with difficulty, having to select their way with considerable care.

Frank was constantly on the watch for an opportunity to make a break and escape into the dense woods, but he found that the black men were watching him constantly with the eyes of hawks.

"If I tried it, I'd be run through by a spear before I had made three leaps," was his mental conclusion.

Ephraim seemed greatly dejected, and plodded along with his head bowed on his breast, whereupon Frank tried to cheer him up.

"Come, come, old man!" he said, "what's the matter with you! Brace up. Some of these people talk English, which shows there have been white men here before us.

There's no telling what we'll find at the village of the natives."

"The chances are we'll find ourselves in the soup," groaned the boy from Vermont. "I've seen these critters lookin' me over ter see what condition I'm in."

"Well, it's likely they'll think you're rather spare, so they'll keep you a while and try to fatten you up."

"Perhaps they ain't cannibals," said Ephraim, by way of trying to console himself. "We don't know about that."

Bright plumaged birds flitted through the forests, uttering shrill cries. There were plentiful signs of animal life on the island.

Ephraim had a ravenous appetite, and the tramp to the village was a torture to him, as he had not eaten his breakfast.

The woods being very dense, the progress of the party was exceedingly slow, and it was near noon when the village was approached.

Couriers had gone ahead to tell the people of the village, and, as the party came nearer, the sound of drumming and shouting could be heard.

"They are making merry over our capture," said Frank. "I don't know why they should feel so good about it unless it is because we are to be roasted and eaten."

Ephraim groaned dismally.

"This is hard luck," he said. "I wish I'd bin drowned! That would have bin the easiest thing."

They entered the village amid a shouting, singing crowd of nearly naked savages. The people seemed to have gone wild with joy.

The village consisted of about forty small, cone-shaped huts, and into one of these the captive lads were thrust, the place being surrounded by armed guards.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### CAPTIVES AMONG CANNIBALS.

It was quite dark within the hut, so the boys could not get a good view of their surroundings at first.

"Well, here we are, Ephraim," said Frank, cheerfully. "Make yourself right at home."

"I wish I was right to hum, by gosh," exploded the Vermonter. "This kind uv business is too much fer me."

"Oh, this is nothing. Wait till you see what we're coming to."

"You're real consolin', Frank! You make me feel as jolly as a funeral. I ain't had so much fun sence the last time."

"The people here seem real pleased to see us. Hear them howl."

"That's what I don't like," confessed the Vermont lad. "Ef they wasn't so pleased, I should be a great deal more pleased myself."

"You're fussy."

Ephraim groaned and stopped his ears with his fingers, as another wild chorus of yells came from outside the hut.

Drums were beating over the village, and the black people seemed to have gone crazy with joy. They were dancing and capering in the most extravagant manner.

Although he kept up his outward appearance of reckless indifference, Frank Merriwell was rather sick at heart. From the open door of the hut he looked out and saw the savages dancing and going through all sorts of extravagant gestures of joy, and he felt certain they

were thus rejoiced because of a new acquisition of food in the village.

"They are cannibals," thought Frank. "I believe I was foolish in submitting to capture. We should have fought as long as we could. Now we are helpless in their power, and must submit to be killed."

The more he thought of this the more he reproached himself; but it was now too late to do anything, for the armed guards about the hut were very vigilant. He could see them standing with their spears pointed toward the entrance, ready to run one of the captives through, if one attempted to escape.

"Do you really s'pose they mean to eat us, Frank?" asked Ephraim, in a voice that indicated great distress.

"It is possible they do. We cannot be sure of it yet."

"Yes, you may," said a voice near at hand, causing both lads to start and utter exclamations of astonishment. "I can assure you that you will be killed and eaten with very little delay."

Peering toward the point from which the voice came, they discerned the figure of a man seated on the ground, with his back against the wall of the hut.

"Who are you?" Frank quickly demanded.

"A captive among these man-eaters, like yourselves," was the answer. "I was a fellow passenger on the *Sea Fox*. You should recognize me."

"It is dark here, but now I see—— Why, it's Mr. Ross, who was searching for the lost heiress!"

"By gum! so it is!" exclaimed Ephraim.

"We presumed you had been drowned," said Frank.

"I was not thus fortunate," said Austin Ross, with a deep sigh. "And now I am to be roasted."

"How do you know?"

"I have been thus informed by one of these gentlemen, who speaks rather indifferent English."

"How did you come here?"

"The same way you did, I fancy. I was captured and brought here by these miserable niggers."

"When was that?"

"Early this morning."

"Where were you?"

"Hunting in the forest for something to shoot with my revolver, as I was hungry and wished to kill something to eat."

"How did you escape being drowned when the schooner was wrecked?"

"I had on two life-preservers, and I succeeded in reaching the shore, although it was a most desperate struggle for life."

"Well," said Frank, "surprises will never cease. At first Ephraim and I believed we were the only ones to escape; but Sardago and Dalfors turned up, and now we find you."

"Sardago and Dalfors, two of the sailors?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"Somewhere on this island."

"Have the savages captured them?"

"I scarcely think so, although Bondalwe and a party remained on the shore near where the wreck occurred, and they were looking for any others who escaped, I fancy."

"Who is Bondalwe?"

"A giant among these savages. He speaks English."

"He is not the only one. Several of them can say a few words of English. I wonder how it happens?"

"It is likely the *Sea Fox* was not the first vessel to be wrecked on this island. Other white men have been here."

"But they ain't here now," groaned Ephraim, dismally.

"Not much!" said Ross. "And it will not be long before we are served as they were served. As they brought me into this accursed village I saw a spectacle that froze the blood in my veins."

The man shivered, and his teeth chattered like rattling dice.

"What did you see?" asked Frank.

"Human skulls and bones, all picked clean and piled in a heap, the refuse from the horrid feasts of these cannibals."

Ephraim groaned again, and fell flat on his back, where he lay, still groaning.

"I wish I was to hum on the farm!" he moaned, huskily.

Frank was silent for some moments, and then he struck his clinched right hand into the open palm of his left.

"That settles it!" he cried. "I was a fool that I urged you to submit quietly, Ephraim. We should have fought to the last gasp. Now we are powerless."

"Yes, we are powerless," agreed Ross. "We can do nothing to save ourselves. They can keep us like pigs in a pen till they get ready to stick us."

"If I was to hum I'd stay there the rest of my natteral days," gurgled the boy from Vermont, in great agony.

"If I were in the United States, nothing would lure me forth again in search for the lost heiress, Ethel Driscoll," declared Ross.

The condition of the unfortunate trio was indeed most wretched and hopeless. Frank, however, with his usual persistency, refused to give up hope. He set about trying to devise some scheme for escaping from the trap.

The uproar outside continued, and the savages could be

seen drinking from large wooden dishes. That they were intoxicated and fast becoming more so was evident.

"I wonder where the chief is?" speculated Frank.

"I saw him when I was brought into the village," said Ross. "I was taken before him. He is a hideous old wretch, and he was pretty drunk when I saw him. He danced, and grinned, and felt me all over, as a person might examine a beef creature. Then he proceeded to drink more of the stuff they are pouring down their throats, and I should not wonder if he were dead drunk by this time."

"If they'd all get drunk we might find an opportunity to escape."

"But they will not. You must notice that our guards are not drinking at all. They are letting the others booze, but they are keeping perfectly sober."

This was true.

After a time, two women came and brought some dishes of food, which were placed within the doorway of the prison hut, and the captives were invited, by gestures, to partake of it. The women were very ugly—much more so than the men.

"Come, Ephraim," said Frank, "you are hungry, and here is something to eat. Sit up and help yourself."

"I don't want it."

"Don't? Why, you were almost starved early this morning."

Ephraim sat up.

"Think I'd eat any uv their stuff!" he squawked. "I don't know what it is. I don't want it."

"It is made of vegetables."

"I don't care ef it is! I'll bet a yaller squash it was cooked in a dish that some man had been cooked in! Great jumpin' Jupiter! It makes me sick!"

The thought was sickening, and Frank himself had no desire to taste the stuff, hungry though he was.

"Ef they try ter keep me an' fat me up, I'll starve myself till I'm so gol dern thin they won't hev no fun eatin' me," declared the boy from Vermont.

"That's a very good scheme," nodded Ross; "but I do not fancy any of us will be kept long. I am to be slaughtered to-morrow morning, and it's likely we'll all be killed at the same time. The black devils will have a regular barbecue."

Not one of the trio would taste the food, but their thirst forced them to take a drink from a dish of water the savages had provided.

The carousing continued among the savages throughout the day, and a wild orgie it was.

Frank watched like a hawk for an opportunity to escape, but found none.

Midway in the afternoon Bondalwe and his party came in.

They brought no more captives.

"Sardago and Dalfors have not been captured," said Frank. "It is merely a matter of time before they will be, however."

Bondalwe came and peered into the hut, seeming much satisfied.

"Why um white boys no eat?" he asked, seeing the food remained untouched. "Um white boys mean to starve? They no got time for that. Musweno see them bimeby pretty soon before night. Mebbe he have one boy for his supper. Um boy better than man—great much more tender. Musweno like white boy pretty good."

With that the giant war chief of the black men departed, leaving the captives in anything but an enviable mood.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### DEATH OF THE KING.

Phantom Island seemed to lay in a region of storms, for, toward night, thunder was heard muttering in the distance, and the sky gradually became overcast.

About this time the king of the black men sent an armed escort to bring the new captives before him.

Frank was still on the alert for any opportunity to break away and make a dash for life and liberty.

"Watch me, Ephraim," he directed. "If I give the signal you make a break at the same time. It may be our last chance."

"It's no use," declared Austin Ross, dolefully. "We are all doomed. Even if one or two of us escaped, we'd be on the island, and we'd fall into their hands again after a time."

"Well, you needn't think I am going to tamely submit to being roasted and eaten," came rather warmly from Frank.

Bondalwe was the leader of the guard, and he heard the lad's words, which brought a savage smile to his face.

"Um white boy talk big," he said, scornfully. "What white boy think um do? Him no git a chance."

"Wait," came clearly from Frank's lips. "I submitted quietly to capture because I knew I should not be harmed."

The big war chief grinned more than before.

"White boy know heap much. How him know so much?"

"Because I am protected by powers you know nothing

of. You will not be allowed to harm me. The Spirit of the Air will prevent it."

Bondalwe pursed up his lips and then shook his head.

"No understand that," he said. "What you mean, white boy?"

"You shall see. There are things you do not understand. Take us to your king. We are ready."

As the boys marched along in the midst of the guards, with the spears pointed toward them, Ephraim whispered to his companion:

"What in jee-thutteration did yeou mean by what you said to that darn big nigger? Was it all a big bluff?"

"I am making a play to save us from the soup," was the answer. "It is our only hope, and I'll confess it is a mighty slim one."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Wait and you shall see. Do not express surprise at anything that may happen, or anything you may hear."

Ephraim was puzzled. He could not conceive how Frank could do anything to save them, and still he had great confidence in the ability of his friend. He had seen Frank do many nervy and astonishing things, and, somehow, he felt hopeful that something might happen to save them from the cannibals at the last moment.

The black men and women ran along the street on either side of the armed guard and the captives, wildly waving their arms, shouting and screaming. They were a savage-looking set, nearly all of them drunk. The women seemed even fiercer than the men.

"What a mess uv old hags them shemales be!" muttered the boy from Vermont. "They act ez if they'd like to eat us raw."

"On this island the women cannot be called the 'fair sex,' and that is a fact. They are ugly as scarecrows."

"I don't b'lieve there's one decent lookin' one on the hull island."

Bondalwe's ears were sharp, and he had heard every word spoken by the boys. Now he turned about and said:

"You have not seen Malwe."

"Who is she?"

"One great princess—king's daughter. Heap much pretty."

"I be gol derved ef it wouldn't be a relief to git a look at her before we're roasted," said Ephraim.

"She not 'lowed to see um white boys—no, no!"

"Why not?"

"Her heart tender. She might try to keep white boys from being eaten."

"What's that?" cried Frank. "Then I rather reckon Malwe is the person we must desire to see about now."

"White boy not need to," said Bondalwe, sneeringly. "Him Spirit of Air will take care of white boys."

"That's right," declared Frank, stoutly. "You shall see."

Beyond the limits of the village they marched, and they came to an open lot of ground, surrounded by lofty trees with wide-spreading tops.

In this open space a number of the natives had assembled, and they shouted as the guard came up with the captives.

The crowd opened, and the boys were marched into its midst.

The boys found themselves before a large savage, who was seated on what seemed to be a sort of raised throne. This throne was decorated with human skulls, which peered out from every side in all their ghastly suggestiveness. Behind the throne there was a half circle of poles,

on which were perched bare and grinning skulls of human beings.

It was a ghastly and horrible spectacle, and the boys shuddered as they looked.

The king was a fierce-looking old wretch, with his teeth filed so they were all pointed, and his face and body fantastically tattooed. He was gotten up in a manner intended to strike awe to the hearts of the captives.

But Frank was not easily awed, for he leaned toward Ephraim and whispered:

“Well, old Musweno is a peach, and that’s straight!”

The teeth of the boy from Vermont chattered a little, as he whispered back:

“I’d give a pile ef I was to hum on the farm!”

The thunder was growing louder and louder, telling that the storm was approaching, and flashes of lightning became more frequent.

The king looked the boys over in a greedy way, as if he longed to devour them immediately.

Bondalwe bowed low before the throne, saying something in the native language, and motioning toward the captives.

Musweno lifted one pudgy hand and motioned for the boys to approach.

“Come on, Ephraim,” whispered Frank. “Show your nerve.”

The boys stepped forward, and the king surveyed them once more. His eyes finally rested on Frank, and he said:

“Um white boy much good. Him do for supper.”

So the king could speak English. Frank was greatly satisfied when he discovered this, for it would be of service to him in carrying out his scheme. He now addressed the monarch, speaking clearly and boldly:

"You may as well select another subject for supper, king, as I positively decline to serve."

Musweno gave a grunt of astonishment.

"What that?" he asked. "What white boy mean by that?"

"White boy say, oh great Musweno, king of the Wedolbas, that him be protected by Spirit of Air," explained Bondalwe, speaking in a derisive manner.

The cannibal king grunted again.

"What that?" he demanded. "White boy think we all fools?"

"I do not think you are fools," said Frank, calmly; "but I am telling you the simple truth. You cannot harm me, for I am protected by the Spirit of the Air. The Spirit is always ready to answer my call, and is within sound of my voice at this minute."

Old Musweno laughed derisively, showing his ugly, pointed teeth. He held onto his abdomen as he laughed.

"Much big lie," he declared. "Let white boy prove what him say, or him be killed right off now."

"Great gosh!" gasped Ephraim. "Yeou've got yerself inter an awful scrape! This fixes us both!"

But Frank Merriwell did not seem in the least disturbed. It is possible his face was somewhat paler than usual, but his voice was cool and steady.

"I will prove it, oh, king. You shall hear the voice of the Spirit of the Air—you shall hear him speak. He will speak to you, Musweno, King of the Wedolbas."

Then Frank stretched forth one hand, pointed straight at the old monarch, and uttered a long, loud cry.

As the boy uttered the cry there was a frightful shock, a blinding glare, and the king fell dead, plunging headlong from the ghastly throne to the ground.

He had been struck by lightning!

For some moments the savages seemed dazed with ter-

ror, staring wildly at the huddled body of the king, which lay in a heap at the foot of the throne, the hideous face distorted and turned toward the throng of natives, his sightless eyes seeming to stare in terror at Frank Merriwell.

Frank was no less astonished than the natives, for, of course, the thunderbolt had been totally unexpected by him; but, after the first start of surprise, which was not seen, he stood there cool and calm, thanking fortune for the seeming miracle, as he knew it must strike terror to the hearts of the black men.

Ephraim Gallup nearly fell to the ground in a heap. He had not known what Frank intended to do, and it almost seemed that the boy at his side had summoned the bolt of lightning to kill the cannibal king.

Suddenly a general cry of great fear came from the savages, and they prostrated themselves upon their faces on the ground.

"Gol dern my skin!" gasped the boy from Vermont. "This jest natterally beats anything I ever saw."

Frank smiled grimly.

"The Spirit of the Air certainly spoke to old Musweno in quite a loud tone of voice," he said, in a guarded way. "The old pirate heard it, and felt it, as well."

"Yeou don't mean to say you made the lightnin' strike him, do ye?" fluttered Ephraim, in a dazed way.

"Of course I did," chuckled Frank, comprehending the bewilderment and surprise of his companion. "Didn't I cry out to the Spirit?"

"I don't understand it," muttered the Yankee lad. "It's the queerest thing I ever saw sence I was born."

The native men and women lay face downward, not daring to look up at all. Even Bondalwe was overcome with fear.

"Arise, Bondalwe," directed Frank, in a loud tone,

"Tell the people to get upon their feet. The Spirit has spoken to the king, but they need not fear him more, for he will not speak again unless I call upon him."

The giant war chief got up very slowly, his black face seeming to have a sort of pallor, which may be seen in the faces of negroes who are badly frightened.

"Tell the others to arise," commanded the triumphant boy.

Bondalwe did so, but the people were so greatly frightened that they hesitated about obeying, some starting up, but falling back on their faces when they beheld the dead body of the king at the foot of the ghastly throne.

After a time they were induced to arise, but they huddled together, like a flock of frightened sheep, staring in speechless awe at Frank.

"Bondalwe," said Frank, "you doubted when I told you I was protected by the Spirit of the Air—you laughed at me. What do you think now?"

"White boy's tongue speak the truth. White boy one great magician. Him chief of many devils."

"Bondalwe, shall I call on the Spirit, and ask him to speak to you?"

The giant fell on his knees, his eyes rolling, his teeth chattering, his hands outstretched to the boy in an appealing gesture.

"No, no, no!" he almost screamed. "Um white boy spare poor Bondalwe! Bondalwe be slave to um white boy."

"Very well," came quietly from the boy's lips. "Get up."

The big war chief arose again, standing in a cowering attitude, while the islanders looked on in wonder and fear.

"The Spirit spoke to Musweno," said Frank, "and

Musweno is dead. If I should direct the Spirit to speak to any one of you, you would also die."

He made a gesture with his hand as he said this, and, by a fortunate coincidence, there was a sharp glare of lightning and a heavy peal of thunder.

Again the natives flung themselves on their faces, and it was some time before they could be induced to arise. When they did so they would have run away, but Frank commanded them to remain, under penalty of being touched by the Spirit."

"The king is dead," said Frank. "Who next in order should become your king? Speak up and answer me?"

After much faltering, Bondalwe bowed low, his eyes on the ground, and said, in a low and faltering voice:

"Oh, great white boy, Bondalwe is next among the men. There is but one to dispute his right to be king after Musweno."

"Who is that?"

"Malwe, the princess."

"Is she the king's daughter?"

"Yes."

"What relation are you to the king?"

Bondalwe tried to explain, but he did not succeed in making anything clear but that he was a distant relative.

It became evident to Frank that the big savage aspired to the throne, knowing there was none among the natives who dared oppose him.

"I scarcely think you will be allowed to become king while I am on this island," thought Frank.

He then asked for Malwe, but was told the king had forbidden that she should see the white captives, and that she had been sent to the other village, which was situated at the farther extremity of the island. The men from

his other village and nearly all the women were present and had witnessed the death of their king.

A sudden thought struck Frank, and he said, in a loud voice:

"Oh, people of the Wedolbas, the Spirit has seen fit to take your king from you, but Musweno shall speak and say who shall become your king in his place."

At this much surprise was shown, and Bondalwe falteringly asked:

"How is it, white boy, that Musweno can speak when him be much dead? Dead one no speak at all any more."

"The Spirit can give him power to speak, even though he is dead," asserted the resourceful lad, with confidence. "You shall hear him speak."

"Gosh-all-hemlock!" gurgled Ephraim, in consternation. "You're crazyer'n a coot, Frank! You're goin' ter spoil ther hull blamed mess ef yeou keep on this air way."

"Don't get excited, Ephraim," cautioned Frank, serenely. "I know what I am about, so keep your mouth buttoned up a while and see what you will see."

Bondalwe seemed more incredulous than ever. He repeated the lad's words to the natives, and they stared at Frank in mingled fear and doubt.

Making sure that all understood that he had asserted the dead monarch should speak and declare who should become king, Frank began approaching the huddled, tattooed body at the foot of the throne. As he advanced he muttered some gibberish, and made strange movements in the air with his hands.

The savages stared with increasing awe and fear, some seeming ready to fall on the ground once more.

Reaching the body, the boy bent over it, making some mystic passes, and then, crying, in a loud voice, so all must hear him:

“Oh, Great Spirit, give to Musweno power that he may speak and proclaim the name of his successor. Oh, Musweno, dead though you are from the touch of the Spirit, speak and let your wishes be known—speak, I command you.

Dead silence, with every savage staring and listening.

The king's lips were drawn back from his filed teeth, and from his throat seemed to issue these words :

“The white boy, whose servant is the Spirit of the Air, shall become king of the Wedalbos in place of Musweno. This is the wish and command of Musweno, who is dead.”

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE NEW KING.

It seemed that the dead had spoken.

There were a few among the savages who understood English, and they translated the words which seemed to come from the lips of their dead monarch. In a moment every native present understood what the corpse had seemed to say.

Once more the islanders prostrated themselves on the ground, but this time they cried:

"The white boy is our king! He is great and mighty, and he shall be our king to the end."

Bondalwe alone did not cry out, as Frank observed, but he bowed with the rest, although it was evident that he was much disappointed.

Ephraim Gallup could not restrain his unutterable amazement.

"Gol dern my skin!" he exclaimed. "This beats anything I ever saw in my natteral born days!"

Frank made a motion to him, saying, sternly:

"Bow, boy! Down upon your face, or you will incur the wrath of the Spirit and the new king of the Wedolbas."

"Yeou want me to git daown on my face?" asked Ephraim, astonished.

"I do," said Frank, appearing very stern. "I command it."

"Wal, I be kicked ef I do enny such——"

"Then your fate be upon your own head. I have worked to save you, but you may destroy yourself by your own folly."

"Then I guess I'll git daown, though it does seem thunderin' foolish. Do yeou want me to rub my nose in the dirt?"

Ephraim bowed rather reluctantly, getting down slowly.

Then Frank mounted to the throne, upon which he seated himself, very well satisfied with the turn affairs had taken.

"Arise, my people," he commanded—"arise and greet your king."

The natives got upon their feet. Bondalwe shook his spear in the air and uttered a wild shout, which was echoed by all the savages, who also shook their weapons or their empty hands in the air.

Down across the sky at the rear of the throne zigzagged the lurid lightning, and the thunder roared like ten thousand cannon.

"It is the Spirit of the Air!" the natives told each other. "He greets our new king! The king is a great king!"

Bondalwe slowly advanced, got upon his knees before the throne, placed his forehead on the ground, and remained thus till Frank told him to get upon his feet.

Having arisen, the war chief asked:

"What is the king's name, that I may tell it to his people?"

"Tell them that his name is Merriwell."

Bondalwe did so, and the natives shouted the name over and over.

"Merriwell is our king! He is a great and mighty king!"

Bondalwe then explained that whenever a new king ascended the throne there were certain ceremonies to be observed, such as the drinking of human blood and the eating of the brains of a human being.

Ephraim, who had begun to feel better, grinned and winked at his comrade, slyly observing:

"You'll have a regular high old feast, Frank!"

Immediately Frank looked sterner than ever, asking of Bondalwe:

"Where is the victim?"

"Um one be in hut," said the war chief, "or um one be here."

He indicated Ephraim.

"I do not like the one in the hut," declared Frank, "so I think I'll have to take um one here."

"What's that?" shouted the boy from Vermont. "Great smoke! Yeou don't mean to say you're goin' to make a meal off me?"

"Well, I am pretty hungry," said the new monarch. "I feel as if I might eat almost anything, and I doubt if I'll find anything better on this island than you are, Ephraim."

"He shall be killed at once right away soon," said Bondalwe. "First him throat be cut to let out blood."

He made a motion with his hand, and Ephraim was seized by several savages, who were ready to execute orders. One of them produced a long, wicked-looking knife.

Instantly the boy from Vermont fell on his knees, his face turning very pale, and his teeth chattering with terror.

"Oh, sus-sus-say, Fuf-fuf-frank!" he stammered, "just tut-tut-tell them to sus-sus-stop it! Gol dud-dud-dern it all! yeou can't mum-mum-mean to have mum-mum-me kuk-kuk-killed like this! Oh, what'd I gug-gug-gug-give ef I was to hum on the fuf-fuf-fuf-farm!"

Seeing how he had terrified his companion by his little joke, Frank's heart smote him, and he quickly said:

"As the Spirit of the Air has been instrumental in mak-

ing me king of the Wedolbas, we will omit all ceremony. I am your king. That is all that is necessary."

Bondalwe and the savages seemed much disappointed, while Ephraim was relieved beyond measure, although, seeing Frank had played a ghastly joke on him, he was rather angry. However, he fancied it was best to repress his anger and keep quiet.

Frank now directed that the other white captive be brought before him, and a party of natives rushed away to obey the command.

In the meantime Frank addressed Bondalwe, saying:

"Bondalwe, you are strong and handsome, and you shall still be the war chief of the Wedolbas. You shall be my head chief, and, next to me, you shall have the greatest power over the people. How does that satisfy you?"

"It is much good," answered the giant, bowing low and seeming pleased. "You shall not have some reason to be 'shamed of Bondalwe."

"Stand on my right," directed Frank, and the giant did so.

"Now," said the boy monarch, "my chief companion and counselor shall be this other white boy, who is wise beyond his years, and who knows much that is hidden from the learned and aged. Ephraim, stand on my left."

Ephraim did so.

"Bondalwe," said Frank, "I shall depend on you to select ten men as my body guard. They must be ten of the bravest and most trustworthy."

The war chief agreed to do so, and he quickly chose the number required, selecting the tallest and most intelligent-looking savages.

Frank then directed that these men, all of whom were armed with spears, should form two lines, five in each

line, standing three feet apart, on either side and to the front of the throne.

By the time this was arranged the natives with Austin Ross came hurrying up. Ross was overcome with terror, and scarcely able to keep on his feet, fully expecting he was being rushed to slaughter. He stared in bewildered surprise when brought before Frank, who was seated on the ghastly throne. He saw the king lying dead on the ground, and his wonder increased.

"Mr. Ross," said Frank, with dignity, "I am now king of this people, in place of the late king, whom you see down there. I am absolute monarch of this island, and what I say goes."

Ross nearly fainted.

"How in the world did you ever do it?" he finally gasped.

"Oh, it's a way I have of doing things. I seldom get left, although I sometimes seem to be badly in the soup."

"That's right, by thutter!" squealed Ephraim Gallup, who was feeling so good that he could not contain himself longer. "You're a reg'lar peach, by gum!"

"Be careful," warned Frank. "The chief counselor of King Merriwell the First of Phantom Island should not forget to be dignified on all state occasions, such as the present, as he is beneath the watchful eyes of the populace."

Ephraim stiffened up, becoming grave as a judge in a moment.

"Yeou'll have to excuse me this time," he said. "I'll kainder watch aout an' not make another break, your royal highness."

Bondalwe now approached, and, after certain salutes, he asked:

"When, oh, king, do we eat him?"

He indicated Ross.

"You will not eat him at all," said Frank, sternly. "He is a countryman of mine, and he must not be harmed. He must have his liberty, and I give warning that the Spirit of the Air will visit with the death touch the one who injures him. Release him."

He waved his hand, and Austin Ross was set at liberty. The man nearly fainted with joy.

It now began to rain large drops, and, seeing the shower was right upon the island, Frank directed that the dead king should be lifted and carried to his home. This being done, the assemblage was dismissed. In the native language they shouted:

"Great is our king! Great is Merriwell, king of the Wedolbas!"

Frank marched toward the village, accompanied by Ephraim, Bondalwe, and the body guard of ten, with the awed natives following at a little distance, speaking one to another of the astounding and miraculous things they had witnessed.

Frank was escorted to the king's house, which was larger and better than the others, and he entered to escape the rain, which was beginning to come down freely.

The cannibals had been greatly frightened by the sudden and unexpected death of their king from a thunderbolt, which it seemed the strange white boy had called from the sky.

They placed the dead king in one of the huts, leaving him with two of his widows to watch over the body. Then they gathered to talk over the marvelous things which had happened.

While they were fully convinced of the power of the white boy to work his will by calling to his aid the Spirit of the Air, they were also much disappointed because the new king had seen fit to release both the white captives.

All cannibals are gluttons, and thus it was with the Wedolbas. They thought a great deal about what they would eat, and it seemed that, some time in the past, they had discovered that white men made very good eating. Therefore it was a great disappointment to them when they failed to get so much as a taste of one of their three captives. They had expected a great feast.

Notwithstanding nearly all of the black men and women had been intoxicated when the youthful captives were brought before King Musweno, they were decidedly sober directly they witnessed the death of the old monarch.

But some of them were sullen, feeling that the new king had not used them quite right by taking both the remaining captives from them, and they covertly whispered their dissatisfaction one to another, holding their hands over their empty stomachs as they did so.

Still, they had no thought of questioning the authority of King Merriwell, for all were convinced that he had the power to strike any one dead by a look, and they held him in the greatest fear.

While the rainstorm lasted the natives were huddled in the little huts, whispering, whispering, whispering. They shuddered with terror when they heard the heavy peals of thunder, which had suddenly assumed a new significance for them. It was the voice of the Spirit of the Air, whose touch meant instant death.

In the meantime, once inside the dead king's house, Ephraim Gallup executed a wild can-can of a dance, threw his arms about Frank's neck, and gave him a bear-like hug.

Immediately Frank cast the Vermonter off, saying, reprovingly:

"Be careful how you monkey with his royal highness, King Merriwell the First. You must approach me with awe and deference—that is, if it doesn't make any 'deference' to you."

Ephraim gave a deep groan and staggered, catching at his heart.

"Gol derned ef that ain't the wust pun I ever heard!" he gasped. "It was awful—simply awful! What you think, Mr. Ross?"

"I think I am so well satisfied to escape being eaten by these savages that I can stand almost anything. Go ahead with your puns, King Merriwell."

"Hereafter, while I remain monarch of this island," said Frank, "you must show me the regard my position demands. If I make a bad pun, you must laugh heartily, even though it may give you an attack of heart failure. Do you catch on?"

"Oh, we catch on fast enough," nodded Ross; "but what puzzles me is how you got to be king. Will you explain that?"

"With pleasure."

Then Frank told what had happened when he was brought before King Musweno, and Ross listened in astonishment.

"What did you mean to do if the lightning had not struck the old cannibal?" asked the astonished man. "You must have had some scheme you were trying to work."

"I did. I told them they should hear the voice of the Spirit of the Air. After that, the dead king seemed to speak, aided by the same spirit."

"By gum! I have it!" cried Ephraim, slapping his knee.

"Well, if you have it, don't yell so loud the whole village will get it," advised Frank. "What is it you have?"

"I'd plum fergot one trick yeou uster do at skule. Yeou was a slappin' good ventriloquist, and yeou was alwus playin' jokes by throwin' your voice around. Yeou made the dead king seem to speak."

"Exactly so, my astute chief adviser, but it was some time before you seemed to get that through your head. When I called on the mythical Spirit of the Air, I intended to make a voice seem to come from the air, commanding the king not to harm one of the captive white men. I was on the point of trying to work the trick when the thunderbolt knocked old Musweno off his perch."

"Well, you are a wonderful boy," declared Austin Ross, admiringly. "Aided by the thunderbolt, you have saved us all for the time; but I shall feel uneasy among these cannibals till we escape. I shall be watching out all the time, so they will not catch me and eat me when I am not looking."

"Yeou've got to be king, Frank," said Ephraim; "but yeou may not be able to hold yeour job. When the thunderstorm is over, the niggers may decide that they want one uv their own people to rule 'em."

"If they do, I shall have to try a few tricks of legerdemain I know. I am no Herman or Keller, but I fancy I can do some things to surprise these people."

"You are such a lucky fellow that I'd not be at all surprised if you could aid me in finding Ethel Driscoll, the lost heiress," said Ross.

"Well, I don't know about that," smiled Frank. "I scarcely think there is any chance of finding her among these tanned maidens of the Wedolbas, but I'll look

around. If I should happen to come across her, I will hand her over to you, and all I ask is one-half the reward offered for her discovery."

"You shall have it," came seriously from Ross. "I will pay it willingly, in case we ever get away from this island."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE KING'S WIVES.

Frank proceeded to make himself quite at home in the king's house, which was far more comfortable than any other house in the village. He informed Ephraim that he must turn cook and fix up something to eat as soon as the storm had passed.

"I'll do it ef I kin find anything to cook," said the lad from Vermont. "I'm sure I don't want to eat anything that the niggers in the village cook."

So, when it had ceased to rain, Ephraim began to overhaul the dishes in the king's "kitchen," while Frank called in some attendants, and asked for something to cook in the way of vegetables or wild animals.

The attendants hastened from the hut, uttering loud cries. In a few moments they returned, escorting nine women of various ages, from sixteen to sixty.

One of the attendants, whose name was Howena, bowed to the ground before Frank, saying:

"All um these belong to King Musweno. Now Musweno him be dead, all um belong to new king. They use um new king much good."

"I presume these are my cooks," said Frank, dubiously.

"No," said Howena, shaking his head vigorously—"no cook; all um be wives."

"Wives!" shouted Frank, in horror, starting back. "Why, Musweno must have belonged to the Mormons! What do I want of his wives?"

"When um king die 'mong Wedolbas, um next king

have to take all um wives. Must take um, King Merriwell. They be much good to you."

Howena waved his hand and the women crowded around Frank, grinning and holding their arms. The oldest and ugliest of the lot said:

"Me berry good wife. Me cook, me do lot of thing. Me love new king. Him be very handsome."

She acted as if she wanted to clasp Frank in her arms, and he uttered a yell of fear. For once in his life Frank Merriwell was frightened, and he showed it.

Ephraim had come from the back room, and he saw and heard all that passed. He was convulsed with laughter, which he tried to suppress, but it now burst out, and he roared:

"Haw! haw! haw! By gum! this is better than a hull bar'l uv monkeys. Kiss your wives all around, Frank. They're a regular crate uv peaches! Whoop! Haw! haw! haw!"

"Be still!" shouted Frank, fiercely. "If you don't shut up, I'll do something you won't like."

"What'll yeou do?"

"I'll turn every one of these creatures over to you, and make you take them for your wives."

The Vermonter gave a howl of terror and vanished into the back room with precipitate haste, utterly routed.

Frank was in a quandary. He did not wish to offend the women, and he was not inclined to accept the nine coal-black wenches as wives. He commanded them to keep off when they crowded too closely about him, and then he explained that, in the country from which he came, men were not allowed to have more than one wife, and so he could not take them.

Immediately Howena said:

"Um king take one wife, all odders be killed right away when um say so. He have um to eat."

"Great Scott!" gurgled Frank, while Austin Ross gasped for breath, "is this the custom of these heathenish creatures?"

"That way all um kings do," explained Howena. "When um git tired of wife, kill um and eat um. New king alwus kill all um wives he no want to keep."

The women now received the impression that but one of their number was to become the wife of the white king, and all the others were to be killed and eaten. This filled them with the utmost terror, but all were hopeful that they would be the one selected for a wife. They crowded about Frank, jabbering wildly, each one evidently trying to convince him that she should be the one selected.

"Jupiter and Mars!" cried the young monarch, despairingly. "This is more than I can stand! It is altogether too much!"

Then he yelled at Howena:

"Take them all away! If you don't take them away I'll be tempted to kill every one of them! Be lively about it!"

Howena jumped into the midst of the jabbering women, grasping them, shaking them, and shouting at them. He made them understand, and they hastened from the hut, still in great fear of the white king.

When they were gone, Frank collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"Merciful goodness!" he gasped. "Is there no way to escape from this island at once?"

Frank succeeded in getting out of the predicament for the time by giving notice that he would require considerable time to make the selection of the wives he desired among the late king's widows, although this did not seem to satisfy the natives very well, for they thought

he should choose his wives without delay, so he might begin feasting on the ones he did not desire.

Ephraim Gallup chuckled with satisfaction, and asked Frank how he liked the "king business."

Frank, being full of fun himself, could appreciate a joke, and he laughed over the affair, although he was troubled to know how he was going to get out of the scrape.

The trio, Frank, Ephraim and Ross, succeeded in obtaining food to satisfy their hunger, and they felt much better.

That night they kept together in the king's house, taking turns at standing guard, as they did not fully trust the savages.

With the coming of another day Frank went forth through the village, accompanied by Bondalwe and his body guard.

Wherever the new king went the people prostrated themselves before him, rising and shouting when he had passed:

"Great is the king of the Wedolbas! Long live King Merriwell!"

When he had inspected the village Frank called the people around him, and made a speech. He told them he had become their king through the will of the Spirit of the Air, and that the Spirit watched over him constantly, so no harm could come to him. He assured them that he would be a good and just king, that he would look out for their welfare, and that he would bring good fortune to them. But he warned them that they must not try to deceive him, that they must be just and open in their dealings with him, and that they must obey him in everything.

Bondalwe translated Frank's words, and the people shouted:

"It is good! We love our white boy king! We will be just and fair with King Merriwell. We will obey him in everything."

Frank then informed them that he was somewhat prejudiced against eating human beings, and that he could not eat any of the former king's widows. Neither did he want them for wives. The Spirit of the Air had forbidden him to marry.

Then a number of the natives cried out, and Bondalwe explained to Frank that the women must all be killed if he did not take them as his wives. Some of the savages volunteered to eat them.

However, Frank sternly forbade any sacrifice of the sort. He then demanded the weapons which had been taken from himself and Ephraim when they were captured.

The revolvers were brought, and the boys felt much better when they had regained possession of them.

In conclusion, Frank succeeded in getting the throng into a pleasant mood by several deftly worded phrases, and, as he finished, they again shouted:

"Long live King Merriwell!"

When Frank retired to the "royal palace" he felt well satisfied with the way matters stood.

"There, Ephraim," he said, "I rather think we are all right. Those savages will not dare harm us now, and I have fixed it so the late king's widows will not bother me and will not be killed."

"Oh, yes, we're all right!" came sarcastically from Ephraim's lips. "Here we be thousan's uv miles from hum, wrecked on an island inhabited by cannibuls, and not likely to ever git off. Uv course we're all right!"

"You should feel well satisfied to think we escaped being eaten by the cannibals, and let it go at that."

"What yeou want to do? Do yeou want to live here the

rest uv your natteral life? Do yeou intend to marry a dozen ur so uv these nigger gals, an' settle daown here? Be yeou stuck on the place because the niggers have made you king?"

"Be careful," warned Frank. "Remember you are addressing the absolute monarch of Phantom Island, and I may take a fancy to be offended by what you say. Of course I do not want to stay here if I can help it, but it does not look as if we can help it now. We will do what we can."

"Wal, what can we do?"

"We will plan that out later. It will not be difficult to make arrangements to burn signal fires on various parts of the island, and keep flags of distress flying, so any vessel which sights the island will run in here."

"Wal, why don't ye see that it's done right away? Gol derved ef I want to stay here long, an' some ship might be passin' the island this very day."

"Don't be in such a rush, Ephraim. The natives might grow suspicious if we were in too great a hurry. I will make them believe it is a way I have of worshiping the Spirit of the Air, and they will let me erect as many signal flags as I wish."

Ephraim growled and grumbled, being very anxious to get off the island without delay. Oyer and over he said he'd "stay to hum on the farm," if he ever got back there again.

During the day Frank heard considerable concerning Malwe, the princess, and he wondered why she did not come from the other village. Toward night he missed Bondalwe, and, on making inquiries, was informed that the giant war chief had gone to the other village.

Then, for the first time, Frank learned that Bondalwe was in love with Malwe, but she had refused to become

his wife. The giant, however, was determined to have the princess.

This interested Frank at once. Here was something romantic on this lonely cannibal island.

"I must see Malwe," decided the boy king. "I must see what she looks like. The savages say she is very beautiful; but I do not bank much on their taste in such matters.

With the coming of another morning Frank learned that Bondalwe had not returned from the other village, and so he set out for that village immediately after breakfast, accompanied by Ephraim, Ross, and the native body guard.

The route led through a dense forest, and the road was very narrow. It took nearly three hours of marching to reach the village, which was smaller and less pretentious than the one at the foot of the mountain.

The people of the second village seemed to stand in great awe of the white boy king. They fell on their faces before Frank.

Frank made them a short speech, and then he asked for Malwe. He was informed that she had left early that morning in company with Bondalwe and five protectors for the other village.

This seemed rather strange, as the party had not been met with on the road, and the natives said there was but one main road between the two places.

Frank puzzled over the matter a while, and then he said to Ephraim:

"I don't like it. I know Bondalwe aspired to become king in place of old Musweno, and he was much disappointed when he failed to ascend the throne. I believe he is up to some trickery, but what it is I cannot understand."

When the party had rested a while, and the boys and

Ross had eaten some food which they brought, and which had been cooked by Ephraim, preparations were made for starting back.

During the journey through the forest a sharp watch was kept for Bondalwe and his companions, but nothing was seen of the giant native.

When the other village was reached, Bondalwe was found there.

But Malwe was not in the village.

When questioned, Bondalwe told a rather mixed story about Malwe going to some place in the forest where she lived alone—a place known to no one but herself.

Frank saw in an instant that the fellow was lying.

“Bondalwe,” he said, sternly, “you must find Malwe and bring her here to this village without delay.”

“Can’t do it,” declared the war chief, shaking his head. “I have hunt for um place where she be, but no find it. Don’t know where um be.”

“Well, you will find it now, and you will find it right away,” came grimly from Frank’s lips. “If you do not find it, and if you do not bring the princess before me, I shall have to look around for a new war chief. You will lose your head.”

The giant understood what Frank meant. His face worked with mingled rage and fear, but fear was the victor, and he finally said:

“Um will do my best to find her. All right if I can.”

“All right if you do, but all wrong if you do not,” said Frank.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

MALWE.

That very night a party of natives brought in Sardago and Dalfors as captives.

The Portuguese and the Dane were haggard, wild-eyed and nearly starved. The fierce spirit seemed gone out of them for the time. They begged for something to eat.

The natives were hilarious. Some were for making a feast off the two sailors without delay. Others cautioned them to bring the men before the new king.

Frank heard that the fellows had been captured, and he directed that they be brought before him. He received them upon the ghastly throne of King Musweno.

Sardago and Dalfors were told they were being taken before the king, but when they saw Frank Merriwell seated on the throne and surrounded by his attendants and body guard, they were completely overcome with amazement.

"Dat boy Merriwell!" gasped Sardago, his eyes popping from his head, and his dark face working. "What dat boy do here-a?"

Frank made a commanding gesture, and the rascally sailors were brought close before him. Looking Sardago straight in the eyes, he said:

"You tried to kill me when we were both clinging to a floating spar of the *Sea Fox*. Now the tables are turned completely. Since that time I have become king of this island. I am absolute monarch here, and what I say goes. The people here are cannibals—they delight to feast on human flesh. All I have to do is to make a sign, and

you and Dalfors will be immediately killed, cut up, cooked and eaten."

The Dane uttered a cry of fear and horror, falling on his knees, and holding his hands out to Frank.

"Don't kill me, Merriwell!" he entreated. "I didn't try to hurt you! If I ever done anything to you, it was because Sardago paid me to do so. Don't let them eat me!"

With a fierce curse, the Portuguese kicked the cowardly fellow over on his face. Sardago then folded his arms, stood up very straight, and glared at Frank, snarling:

"Go 'head, Merriwell! Killy me-a right off. You don't killy me-a, some time I killy you! You find-a Vendas Sardago no 'fraid of anything. He die 'thout one squeal-a."

Despite the character of the ruffian, Frank could not help admiring his nerve, for surely Sardago displayed nerve.

All efforts to frighten the Portuguese were vain; but the Dane showed himself a very pitiable coward.

At length Frank directed that the rascals be taken to the hut where captives were confined. When the fellows had been removed, the boy king made a speech to his subjects. He told them that Sardago and Dalfors had been passengers on the same ship that brought him to the island, and that they must not be killed. At this there was some murmuring and a small show of dissatisfaction. Frank pretended to be very angry, and soon silenced the murmuring. He then went on to tell the natives that the two sailors were dangerous, and must be kept closely guarded. It was plain that the islanders had a fancy that the fellows would be given to them to eat in the course of time, and the meeting broke up with the black men and women partly satisfied.

Frank, however, saw there was trouble coming, and, when he obtained a good opportunity, he said to Ephraim:

"You want to keep your eyes open for snags, old man. There's going to be a hot old time on this island before long, and we'll be right in it."

"What do yeou mean?"

"I mean that these fellows, being cannibals, cannot give up their desire to eat white man in sight. They will get drunk on their palm wine, or whatever it is, and then they'll proceed to made a meal off Sardago and Dalfors, for all of anything I may say or do. That is, they are likely to. If that does not happen, Bondalwe will bring a revolution, and an attempt will be made to depose King Merriwell the First. Anyway, there'll be warm times. Watch out."

The next morning Bondalwe brought the Princess Malwe into the village, The princess was escorted by a dozen natives, and she at once hurried to a house that belonged to her alone, where she lived with several native attendants.

Frank Merriwell caught but a glimpse of the princess, but that was enough to fill him with unutterable surprise. He saw the princess was fully and tastily dressed in grass-cloth garments, not even her arms being bare. Her face and hands were dark, like the other savages, but her features seemed to be regular, and her hair was straight. At a distance she seemed really comely despite her color.

Frank went into the king's house and aroused Ephraim, who was sleeping.

"I have seen the Princess Malwe," said the boy king.

"Wal, I be gol derved ef yeou ain't all flustered up—yeou seem excited over it! Was she homblrier than you expected?"

"She is really pretty."

"Hey?" squawked Ephraim. "Yeou don't mean to

say yeou kin see anything pretty abaout a nigger gal on this dinged old island? Git out, Frank! Be yeou goin' foolish!"

"I actually mean to say that she is well formed and pretty—if you do not take her color into consideration."

"That settles it!" groaned Ephraim. "Yeou won't burn no fires ur put up signals to attract passing vessels."

"Why not?"

"Yeou'll take the Princess Malwe fer a wife, an' settle right daown here on this island for the rest uv your natteral days. Yeou'll fergit Inza Burrage and Elsie Bellwood, an' yeou'll cotton to this coal-black princess, an' let it go at that! I wish I was to hum on the farm!"

Frank laughed.

"Don't feel so bad, Ephraim," he chuckled; "I'll let you have all of King Musweno's widows, so you'll not be left."

Bondalwe hung about the house of the princess, seeming to watch over her in a jealous manner.

Frank sat in front of the king's house, watching to obtain another glimpse of the princess. The more he thought about her, the greater became his wonder. It did not seem possible that this girl, who was so unlike the other females of the Wedolbas, could be the daughter of the dead king, who was a horrible-looking old rascal.

Musweno had been buried in the night, according to the custom of the natives in disposing of their kings, his burial spot being a secret from all but those who buried him. Frank could not but wonder if this custom was caused by a fear of the natives that the king's body might be exhumed and eaten.

That afternoon, Bondalwe having disappeared for the time, Frank saw the princess peering out cautiously, in-

specting him with curious eyes. Immediately he called, in a guarded tone:

"Malwe, Malwe, come out. I will not harm you, do not be afraid. I wish to speak with you. Come out."

To his unutterable surprise the princess uttered a cry of joy, rushed out and fell fainting at his feet.

Frank looked down at her in amazement. She was indeed pretty, and he felt his heart give a leap. He stooped and lifted her in his arms.

As Frank did this, there was a roar of rage, and Bondalwe came dashing up, tore the princess from Frank, and gave the boy a heavy blow that sent him reeling.

The young monarch was dazed for a moment by the shock of the blow and the suddenness of the assault. He saw the giant fling the princess into the arms of another savage, and then Bondalwe caught a spear and dashed at Frank Merriwell.

It was plainly the intention of the war chief to run Frank through the body. His face was working with passion, showing his fiendish, pointed teeth, and cries of fury escaped his lips.

The savages came running from all directions, and they stood staring wide-eyed at the spectacle of the war chief and the white boy king engaged in deadly conflict.

Frank knew he was in great peril, and he succeeded in squirming aside in time to avoid the thrust of the spear.

This brought the giant black man and the boy close together.

Crack!—Frank's hard fist landed on Bondalwe's jaw.

The war chief knew nothing about the science of fighting with fists. That blow was a stunner, and it nearly knocked the big fellow over. It made him see more than a thousand stars and bright lights, and, by the time he steadied himself on his feet, the boy was at him again.

This time Frank uppercut, taking Bondalwe under the chin, and driving the fellow's pointed teeth together. Then the boy gave the giant one in the pit of the stomach, and Bondalwe was rounded up in a moment.

That gave Frank the very opportunity he was looking for. He struck a swinging blow that caught the giant on the jaw below the ear, and the great war chief dropped like a log, fairly knocked out!

Cries of wonder came from the savages who had seen this brief battle. They could not believe it possible the boy had conquered Bondalwe, the mighty, with his bare hands.

Frank bent over the fallen native to see if the job were finished. As he did so a savage-faced islander aimed a spear at his back and tried to run him through.

Bang!

Ephraim Gallup fired from the doorway of the king's house, and the native with the spear dropped dead.

Tom! tom! tom!

The war drums were beating! The natives were running to and fro, spears and weapons in hand.

"By gum, Frank!" cried the boy from Vermont. "I guess there's a big raow on."

"That's right," returned Frank. "Bondalwe has planned this, and the natives are aroused against us. We'll have to run for our lives. Where's Ross?"

"I'm here," cried the man, as he came running from the house. "What can we do?"

"Follow me!"

Frank rushed into the midst of a knot of savages. They parted and scattered like sheep before him, one of them dropping the unconscious Princess Malwe to the ground.

Frank caught up the girl, flung her over his shoulder,

shouted again for his companions to follow him, and rushed for the road that led through the forest to the seashore.

Ephraim and Austin Ross kept close at Frank's heels.

The natives would have shot arrows and cast spears after them, but they feared to wound the princess, so they pursued, making the forest resound with their fierce shouts.

The fugitives quickly disappeared into the forest.

"What do you mean to do?" asked Ross, calling to Frank, who was in advance. "Every savage on this island will be aroused against us. We are in a bad scrape."

"Not so bad as we were when we first met," was the answer. "The black fellows are somewhat afraid of me, for all of anything Bondalwe may have told them. We will try to reach a place of shelter on the coast, where we can hold them off for a time. It is possible we may be able to attract some passing ship. If not, we'll try to make peace with the savages."

Frank was fleet of foot, and he ran swiftly for some time, for all of the burden he bore. Then he passed the girl to Ephraim, and fell to the rear, examining his revolvers.

The savages were coming, as their shouts plainly told. Amid the other cries, Frank could hear shouts which did not seem like those that came from the lips of the savages. He stopped short in the narrow road, listening and waiting.

In a moment the foremost of the pursuers came up with a rush, and, as they burst suddenly into view, Frank beheld the two persons who had uttered the strange cries.

They were Sardago and Dalfors!

The natives had released the two sailors, believing they would know best how to attack and overcome Merriwell,

whom they feared, and the ruffians joined heartily in the pursuit.

When he saw Frank, Sardago gave a shout of triumph.

"Now you be no king!" he yelled, fiercely. "Pretty soon we cutty your t'roat. Niggers eaty you uppa!"

He brandished a knife as he leaped toward Frank.

The boy calmly lifted one of his revolvers, which he had held concealed, and shot the Portuguese through the right leg.

Screaming and yelling bitterly, Sardago fell to the ground.

Dalfors uttered a cry of fear, and leaped out of sight into the thick brush beside the road.

The natives stopped abruptly, showing how much they held Frank Merriwell in awe, many of them getting out of sight.

Frank did not feel like wasting a single shot, so he turned and hurried after his companions, whom he soon overtook.

During the remainder of the retreat to the shore the pursuers did not press the fugitives very closely.

Frank and Ephraim took turns in carrying Malwe, although the boy from Vermont was for leaving the girl.

"What's the good of botherin' with her?" he grumbled. "She's in the way."

"We'll cling to her," said Frank. "It may be necessary to make a treaty with these savages, and we can do so much better if we hold her in our power. We may be able to bring them to terms in that way."

"By gum! that's so! Yeou've got a long head, Frank."

But it was not necessary to make a treaty with the savages, for, when they burst out of the forest and came upon the beach, to their infinite amazement and joy, a vessel lay at anchor beyond the reef, and a boatload of sailors were just landing on the island.

The three fugitives hastened toward the sailors, uttering cries of joy.

To the surprise of all three, the sailors did not seem at all surprised to find them there.

But Frank Merriwell's amazement and delight may be imagined when he saw with the sailors Captain Justin Bellwood, whom he knew very well indeed.

The captain greeted Frank, whom he was astonished to see, saying:

"Where shall we meet next? Last time it was in the heart of the Florida Everglades."

"How did you happen here?" asked Frank.

"Picked up a bottle at sea. Paper in bottle, and a few words scrawled on paper, plainly written with great haste. Said it was expected the schooner *Sea Fox*, John Scudd, master, would be driven upon the shore of an island hereabouts. This brief message was written by Cap'n Scudd, at the last moment before the *Sea Fox* struck, sealed and corked up in the bottle, and tossed into the sea. By a rare chance, I picked it up, and I set about finding this island. I found it without trouble, but nearly lost it again in a cloud of mist. However, the mist lifted after a time, and here we are. How many escaped from the *Fox*?"

"Five, two of whom are pursuing us with the cannibals, who live on this island. Take us off immediately, before they come up. We will explain everything later."

So they entered the boat, which was manned and shoved off by the sailors. Frank insisted on taking Malwe along, to the wonder and dismay of all; but they did not oppose him.

When they were nearly out to the reef the natives, with Dalfors among them, came out of the woods, ran down to the shore, and yelled at them. Dalfors begged them to come back and take him off, but they paid no attention to his entreaties.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

ELSIE BELLWOOD.

Elsie Bellwood, the captain's daughter, was aboard the *Saucy Susan*, as the captain's new vessel was called, and she greeted Frank warmly. Indeed, in her impulsive way, she actually flung her arms about his neck, and gave him a kiss, much to the amusement of Ephraim Gallup, who slyly whispered to his friend:

"What be yeou goin' to do with the Princess Malwe naow? Yeou will have to give up the black gal, ur the white one will be jellus."

Elsie looked at Malwe, who had regained consciousness, in some amazement, but Frank said a few low words that caused the captain's daughter to take the princess into her cabin without delay.

From various points where they had been hidden along the shore, the natives brought out canoes, and they were soon paddling off toward the *Saucy Susan*, as if they actually meditated attacking her.

Seeing this, Captain Bellwood gave orders to get up the anchor and get under way.

"We'll have to come back here and leave the black girl later on," said the captain.

Frank smiled.

It was not found necessary to return to Phantom Island.

When Elsie Bellwood came from the cabin, she was accompanied by a pretty, dark-eyed white girl, who wore one of Elsie's dresses.

Every one of the men, with the exception of Frank,

stared at the strange girl in blank astonishment. Frank advanced quickly to her side, took her hands, said a few low words, and then turned to Captain Bellwood.

"Captain," smiled the boy, "permit me to present to you Princess Malwe, of Phantom Island."

"But—but she is no black girl!" stammered the old master.

"Not now," said Frank. "She was black a short time ago, so far as her face and hands were concerned, for they were stained that color. Bondalwe, a great chief among the natives, wished to make her his wife; but she did not desire Bondalwe for a husband. She was the adopted daughter of old Musweno, lately king of the island. The old fellow, though a cannibal, seems to have had some redeeming qualities, for he protected her from Bondalwe. I am inclined to fancy that old Musweno contemplated taking Malwe for his own wife as soon as he could find time or an excuse to kill and eat one or two of the wives he had. Be that as it may, he enabled her to escape Bondalwe as long as he lived."

"But how did she come on the island?" asked Captain Bellwood.

"She was cast on the island through a shipwreck, and, of seven who reached that cannibal island, she was the only one spared. The others were killed and eaten by the natives. Old Musweno saved this girl."

"But why was her face black a little while ago?"

"That was some of Bondalwe's work. When we were captured, he had her removed to another village than the one to which we were taken, told her I was a most blood-thirsty cannibal, and caused her to hide in the forest. Then I made him bring her in, and he had her blacken her face and hands, so I would think her one of the natives. He must have ordered all the natives to keep still about Malwe being white, for not one of them men-

tioned it. When she saw me and became aware that I was not such a terrible being as Bondalwe declared, she rushed out and fainted at my feet. As she fell, her sleeve was thrust up, and I saw that her flesh was white."

"Wal, gol dern my skin!" gurgled Ephraim. "Then yeou've known all ther time that she wasn't a black gal?"

"All the time since that."

Then Frank turned to Austin Ross, saying:

"Mr. Ross, permit me to introduce to you Miss Ethel Driscoll, the lost heiress for whom you are searching."

It was true that "Princess Malwe" was the lost heiress. She owed her rescue from the cannibal island to the nerve and bravery of Frank, and she expressed her gratitude as far as possible in words.

She and Elsie Bellwood became fast friends.

Captain Bellwood was bound on a trading expedition to the west coast of Africa, so it was necessary for Ross and Miss Driscoll to go along till a vessel bound for America should be seen.

Sardago and Dalfors were left to their fate on Phantom Island, and Frank wondered if they became powerful chiefs among the cannibals or were slain and eaten.

"I hope they was eaten," said Ephraim, as they sailed away.

A week later found the *Saucy Susan* lying at anchor in the Fernand Vas River, on the west coast of Africa.

The *Saucy Susan* was a trader, loaded with cloth, beads, powder, bullets, old muskets, brass and iron kettles, and such other articles as the natives of the country were most likely to prize.

In exchange, Captain Bellwood hoped to secure a cargo of ivory, mahogany and a few skins of wild beasts.

Ross and Miss Driscoll had been placed on board a vessel bound for New York. Ethel Driscoll had admired

Frank Merriwell greatly, and she had told him over and over that, if it were true that she had been left a fortune by her uncle, she should give him some token of remembrance in reward for his bravery in saving her from Bondalwe.

Frank, with his usual gallantry, had assured Ethel that he had been a thousand times rewarded by his satisfaction in being of service to her.

But that did not satisfy the girl, who was pretty and refined, for all that she had been some time among the natives of the island, the old king having adopted her as his daughter.

She was greatly fascinated by Frank, and she was plainly determined to see him again when he should return to the United States. That was why she insisted on giving him something as a remembrance token.

Elsie Bellwood was relieved when Ethel was placed on board the vessel bound for New York.

Although the two girls had become warm friends in a very short time, as girls usually do, Elsie had secretly been very jealous of Ethel.

In the past, as my old readers know, Elsie had been in love with Frank, but had tried to forget him, knowing he was loved by another girl, Inza Burrage, who had befriended Elsie when Captain Bellwood lost a vessel on Tiger Tooth Ledge, off Fardale village.

Feeling that it would be a mean thing to attempt to "cut out" Inza, Elsie had struggled to tear Frank Merriwell's image from her heart—had even repulsed him when he betrayed more than friendly interest in her.

But now Elsie began to believe it was useless for her to fight against her own heart. She had said, over and over, that she hoped she might never again meet Frank, but fate flung them together in the most remarkable

manner, so that the girl began to feel that it was useless to struggle against destiny.

It was with her lips alone that she had said she hoped she might never again meet Frank. All the while, in her heart, she was longing to meet him.

As for Frank, he was not certain of himself no further than that, in a certain way, he felt bound to Inza, having known her first. It was true that it had been a case of boy and girl love between them, and they had not spoken seriously of their affection, but there had seemed to be a tacit understanding that made them more than lovers for the moment.

In his dreams Frank sometimes saw dark-eyed Inza hovering near him, and sometimes it was Elsie, with her golden hair and "eyes of tender blue."

Inza seemed to wield a strange and potent power over him when she was near, while Elsie appealed to the tenderer side of his nature. Inza he admired for her beauty, her ready wit, and her self-reliance; but Elsie was a girl to shield and protect, to shelter from every ill wind and harm.

Frank saw there was something the matter with Elsie, even after Ethel Driscoll had left the schooner. She seemed to avoid him, and he fancied there was a shadow on her pretty face.

He was determined to know what this meant, and he watched till he found a good opportunity to corner her so she could not escape. Then he questioned her.

At first Elsie declared there was nothing the matter; but, by skillful questioning, Frank finally obtained an inkling of the truth. He laughed at her.

"Surely you are not jealous of Miss Driscoll!" he exclaimed, reproachfully.

Elsie hung her head, her cheeks crimson.

"Foolish girl!" cried Frank. "Why, Ethel Driscoll is

nothing to me. She was very unfortunate, and it was out of politeness that I treated her with the greatest consideration."

"She is an heiress," said Elsie.

"What of that? I have a few dollars of my own."

"And she is very pretty."

"There are others."

"She is in love with you."

"How do you know?"

"She told me so."

Frank whistled.

"This is interesting."

"You act as if you did not suspect it before."

"Well, I did not. She seemed very grateful to me for saving her from the cannibals; but I did not fancy she had fallen in love with me. Are you sure, Elsie?"

"Of course I am."

"Well, don't let it worry you."

"You do not care for her?"

"I think she is a charming girl, but I am not in love with her, Elsie. How could I be with you near?"

He had secured her hand. She tried to draw it away, but he held it fast and captured the other one. He bent nearer and nearer, his eyes on her face.

"Elsie," he half whispered, "the last time we met was in the Great Dismal Swamp of Florida. Then I told you how often I had thought of you—how often I had dreamed of you."

"Have you forgotten——"

She checked herself, unable to utter Inza's name. She was trembling a little, and the warm color was coming and going in her cheeks. Never had she looked prettier than at that moment.

Frank felt his heart fluttering in his bosom, and one

arm slipped about her waist. He drew her close to him, and held her there, as he hastily went on.

"I have forgotten nothing, Elsie. Fate has not been kind to us in everything, but has persisted in flinging us together. It has convinced me that there is something that draws us one to the other. Fate was not kind to us when it brought us together so late the first time. And still we were but boy and girl—we are still. Perhaps we regard these matters too seriously——"

"No, no, Frank—I am sure not."

"Elsie, little sweetheart!"

Her head was bowed still lower, and her breath caused her lips to flutter. She did not speak.

"Elsie, I tell you the truth when I say that I think of you oftener than of any other. You come to me oftener in my dreams. I see you near me, with your sky-blue eyes, your sunshiny hair, your lips like cupid's bow, and your smile like a summer's morning. I have dreamed that you came to me and whispered over and over, 'I love you, Frank; I shall always love you, and I shall love no other.'"

She was silent, enchanted; but her heart was throbbing wild with pleasure that was painful. She had pictured this moment to herself, and now it had come.

Frank, quite unconsciously, was becoming poetical. He did not pause to form his phrases, but they came from his lips despite himself. Had he thought what he was saying, he would have hesitated and regarded the language as stilted and unnatural; but, as he did not pause to consider, his words were the natural expression of the feelings within his heart.

"Sweetheart," he continued, "we are together now, so let's forget the past—let's be happy for the present. The future will give us what is our due."

"Oh, Frank! how can I be quite happy when I think of

her—when I think that I may be doing such a mean thing?”

“Elsie, we will write to her—we will tell her everything. We are still very young. We may think now that we shall never, never care for anybody else; but I have read a hundred times that youth is changeable.”

“I care not what you have read, Frank; I know my heart will never change.”

He drew her still closer and kissed her, murmuring:

“Dear little Elsie!”

A gruff cough sounded behind them, causing them to part and turn in no little consternation.

Captain Bellwood was standing near at hand, with his back toward them, surveying the cloudless sky in a nautical fashion.

“For all that it’s so calm now, there may be a storm kicking up,” he said. “The air seems very close around here.”

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE MISSING LINK.

The second day after the *Saucy Susan* dropped anchor in the Fernand Vas, a white man came on board, brought off in one of the native boats.

He was a thin, long-necked, red-nosed man, wearing spectacles, and having an unmistakably scholarly air, despite the fact that he was dressed in coarse, stout clothing and heavy boots.

He introduced himself as Professor Johnson Bonner, a famous naturalist. Frank had heard of Professor Bonner, and so was interested in the man at once.

The professor explained that he had been left there eight days before by an English vessel, and had just completed preparations for an extensive trip into the interior.

"To confess the truth," smiled the lanky professor, "my mission is a most remarkable one."

"Then you are not going inland to trade?" asked Captain Bellwood.

"No, sir. I have quite a different object in view."

"If you were going to trade, the natives here might cause you trouble and delay."

"I have found that out. They are very jealous of their privilege to trade with the white men who come to the coast, and they do not wish the white men to reach the interior tribes, from whom the finest ivory, and, in fact, nearly all things of value to the trader, come."

Captain Bellwood knew this well enough, having made several trading voyages along the African coast.

"Their jealousy made it quite difficult for me to get

away with my loads of goods," Professor Bonner went on. "Now I have it all arranged. They understand why I am carrying so many bundles."

"And why are you, if you are not going to the interior to trade?"

"My dear captain, I shall be forced to purchase my passage inland, and so I must have a plentiful supply of goods or presents."

The old salt nodded.

"Very good, professor," he said. "I asked the question to see if you knew what you were doing. It is evident you do."

The tall man drew himself up stiffly.

"You are not the first person to hint that I am on a crazy search," he said; "but I will show them—I will show the world a wonder that shall make me famous for all time."

Frank was listening attentively, and he was curious to know why Professor Bonner contemplated visiting the interior. It was evident the man was not going on an exploring expedition, and he had stated that he was not going for the purpose of trading. He did not appear like a hunter who was about to make the dangerous venture in search of big game, and his language had revealed that he was going in search of something.

Captain Bellwood was not a little curious himself.

"Professor," he said, "you make me inquisitive—I trust not impertinent. Would you mind telling us why you are going inland amid savage tribes of black men and ten thousand dangers of which you know nothing at all?"

"Ah—ahem!" coughed the professor. "Of course I do not mind. In fact, I came here to tell you, to see if you have not a brave man—a faithful and brave fellow—you can spare me as a companion. I need such a companion."

The captain shook his head.

"I fear I cannot spare a man of my crew," he said.

"Wait," urged Bonner. "I may be able to make such a man famous. His name may be printed in newspapers all over the world as the companion of Professor Bonner, who made the most wonderful discovery ever known."

"My curiosity increases," admitted the captain. "Go on. What is the object of your expedition?"

The professor took a roll of parchment from a little case, and spread it out before the captain.

"See this," he directed. "This is a chart of the course I mean to follow, and the unknown land I hope to reach. See this dotted line. It runs up the Rembo, crosses the Oviguli, Louvendji, Agouyai, and other rivers; it passes through the land of the Commi, Bakalai, Apono, Ashango and other tribes; it continues through the lands of the Dwarfs; and here it comes to a region that has never been explored by white men."

"All that is interesting; but why should you desire to make such a journey, if not for exploration? Only a fool would think of going so far inland to trade, and I do not take you for a fool, professor."

"Some do," said the tall man, dryly. "As I have said, that region right there"—indicating a point on his chart with his finger—"has never been explored by white men. A white man once reached its border, and that not so very long ago. He had a photographic outfit with him, and he brought back some remarkable pictures. I have one here. Look at it, captain."

He removed the photograph from a leather pocket, and placed it on the chart before Captain Bellwood.

"Why, it's a gorilla!" exclaimed the master of the *Saucy Susan*. "And yet—and yet——"

"And yet it is not a gorilla—exactly so. You see, it much more resembles a hairy man, with a very short stump of a tail. Its arms are not so long as those of a

gorilla, who walks on all fours, standing in a half upright position. Its head is far better formed than that of a gorilla. The nose is not so flat, the teeth less prominent, the ear better formed, and the forehead higher. It is a creature of much greater intelligence than the gorilla, and still it is not a man, as the stump of a tail indicates."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Captain Bellwood. "I am growing strangely interested. If this creature is not a gorilla and is not a man, what is it?"

"The Missing Link!"

"What?"

"This is the missing bond that unites man with the beasts!" cried Professor Bonner, excitedly and confidently. "There is no doubt of it, sir."

"Oh, say! I can't take stock in that theory, for I do not believe in evolution."

"You may not believe in evolution now, but you will in a very few years, if you live so long. My dear captain, I am on one of the most momentous expeditions ever attempted by a human being."

"You are going to penetrate this unknown land in search of this creature, which you call the Missing Link?"

"Exactly. And I shall not return till I have captured or killed one of these creatures. I do not wish to kill one, as it would seem like murder; but, if I cannot capture one, the advancement of scientific discovery and the broadening of human knowledge will nerve my hand to slay one. Even though I felt myself a murderer, even though I might be regarded as a murderer, I should consider it my duty to mankind to establish, beyond the shadow of doubt, that there is such a creature as the Missing Link."

Frank was feverishly interested. He longed to ask some questions, but held himself silent in the presence of the captain and the professor.

Captain Bellwood was incredulous, as was plainly evident.

"How long ago was this picture taken, professor?" he asked.

"Not more than two years ago. I do not know the exact date when it was taken, but it was about two years ago."

"By whom was it taken?"

"By Professor William Riding, of the University of Healdsburg, a gentleman, a scholar, a man of honor, and a man of veracity."

"How did he happen to be where he could obtain such a picture?"

"He heard stories of this being—sailors' stories. He even found a sailor who professed to have penetrated to the country where the creatures are, and to have seen one of them. That aroused his curiosity. He found a wealthy man who was willing to back him, and he organized an expedition to penetrate to this land and bring back absolute proof of the existence of the Missing Link. He carried out his project to a certain extent, for he reached the country where the man monkeys are, and obtained this photograph. Then a terrible misfortune befell him. He was wounded by a poisoned arrow, and he never recovered, although he lived many months thereafter. His health failing, he was forced to give over his project and return to his home. From his own lips I learned enough to satisfy me that the Missing Link is no myth. When he died, I promised to complete the work he left unfinished, and here I am. That is a full and complete explanation of how I happened to start out on this expedition."

Frank saw the man was sincere and in earnest. Professor Bonner had not a single doubt concerning the existence of the Missing Link.

"But this creature of which you have a picture may be no more than a wild man—an outcast from the natives near where he was discovered," said Captain Bellwood.

"Look at that!"

"Bonner pointed triumphantly to the stubby tail exhibited in the photograph.

"That proves the creature is not an ordinary wild man who has been cast out from some of the savage tribes," declared the professor. "Now, Captain Bellwood, I have made every arrangement for this expedition; but desire companionship and aid of at least one white man, and I have come to see if you haven't a sailor who will accompany me—a man you can spare."

"I am sorry," said the master of the *Saucy Susan*; "but I do not feel that I can spare a single man, professor. The crew——"

"If there is none of the crew who can go, there is a passenger who will accompany you, Professor Bonner," said Frank Merriwell, quietly.

The professor looked sharply at the boy, peering over his spectacles.

"Eh?" he grunted. "A passenger, did you say?"

"I did, sir."

"What passenger?"

"I will go myself, if you will take me."

## CHAPTER XXX.

### PREPARING FOR THE START.

Professor Bonner pursed up his lips, looked very much surprised, and shook his head in a decidedly decisive manner.

“You?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why, you are a mere stripling.”

Frank flushed a bit, but remained cool.

“I know I am young in years, but I have traveled some, and I have had many experiences, passing through not a few dangers. I do not wish to boast, but I will say that you might take many men who would not prove as valuable as myself.”

“Besides that,” smiled Captain Bellwood, “if you take Mr. Merriwell, you will be constantly in royal society. Mr. Merriwell was lately the king of the Wedolbas.”

“The Wedolbas?” repeated Professor Bonner, questioningly. “Who are the Wedolbas?”

The master of the *Saucy Susan* explained how the boy had been wrecked on an island inhabited by cannibals and had saved himself and his companions from being slain and devoured, making the cannibals believe he had supernatural power, and thus becoming king in place of the former monarch, who was killed by a stroke of lightning.

Professor Bonner gazed at the boy with increasing interest, which led him to ask still further questions. In a short time he had learned enough about Frank to convince him that the youth was no ordinary “stripling.”

"But how is it you are traveling around the world in such a manner?" questioned the professor. "I should not think your parents would permit it."

"My mother is dead," explained Frank, "and my father has not bothered himself about me for a number of years. My uncle, who was very eccentric, left me his fortune, and provided, in his will, that I should travel in company with my guardian, in order to obtain a wider knowledge of the world."

"Hum!" grunted the professor. "But where is your guardian?"

"On his way to Europe by this time, I expect, if my last letter, which was mailed at Buenos Ayres, reached him."

"And here you are in Africa. When and where do you expect to meet him?"

"I do not know. I shall write him, at the first opportunity, and the letter will be forwarded by my London bankers."

Bonner pursed up his lips and whistled, canting his head to one side, and regarding the boy in a manner that made Frank think of the herons he had seen in Florida when they were watching something in the water near their feet.

"A remarkable boy!" mumbled the professor—"a most remarkable boy! He has the air and bearing of a man of the world. I should much enjoy having him for a companion."

Frank's heart gave a thump of satisfaction.

"Then take me along with you," he urged. "I'll guarantee that I will not prove an incumbrance."

"My dear boy, you know nothing of the dangers we must encounter, the perils of the forest and jungle, the wild beasts, the savage men, the venomous reptiles, the

danger of fevers and strange diseases. No, my boy, I do not think I dare take you.'

Frank's heart sank in his bosom.

"I think you are making a mistake, professor," he said, with an air of disappointment. "I know my age counts against me in your eyes; but still I think you would take me along if you knew my guardian would not make trouble about it."

"I might," was the confession.

"Well, I can assure you that Professor Scotch——"

"Professor who?" cried Bonner. "Not Horace Scotch, of Fardale?"

"Exactly. Professor Horace Scotch is my guardian."

"Why, we were boys together—schoolmates!" cried the scientist. "I have not seen Hoddy for years; but I have not forgotten him. And he is your guardian. Well, well, well!"

Frank fancied he saw an opportunity to gain the object he so much desired, and he worked for it with a will. He explained that Professor Scotch was more of a companion than a guardian, that the professor seldom or never objected to anything Frank wished to do; that he had been traveling alone since his sudden expedition into South America, and that Scotch would be delighted to know that his *protégé* was in such excellent company as his old comrade and schoolmate, Johnson Bonner.

The boy played his part skillfully, and Professor Bonner finally succumbed, after appealing to Captain Bellwood, who was forced to acknowledge that he believed the lad would be a most valuable and trustworthy companion.

"All right," said the scientist, "I start to-morrow morning as early as possible, and you must be on hand. I am stopping at the upper village, which you have not yet visited, and it would be well for you to come up this

afternoon and talk matters over with me. Will you come?"

Frank agreed to come, and the professor finally took his leave, his last words being an expression of doubt as to the wisdom of taking a boy along.

When Frank told Ephraim Gallup that he was going with Professor Bonner, the boy from Vermont quietly observed:

"Gol derned ef I ain't goin', too. Yeou can't lose me, Frank."

Frank spoke of the dangers and hardships; but Ephraim was not disturbed in the least.

"What yeou s'pose I keer fer them things!" he cried. "I may kick up some, an' say I wish I was to hum; but yeou'd oughter know I kin fight when I hev to, an' I kin stand some knockin' araound. I tell yeou I am goin' along."

"Perhaps Professor Bonner will not have you."

"He'll have to have me, by gum! I'll jest go along, anyway."

So Ephraim accompanied Frank when the latter visited the professor at the upper village that afternoon.

Professor Bonner objected vigorously to taking two boys; but Frank told some "large yarns" about Ephraim's ability and bravery, and the man finally gave in.

The professor had a large stock of goods, all of which were made into bundles for carrying, but were to be transported in boats as far as possible.

He explained that he should take twenty boatmen and porters from the Commi people, among whom he was stopping. The Commi could be depended upon, being brave and hardy, and comparatively honest. Some of the tribes inland were noted for their treachery and dishonesty.

The professor had taken care to provide himself with

the most modern weapons, revolvers and magazine rifles. He was also able to supply Frank and Ephraim with such weapons.

"It is very likely we may have to do some fighting," he said. "Some of the inland tribes will not let us pass without trouble, that is pretty sure."

"Can you shoot, professor?" asked Frank.

"Well, I know how to fire a rifle, but I am no great marksman. How about yourself?"

Frank picked up one of the handsome Winchester rifles.

"See the bright-colored bird on the very tip of yonder tree?" he asked.

"Yes, I see the bird. It is scarcely possible you fancy you can touch it at such a distance."

Frank made no reply, but brought the rifle to his shoulder, took swift but accurate aim, and fired.

There was an exploding puff of bright-colored feathers, and the bird, shattered by the bullet, fell from the tree.

"Good gracious!" gasped Professor Bonner, in a dazed way. "It is really marvelous—if it was not an accident."

"Wal, it wa'n't no accident," said Ephraim Gallup. "An' that ain't northin' side of the shootin' I've seen him do."

Some of the natives had seen the shot, and they uttered loud cries of astonishment and admiration. Frank was regarded as a great wizard, and the chief of the village immediately sent to him to see his "fetich," or charm.

In Africa every native has a fetich. Some are to prevent sickness, some to protect from wizards, some to make the owners great hunters, or for hundreds of other things.

The fetiches are made from all sorts of things, such as birds' claws, monkeys' teeth, hair, snake skins, human bones, and so forth.

Frank and Ephraim finally returned to the *Saucy Susan* and made ready for the expedition.

When Frank next met Elsie he found the girl very sad and dejected.

"Cheer up, little sweetheart," smiled the light-hearted lad. "You are looking as if you did not expect ever to see me again."

"I fear I never shall," she said, gloomily. "You are going into a land of fevers and unknown diseases, to say nothing of other perils. Oh! Frank, why do you go? I was so happy, thinking you would remain with us for some time!"

"You know I am determined to see all the world I can, Elsie; and I shall not find another opportunity like this. Besides that, just think what it means if it should be true that the Missing Link has been discovered in the wilds of Africa—if we should capture one of the creatures and bring it out alive. It would make us all famous the world over."

"What is fame, Frank! Life, health, and happiness are far preferable. For my sake, won't you give up this foolish expedition, Frank?"

Frank was placed in an unpleasant and embarrassing position. It took him some time to convince Elsie that she was asking too much of him, but he finally succeeded, and she gave up.

But they were together a long time, and Captain Bellwood did not interrupt their love-making.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### A CRY IN THE NIGHT.

Frank and Ephraim were on hand early in the morning for the start, which Professor Bonner had anticipated would be made at sunrise.

But the professor was not yet familiar with the ways of the black people. Before the start could be made there were speechmaking, farewells, and strange ceremonies. And when these things had been gone through and everything seemed ready for the start, the twenty natives who were to accompany the professor had to rush back and go all through it again.

All this took much time, and the sun was well up before the start was made. At last the boats were off. The throng of blacks on the shore fired a salute from their guns and yelled like maniacs; the blacks in the boats fired a salute in response and yelled like fiends.

"Gol dern my skin ef I ever saw such a passel of yee-haw critters!" exclaimed Ephraim. "They kin make more noise than a menagerie uv wildcats."

"They certainly seem to have good lungs," laughed Frank.

Up the Fernand Vas they paddled, and, at nightfall, they camped near where the Rembo emptied into the larger river.

Frank never forgot that first night camp. Several fires were built, and brush houses were hastily constructed. After supper the Commi men sat about the fires and smoked and jabbered, the firelight flaring on their black skins, their eyes rolling, their white teeth showing, and

their arms being flung about in strange gestures. They were telling hunting yarns, and it seemed that each one was striving to tell a more improbable lie than any of the others.

Frank and Ephraim lay on some blankets and watched the singular scene, while Professor Bonner sat near one of the fires, writing in his journal, making a record of the first day's journey.

"Well, Ephraim," said Frank, "here we are well started on the most remarkable search ever undertaken by human beings."

"That's so, Frank," nodded the Vermonter. "I be gol derned ef it don't seem like I was dreamin' all this."

"It is no dream; but it is a strange reality."

"Nobody'd ever thought that I'd be here. Folks up in aour taown never suspected me nor Hiram, my brother, 'd 'mount to much; but Hi, he went to Chilly, where he's making money hand over fist, an' I'm travelin' araound the world."

"You are traveling around the world, even though you sometimes wish you were back home on the farm."

"Wal," said Ephraim, a bit sheepishly, "anybody'd kainerd wish they was to hum ef they was captured by cannibuls as was jest goin' to eat 'em up. Ef it hedn't bin for yeou, Frank, the cannibuls'd made a meal off me sure as hens lay aigs."

"There are cannibals in Africa."

"Git aout."

"Lots of them. The Fans are said to eat people who die of natural causes."

"Oh, the gol dern critters! It can't be they know anything at all."

"On the contrary, they are said to be one of the finest and most intelligent-appearing races in Africa. They are splendidly built, both men and women, are skilled workers

in iron, make the finest spears, knives, axes and other implements, and are brave and warlike."

"Gosh, ef that don't beat me! Anybody'd think that critters what eat dead folks would be sickly an' scrawny an' good for northin'."

"It is probable that the Fans were not cannibals originally, but were driven to eat human flesh from necessity during some time of famine. In that way the habit came upon them. They do not eat their own people who die of diseases, but exchange them for others."

"Haow is it that yeou alwus know so much abaout every place where yeou go?" asked the boy from Vermont, wonderingly.

Frank smiled.

"That is easy. I make it a practice to obtain all the information possible about the countries I mean to visit, so that when I get back home I shall really know something of the world."

"That's a great idee."

"In this way, I feel that I am carrying out the design of my Uncle Asher, who provided by his will that I should travel in order to broaden my knowledge of the world and humanity."

"Haow'd yeou find aout so much about this part of Afriky? Yeou didn't know for sure that yeou was goin' to visit this coast till we was taken off Phantom Island by Cap'n Bellwood."

"Captain Bellwood is a man who believes in knowing something of the people with whom he intends to do business, and he has a number of authentic books on Africa and its inhabitants."

"An' yeou was readin' uv 'em ev'ry day, I remember that. Wal, Frank, you're baound to be a great man some time. Yeou'll know a heap."

"It is not absolutely necessary to travel in order to

become well informed concerning the world and its inhabitants. Any boy who has the ambition may acquire a vast store of knowledge by reading books of travel, and well-written books of travel are as fascinating as novels."

"By gum! I'm goin' to read more uv that kind uv stuff arter this. I don't expect to travel all over the world, same as yeou will; but what I have traveled makes me want to know moare abaout the world than I do. At the same time, I don't care much abaout havin' anything to do with no more cannibuls."

"Well, you are not likely to, for we pass to the south of the Fan country, so we shall not see the cannibals. But we are going through a country inhabited by people far more dangerous than cannibals."

"Git aout!"

"That is right."

"Who be they?"

"The Bakalai."

"What's the matter with them?"

"They are very treacherous and untrustworthy."

"Is that all?"

"No. At the very moment when they appear the most friendly they may be plotting to murder one. And they use poisoned arrows."

"Wal, dern their skins!"

"The heads of their arrows are so attached to the shaft that, if the arrow penetrates beyond the barber head, an attempt to pull it out will leave the poisoned head in the wound."

"By what yeou say abaout them, I should judge the Bakalai are real nice people! They'd oughter go to war with the cannibuls, an' both sides fight till everybody was killed dead."

The boys lay and talked till they became drowsy, and

they finally wrapped themselves in their blankets and slept.

Some time in the night they were aroused by the frightful screech of a leopard; but the natives hastily stirred up the fires and the creature did not approach the camp.

The next morning they pushed on up the Rembo, which was rather narrow and swift where it emptied into the Fernand Vas, but became broader and easier to navigate as they progressed.

On both sides of the river the foliage was like a dense green wall, dotted here and there with bright flowers. Bright-plumed birds cut the air overhead, monkeys chattered in the trees, crocodiles slipped into the water from muddy banks on which they had been sunning themselves, and once more elephants that had been near the river took to their heels and disappeared amid the trees, which crashed and swayed as they went.

Frank caught up his rifle and fired after the elephants, but the creatures were out of sight before he could get a shot, so he had to fire by chance, and it seemed that he did not wound one of the creatures.

Both boys were kept constantly interested and on the alert by what they saw about them. Everything seemed novel and strange, and the day passed swiftly.

Near night the boats approached Goumbi, a large village. One of the smaller boats was sent forward, so the inhabitants of the town might be notified that three men were coming to visit them.

When Goumbi was approached all the inhabitants of the village were on the shore to welcome the white men. They danced, shouted, sang and fired guns.

"Gol dern the critters!" muttered Ephraim, clutching his rifle. "They act like they was itchin' to chaw us up."

"That is their way of greeting us," explained Professor Bonner. "They expect me to stay with them some time

and trade, and they will be greatly disappointed when they learn that I mean to go on in the morning."

As the boats approached the shore, Frank stood up, pointed his Winchester into the air, and fired six shots in bewilderingly rapid succession.

The natives were astounded and frightened. All their guns were old-fashioned muzzle loaders, and they had never seen a repeating rifle. It seemed marvelous to them that a gun could shoot so many times without reloading, and some of them ran away and concealed themselves, fearing the "white wizards" too much to face them.

The king, although greatly agitated, greeted the professor and the boys, saying he was glad they had come, and making them presents of goats and plantains.

Professor Bonner made a brief speech, in which he assured the king that he had come to do him good, and ended by making the old fellow a present of a bright-red jacket, which the king immediately donned, grinning with delight and dancing about like a jubilant schoolboy.

A house was given the professor and the boys for their occupancy while they remained in the village. The professor took care that his goods were stowed away for the night and carefully guarded.

Later on there was a great powwow, in which the villagers and the three white visitors took part.

The professor presented each of the king's ten wives with a string of bright-colored beads, and explained that he had not come to trade, but was going inland to hunt.

This was something the natives could not understand, and they appeared to doubt the white man's word.

At last the professor was forced to show his photograph of the "Missing Link" to the chief, and explain that he was going in search of that creature, hoping to capture one alive, and take it to the white man's country, where he could make much money by exhibiting it.

The king was finally forced to be satisfied with Bonner's statements, but he professed great grief over the short stay the whites were to make with him.

The inhabitants of Goumbi told frightful tales of the great perils to be encountered farther on, plainly striving to frighten the party from proceeding, but Bonner laughed at all these yarns, and insisted that he should go forward in the morning.

That night Frank slept soundly, but, despite the heaviness of his slumber, he was aroused by a cry that seemed to come from the river. He started up and listened.

All seemed silent, save for the snoring of Ephraim and the professor, who slept on without a break.

Somehow that cry had stirred the blood in Frank's body. He arose and went out where he could listen without hearing the snoring so plainly.

As he reached the open air, another cry, broken and smothered, coming from a far distance, was indistinctly heard.

It seemed like the call of a woman in distress, and it affected the boy strangely, even though he had heard of wild beasts that uttered such weird sounds.

He crept back into the hut, a heavy chill upon him. Although he lay down and closed his eyes, his sleep was no longer peaceful and refreshing. All through the rest of the night he dreamed of Elsie—dreamed she was in some frightful peril.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### RESULT OF THE HUNT.

When morning came the king still objected to the departure of the expedition, but finally agreed to let the party go on if Professor Bonner would pay a certain price in cloth and beads.

The professor was angry. He ordered his men to make ready to start without delay, and, when the king ordered out his fighting men and attempted to prevent this, the professor threatened him with disaster and ruin.

But Frank Merriwell took a far more effective way to induce the old monarch to let them depart. He promptly leveled his rifle at the king's head, threatening to shoot if the warriors were not ordered off at once.

The king had seen Frank fire six shots from the rifle without pausing to reload, and he stood in great awe of the weapon. He showed fear immediately, and did as the boy directed.

"You are wise," said the cool lad. "If I should start this gun to shooting it might not stop till yourself and all your people were dead."

Frank kept the king under surveillance till the expedition was ready to move. As the boats were paddled up the river, the king cried out to the Commi men of the professor's party that the white boy's gun held a bad spirit that would kill them all.

But the coast savages had seen a repeating rifle before, and they simply laughed.

This day was much like the previous day, except that

the party halted by mid-afternoon and prepared an encampment for the night.

By this time the natives declared they were in a region where the gorilla might be found, and Frank was very anxious to kill one of the creatures.

Ever full of restless energy, Frank proposed a hunt, and Ephraim seconded the proposal.

The professor tried to dissuade them; but he had come to regard Frank with respect, and he did not say much.

Frank's coolness and prompt action in dealing with the old king who had tried to make them pay heavy tribute for the privilege of going onward from his village had convinced Bonner that the boy knew his business and could be relied upon.

The professor had praised Frank for this act, and had been not a little surprised when he found the lad regarded it as of small consequence.

Mpomo, a Commi hunter, agreed to accompany the boys, and they selected two other natives.

The forest back from the river was thick and dark, with very large trees, the branches of which were intertwined.

Mpomo declared it was a fine place for gorillas, who shun light, open places at day, and hover in dark, secluded nooks.

The boys had heard many stories of the gorilla's strength and ferocity since leaving the *Saucy Susan*. With the exception of the hunters, the natives stood greatly in awe of the beast.

It was plain, also, that some of the hunters were not nearly so eager to face a gorilla as they professed to be.

Mpomo, however, seemed a rather brave and nervy fellow, and Frank was favorably impressed by his appearance.

The young Commi hunter led the way, Frank and Eph-

rain following, with the other Commi men bringing up the rear.

In this manner they pushed forward for at least a mile without seeing anything worth shooting.

Frank was surprised and disappointed, for he had expected to find the forest abounding with game, there being so much life along the river.

At length they came to a little strip of prairie right in the heart of the great forest. The grass was green and the natural clearing looked very pretty in the midst of the dark woods.

They were crossing this open space when all were startled by a blood-curdling scream and a bellowing roar.

A moment later a wild bull, with a leopard clinging to it, came tearing across the clearing.

The leopard had fastened its teeth in the bull's neck, and was clinging with its cruel claws to the back of the agonized animal.

The bull bounded and reared, tossed and plunged, but all in vain, for the leopard clung with the tenacity of death itself.

The bull would dart forward a short distance, stop abruptly, wheel and whirl, but all to no avail.

There was a wild light of despair in the buffalo's eyes and a wild light of savage triumph in the eyes of the leopard.

It was a thrilling spectacle, and the boys watched it with breathless interest, forgetting their rifles were in their hands.

The bull was so blinded by pain and terror that it saw nothing of the hunters.

Of a sudden it dashed straight at Ephraim, and the leopard seemed to become aware that human beings were present.

In wild excitement, Ephraim flung up his rifle and fired.

It was a chance shot, but a deadly one, for the bull dropped in a second, the bullet having reached its brain.

At the very moment that the bull fell, the leopard seemed to launch itself into the air, leaping straight at the boy from Vermont.

Ephraim could not have escaped by any effort of his own. He stood with his smoking rifle half lowered, utterly incapable of making a move to defend himself.

In watching the struggle between the bull and the leopard, Frank had stepped several feet to one side. His rifle was at his shoulder when Ephraim fired.

Frank saw the buffalo fall, saw the leopard spring, and comprehended the deadly danger of his friend.

Never was Frank Merriwell's hand steadier than at that moment, never was his aim truer and more deadly.

Spang!—the rifle spat forth its deadly pellet.

The leaping leopard seemed to double into a ball in the air, and it dropped in a heap at Ephraim's feet, feebly clawing at the ground, a bullet through its body.

Ephraim jumped back, gasping:

"Wal, by gum!"

A great shout went up from the throats of the natives. They were filled with astonishment and admiration. Mpomo screamed:

"White boy big quick kill! Sure he have wizard spirit in him gun! Him very big hunter! Hoolray! hoolray!"

Both lads were regarded with unutterable admiration by the amazed savages, who danced with glee about the slain animals.

"Gosh!" gurgled Ephraim. "But that was a thunderin' close call! My gun kainder went off by accident, but it killed the kaow. I don't reckon yeour gun went off by accident, Frank. That was great shootin'."

"Well, I didn't have any time to spare," laughed Frank.

"Not a jiffy. Ef yeou'd stopped to think it over, that

air leopard would hev hed a square meal off me, sure's shootin'."

The natives fell to skinning the leopard.

"I shall keep this skin among my trophies," smiled Frank. "Whenever I see it I shall think of you, Ephraim."

The black fellows were very skillful in their work, and it took them but a few minutes to strip the hide from the leopard. Then they set about skinning and cutting up the buffalo.

One of them started out at a run to the camp to notify the Commi men to come and bring in the meat.

"I rather fancy this ends our hunting for this afternoon," said Frank. "We did not find a gorilla, but we found some game."

"That's right, an' it's purty big game, too."

"I am satisfied with the result of the hunt."

"An' I'm satisfied so long's I escaped from bein' chewed up. I don't keer ef we don't see no gorilla, fer——"

Ephraim was interrupted by a sound like distant thunder. It rumbled and rolled through the forest, almost seeming to make the ground quiver.

Then followed the distant report of a gun.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### FOOTPRINTS IN THE FOREST.

The boys looked at each other in astonishment and alarm.

"Great goshfry!" gurgled Ephraim Gallup, his hair seeming to lift his hat, "what in thutteration was that?"

"It sounded like thunder," said Frank; "but I do not think it was."

"No t'under!" cried Mpomo, excitedly.

"Dat gorilla!"

"What? That a gorilla? Is it possible they can make such terrible sounds."

"Poggerble?" said the Commi hunter, in a puzzled way, "Dey make um. Dunno what poggerble mean."

Mpomo sometimes mixed his English in a ludicrous manner, and he was much inclined to catch at every long word he heard the white men use.

"Ef that was a gorilla, it must be the old king pin uv all gorillas," declared the boy from Vermont.

"Him big man gorilla," explained Mpomo. "Him berry much mad when him make dat poggerble sound."

"Mad?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"By de sound him make."

"Somebody fired a gun," fluttered the Yankee lad. "I kinder guess some feller took a shot at him."

"Perhaps the shot killed him, for he has not roared since that——"

Once more the terrible booming roar sounded through the gloomy forest.

"Gun no kill dat gorilla," cried Mpomo, with still greater excitement. "Gorilla bad man to fool wid. Feller wid gun him in scrape."

"Then it is time we took a hand!" exclaimed Frank. "Lead the way, Mpomo. We'll look after Mr. Gorilla."

"Be yeou goin' there?" gasped Ephraim, in agitation. "I don't seem to care so much fer gorillas as I did a while ago."

"Come on, Ephraim," came sternly from Merriwell. "If you have any nerve, now is the time to show it. A human being may be in deadly peril."

"All right," groaned the boy from Vermont. "Go ahead an' I'll foller. I'd kainder like to be hoein' 'tatur naow on the old farm!"

"Mos be much claucious," warned Mpomo. "Gorilla mad, him berry bad. We find him mebbly; mebbly he be two hundred mile away when we git dere."

"By gum!" cried Ephraim. "I hope he has felt like walkin' a few hundred miles fer exercise."

Mpomo took the lead, quickly plunging into the forest which surrounded the glade. Frank and Ephraim followed him closely, leaving the other hunter to look after the buffalo and leopard until they returned or the people from the camp came.

Mpomo moved forward with great swiftness and silence, taxing the energies of the boys to follow him. It was not long before Ephraim began to breathe heavily; but Frank, being a perfect athlete, kept his "wind" splendidly.

For at least a mile the black guide led them forward through the dismal forest, and the boys were beginning to feel certain he had come too far when he suddenly halted, whispering:

"Now go claucious. Him berry near here when him holler."

"How do you know?" asked Frank.

"Know by sound."

"It does not seem possible he could have been so far away and we could hear his roar so plainly."

"By gosh!" gasped Ephraim. "I'd hate to have him holler in my ear! It'd bu'st a feller's head wide open."

"Must be still," warned the native hunter. "Him may be near. Mebbe him run away if him hear little stick break. Look out berry close where feet step."

Then they crept onward through the woods.

All at once, with a low, clucking noise, Mpomo stopped.

The boys half lifted their rifles, ready for action; but the hunter bent over the ground, a murmur of satisfaction coming from his lips.

"Look dat," he said, triumphantly. "What white boys t'ink 'bout Mpomo know how fur off dat gorilla be?"

They stepped forward and looked at the soft, moist ground where he was pointing, and there they saw a huge footprint that set the blood to leaping in their veins, for it was the track of a gorilla beyond a doubt.

There was the broad foot plainly impressed, with the thumb-like big toes standing out from the others. It was an imprint to fill the beholder with awe, for it showed that the beast must be a monster of his kind.

Ephraim Gallup's teeth chattered.

"Gug-gug-gug-great gosh!" he stammered. "He must be the old he-daddy uv all gug-gug-gug-gorillas!"

"Him pretty big," nodded Mpomo. "Bad feller to fool with."

"I ain't feelin' very well," declared the lad from Vermont. "I guess we'd better go right back to the river."

Frank paid no attention to this, but said to Mpomo:

"Follow the trail; we will follow you."

"Be still," warned the hunter. "Reddy to fire. Come."

Crouching, his eyes rolling, his figure reminding Frank of a creeping panther, the black hunter moved onward.

The white boys followed, although Ephraim's teeth still chattered.

They had not proceeded far before they came to a place where the underbrush was thick, and where, in order to clear a road for his progress, the gorilla had torn up the bushes, snapped great limbs as thick as a man's arm, and even pulled up young trees by the roots.

"Gosh! but he must have some muscle!" whispered Ephraim, admiration mingling with his fear. "He'd be a holy terror to rattle with."

They followed the gorilla's trail through the underbrush, and then, in a little clearing, they suddenly came upon a startling and horrible spectacle.

A dead man lay on the ground, his body ripped open from his breastbone downward. Beside him was a gun, the barrel of which was bent and twisted, showing what enormous strength the enraged gorilla possessed.

It was plain that the man had come suddenly and unexpectedly upon the gorilla, had fired hastily, had failed to mortally wound the beast, and the creature had closed in instantly, killing the man with one blow, after which he seized and twisted the gun.

A shout of the utmost wonder and dismay escaped Frank Merriwell's lips as he saw the dead man on the ground.

"Look!" he cried, pointing a shaking finger at the body. "It is a white man!"

"Great gosh!" fluttered Ephraim, his eyes popping from his head. "It is a white man, sure as punkins make good pies!"

"Him got kickcited," said Mpomo. "Nebber touch gorilla when him shoot. Got to kill gorilla first pop."

"But a white man—here—alone!" came from Frank. "I can't understand that. There's something strange about it."

"Yeou bet!" nodded the other boy. "He must have bin lost."

Frank advanced a few steps, scanning the face of the dead man, which was convulsed with agony and terror.

"A sailor, I should say," muttered Frank. "And there seems something familiar about him, as if I had seen him before."

The next moment he fell back, hoarsely crying:

"Merciful goodness! I have seen bim before! I know the man!"

"What's that? what's that?" spluttered Ephraim. "Know him!"

"Yes! Look—look at that face! You have seen him before—you know him. There can be no mistake."

"By gum! I believe I do!"

"Of course you do. The man's name is Ostergoth, and he is a Swede. He was a sailor on the——"

"On the *Saucy Susan*!"

"Sure as fate!"

The boys looked into each other's eyes in growing amazement, utterly unable to understand this wonder.

"Haow in thunder kin that be?" asked Ephraim. "We left Ostergoth on the *Saucy Susan* when we came away from her."

"That's what we did," nodded Frank; "but the man is here at our feet, dead as a door nail."

"There must be some kind uv a mistake. This feller must look like the Swede, but it can't be him."

"There is no mistake," declared Frank, bending over the man and lifting his arm, from which he thrust the sleeve back. "Ostergoth had a vessel tattooed on his left arm right here, and here it is! This is the man!"

"But haow did he come here, when we left him on the schooner?"

"Ask me something easy."

"He must have deserted."

"That's plain; but I do not understand how he got so far inland in such a short time. It is a marvel."

The wonder of the boys increased as they thought the matter over. The Swede had been left behind them on the schooner, and now here he was, far from the coast, dead in the gloomy wilds of the African forest.

"If he deserted the vessel, he did not desert alone," declared Frank. "No man would leave a vessel on this coast and hurry inland amid the savages."

"Perhaps he was sent arter us," suggested Ephraim.

Frank shook his head.

"That is not at all likely. If he had been sent after us, he would have found us. Instead of that, he must have made special effort to avoid us and get ahead of us."

"Mebbe he was makin' a rush to find the Missin' Link afore we did."

Frank thought of the strange cry he had heard in the night—the cry that had brought him from the hut in the village of Goumbi to listen in the street.

Of a sudden, Mpomo gave a cry, pointing excitedly to the ground.

"Look dat!" he exclaimed.

They looked, and what they beheld was more astonishing than anything they had yet seen.

It was another footprint. It was small and shapely, being the footprint of a female.

And that female wore a shoe!

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### ELSIE BELLWOOD'S PERIL.

"Gosh all thutteration!"

Ephraim could not express his amazement. His eyes bulged, and his jaw dropped, while he actually staggered.

Frank was no less astonished. At first he refused to believe the evidence of his eyes; but he looked again and he saw yet another footprint in the soft ground.

Mpomo was on his knees eagerly searching the ground. Those footprints were like print to him; he read them as his companions would have read an open book.

"A female!" cried Frank Merriwell. "And it was not one of the native women! They do not wear shoes."

"Not by a gol dern sight!" spluttered the boy from Vermont.

"White gal make tracks," declared Mpomo, excitedly. "White gal be here with white man. She run away fast."

"Ran away?"

"When white man shoot at gorilla. Den she run."

"How can you tell?"

"Look at wide step—look at where toes stick in deep. No heel mark at all. Dat show gal be scat an' run away."

"That's right," came hoarsely from Frank's lips. "She ran deeper into the forest when the man shot at the gorilla."

"But who kin she be?"

Frank looked at Ephraim, but made no immediate reply. His eyes, however, told a great dread—an appalling fear—that was filling his heart.

"Look!" cried Mpomo, still pointing to the ground. "Gal run away, but gorilla him foller, after him kill white mans. See him track go off dat way."

Frank saw the tracks plainly enough, and the fear in his heart deepened to horror. It was plain that the monster of the forest had pursued the fleeing female.

"But what'd he foller her for?" asked Ephraim, in a dazed way.

"Gorilla sometime carry off womens," declared Mpomo. "They steal black womans. White womans mebbly carried off."

"Come on!" cried Frank, hoarsely; "we must follow these tracks! Lead the way, Mpomo! We must know what fate befell her."

Mpomo hesitated, and then said:

"Boys be redly all time to shoot. No tell when gorilla come at us. White boys great to shoot. Make sure to kill gorilla quick."

"We'll kill him quick enough, if we see him," assured Frank. "Lead on, Mpomo, and do not waste time in useless talk."

They started. Ephraim slipped to Frank's side, whispering the question:

"Do yeou think it kin be her?"

"Who else?" Frank flung over his shoulder. "Ostergoth was a sailor on the *Saucy Susan*, and she——"

"By gum, it must be!" grated Ephraim. "We'll never stop till we find her, Frank! We'll kill that gorilla deader'n hay!"

Frank Merriwell's lips were moving; he was muttering a prayer for the safety of the girl he had last seen far away on the *Saucy Susan*.

Mpomo was fleet of foot, and his eyes were keen. Still he seemed to dread coming suddenly on the gorilla, for

he would pause at times and listen, his whole aspect betokening fear.

Frank was impatient at every delay; he was burning with a desire to overtake the monster of the forest. He saw that Mpomo had been affected by the sight of the dead man—had lost his nerve.

Frank ground his strong white teeth together, and now and then urged the hunter to hurry along. He could barely keep his hands off the fellow when Mpomo halted for the twentieth time.

"Why do you stop again?" he grated, hotly. "Keep on—keep on!"

"Gorilla him be near," declared the hunter, his eyes rolling with fear. "Mpomo know something 'bout dat gorilla."

"Well, what do you know?"

"Him berry bad spirit."

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"Him no like odder gorilla. Can't kill him. White man nebber touch him wid bullet, and gorilla be close to white man. Dat gorilla berry bad spirit. Can't kill him."

"That is nonsense. Don't be foolish, Mpomo. We must find that gorilla, and save the white woman who is in peril. Lead on."

Mpomo protested, growing still more frightened. Frank became angry after a time, and he suddenly drew a revolver and thrust it against the hunter's head, sternly saying:

"You must follow that gorilla, or we'll leave you here on the ground, a dead Commi man. Start!"

"An' be lively abaout startin'," growled Ephraim.

Through fear of the revolver Mpomo went forward, but it was plain that he could not be depended on in case they came suddenly upon the gorilla.

They had not proceeded far before a moaning cry of fear sounded through the forest—the cry of a girl in dire distress.

That sent the blood like molten lava through Frank Merriwell's veins.

Following the moaning cry came shriek after shriek, terrible, intense, despairing.

And then sounded that rumbling roar, a sound that was horrible beyond description. It was like rolling thunder, and yet it had the mingled note of a human being and a beast in fury. It seemed to fill all the forest and to make the leaves on the trees quiver.

Mpomo fell flat on his face, utterly overcome with terror. Frank and Ephraim were rooted to the ground for a moment, but, as soon as the sounds ceased, Frank whirled and clutched his companion, giving the boy from Vermont a savage shake.

"It's the gorilla!" he panted. "He has pursued her—he has found her! We must save her—or die!"

Ephraim's teeth had been rattling together, but he braced up wonderfully, returning:

"Go ahead, Frank, I'll foller ye, ef it's a hundred roarin' devils we're goin' to meet! I'm purty scart, but I ain't even goin' ter think abaout bein' at hum on the farm. Go ahead!"

Forward they went at a run, paying no heed to Mpomo, who still lay face downward on the ground, as if he had been death stricken.

In a few minutes they broke through into an open space amid the trees, and were just in time to see a huge, hairy creature disappear into the shadows at the farther side.

"Did you see him?" panted Frank.

"Yep," answered Ephraim, staring about. "But where's the gal?"

"He had her—had her in his arms! Come on! Be ready to shoot, but take care not to shoot her."

After the gorilla they rushed, heedless, reckless, desperate. The shadows were deep beneath the trees, but they did not mind. The chivalry of their natures was aroused, and they would have dared anything just then.

They looked around, expecting to see the monster near at hand; but the brute had vanished in a most singular manner. They were about to push onward when they were startled by a cry:

"Frank—save me!"

It came from above. Looking upward, Frank beheld a spectacle that seemed to turn his seething blood to ice-water.

A monster gorilla, nearly six feet in height, with immense body, huge chest, long, muscular arms, fiercely glaring large deep-gray eyes, and a fiendish expression of face, like some frightful nightmare vision, was clinging amid the stout branches of a large tree. With one arm this monster of the African forest held to its hairy breast a girl—a white girl—Elsie Bellwood!

Frank's worst fears were confirmed. He had hoped and prayed that it might not be Elsie; but now he knew the girl who was so dear to him was in this frightful peril. How she came there, so far from her father's vessel, he could not conceive, and there was no time for speculation on that point. She must be rescued without delay.

The crest of short hair which stood on the gorilla's forehead began to twitch up and down, while the monster showed his powerful fangs, making Frank think of the dreadful creatures, half human and half beast, which he had seen in pictures of the infernal region.

Although the gorilla did not seem to fear the boys, he held the girl between himself and them, glaring over her

shoulder, thus seeming to protect himself from their bullets.

Ephraim Gallup had been chattering with terror, but now, of a sudden, he found himself wonderfully cool and deliberate. His hand fell on Frank's arm, and he asked:

"Haow be we goin' to save her?"

"If we could shoot the beast—if we could kill it—if——"

"That gol derved 'if' is a nasty word. Ef we shoot, we may hit her. Ef we don't hit her, we may not kill the gorilla, an' he may take a noshun ter serve her ther way he did Ostergoth."

Frank knew this was true. The first bullet must be deadly, or the imperiled girl might be rent limb from limb by the wounded monster.

The situation was one to rob the strongest man of his nerve, but Frank Merriwell did not lose his head.

"Get under the tree, Ephraim," he directed. "Prepare to catch her when I fire. Move lively now!"

"But you're not goin' to shoot? Yeou'll hit her!"

"Do as I tell you," came sternly from Frank. "It is the only way to save her. Get under that limb."

Ephraim lost no more time in putting down his rifle and doing as he was directed. He placed himself directly beneath the huge limb on which the gorilla was standing, bracing himself to catch the girl if she dropped.

Then the other lad lifted his rifle and took careful aim at the right eye of the gorilla, which was seen over the girl's shoulder.

Never was Frank's hand steadier than at that moment. The rifle seemed held in a vise.

The gorilla seemed to wonder what was about to take place.

"Be still, Elsie," warned Frank, in a calm voice. "I will shoot the brute through the head."

Then he fired.

A scream broke from the lips of the unfortunate girl, and the rifle fell from Frank's hands, while he groaned: "Merciful heaven! I have hit her!"

But even as his lips uttered the words two forms came tumbling from the tree, one of them with a flutter of garments, the other, hairy and horrible, turning over and over in the air.

Ephraim Gallup, true to his trust, caught the girl. Then he leaped aside to avoid the gorilla, who had struck close to him upon the ground, and was tearing up the earth in his frightful death struggles.

Frank sprang forward and literally tore the girl from the arms of his friend. He gazed wildly into her face, palpitating:

"Elsie, little sweetheart, have I harmed you! If I have, I'll never forgive myself! Speak to me, Elsie!"

Her eyes were closed and her face was deathly white. A chill struck through Frank's heart like the keen blade of a knife.

"Speak, Elsie," he hoarsely whispered. "Open your eyes!"

Then he lowered her gently to the ground, an expression of unutterable anguish on his handsome face.

"I have killed her!" he groaned.

"Git aout!" snorted Ephraim Gallup. "Hev yeou gone crazy, Frank! Never saw yeou make a fool uv yourself before."

"But look, Ephraim—see how ghastly she is!"

"Wal, I don't see no blood on her. Yeou never touched her at all. But yeou did shute the gorilla clean through ther coco. Thar gal's fainted."

"Fainted?"

"That's all."

Frank was on his knees at her side, chafing her hands

and gazing earnestly into her face. For all that she was so pale, for all that her clothes were torn and her hair tangled, she had never looked prettier than at that moment. She was like a rumped doll.

The gorilla lay quite still where he had fallen, his struggles having ceased. Ephraim went over and gave the creature a savage kick, crying:

"There, gol dern ye! try to kerry off another gal, will ye! I'll bet a good Durham kaow yeou don't!"

Having relieved his feelings in this manner, he again turned his attention to Frank and Elsie.

"She'll come raound all right bum-by, Frank," he said. "Don't yeou worry abaout that. Ef we hed some water, ur a little uv the professor's whiskey, we could bring her raound right off; but I kinder guess it'll be all right ef she takes her time."

Frank had satisfied himself that Elsie was not injured at all by the bullet, but still he was filled with unutterable anxiety. He hovered over her, rubbing her hands and calling her name, till her eyelids began to flutter, a deep sigh passed her lips, and she finally murmured:

"Frank!"

"Elsie!"

Once more he had her in his arms, looking wildly into her face. She opened her eyes, saw his face so near, and smiled faintly.

"Frank, you saved me!"

"Yes, thank Heaven! I was able to save you, little sweetheart! I feared I had killed you when you cried out; but my bullet went true, and the gorilla is dead."

She shuddered.

"Oh, the dreadful beast!" she half sobbed. "I ran as long as I had strength, and then I hid; but the great, hairy creature found me. Oh, it was horrible, horrible!"

She seemed overcome by the remembrance, shuddering

and sobbing. Frank held her close to his heart, trying to calm her.

"Guess he'll git along all right ef I don't help him," said the boy from Vermont, turning away and winking at nothing in particular.

Ephraim pretended to be very busy in examining the dead gorilla during the next ten minutes, and he would have spent a longer time in this manner if Frank had not spoken to him.

"Wal, I guess she's all right now," said the Yankee boy, as he sauntered over to the young couple.

"I am, thanks to you both," said Elsie, holding out her hand to him. "I owe you a thousand thanks."

"One's enough fer me," said Ephraim. "Give t'other nine hundred an' ninety-nine to Frank. He's the feller what done the shutin', an' he ker-plunked that gol dern ole gorilla right plumb in the eye."

"I aimed at his eye," said Frank. "I could see it blazing over Elsie's shoulder. Somehow, I felt that I could not miss it. It seemed like a magnet that would draw the bullet."

"It was a desperit chance," Ephraim observed. "Ef yeou'd only wounded the critter, it'd bin a bad thing fer Miss Bellwood."

"I knew I must not fail to kill it with the first shot."

"Wal, by gosh! there ain't many boys uv yeour age that kin say they have shot a real live gorilla."

"There's not another boy in the whole world like Frank Merriwell!" declared Elsie, proudly. "He is the most wonderful boy who ever lived—the bravest and the noblest!"

Frank blushed.

"Oh, come, Elsie!" he protested; "don't lay it on so thick! I can't stand it—really I can't. You don't know

all the boys in the world, and so you are not competent to judge."

Although Frank possessed a certain amount of self-esteem, he was not conceited; he did not think himself the smartest fellow in the world, which is rather remarkable considering the fortune that had befallen him and the adventures through which he had passed. Most lads in Frank's shoes would have been spoiled; but, instead of getting the "big head," Frank was learning each day how insignificant one human being really is, and he knew the world would jog along very well if he were to suddenly drop out of existence.

The adventure through which Elsie had passed had severely shaken her nerves, and had robbed her of strength. Both lads were eager to know how she came there in the forest, far from the *Saucy Susan*, but, understanding the state of mind she was in, they refrained from questioning her then.

Supporting her between them, and leaving the dead gorilla to be found and brought in by some of the natives, they started for the camp.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### A NIGHT ATTACK.

When the camp was reached Captain Bellwood and several sailors were found there. The captain was nearly distracted, and the sight of his child, alive and practically uninjured, filled him with unutterable joy. He clasped her in his arms, and actually shed tears of happiness.

When the old salt learned that Elsie had been rescued by Frank and Ephraim, who had saved her from the clutches of a gorilla, when he heard how Frank had shot the monarch of the African forest through the head, although forced to take chances of hitting the girl with the bullet, Justin Bellwood regarded both lads with unspeakable admiration.

The master of the *Saucy Susan* wrung Ephraim's hand warmly, but he deliberately embraced Frank, his voice far from steady, as he said:

"My little girl has said you are the most wonderful boy in the whole world, and I am beginning to believe she is right. Frank Merriwell, I owe you a mighty debt—a debt I can never pay. Anything and everything I may ever possess is yours. All you have to do is to ask."

The eyes of Frank and Elsie met for a single instant, and the girl's lashes drooped, while a warm flood of color rushed to the cheeks that had been so pale a while before.

"Thank you, Captain Bellwood," said Frank, quietly, gravely. "It makes me happy to know you feel thus toward me. Still, I do not want too much credit. Eph-

rain stood by me through it all, and he caught Elsie when she fell, after I shot the gorilla."

"Oh, that wan't northin' at all," spluttered the Vermonter, awkwardly. "Anybody could have done that. But it did take a feller with haydoogins uv nerve ter shute ther gorilla an' not hit the little gal."

"Well, well, well!" cried Professor Bonner, who had heard all that passed. "And to think I hesitated about taking such boys as companions! Remarkable lads. Wonderful youths! I am proud—proud, sir!—to have them with me."

Frank was restless and longed to get away, as all this praise and admiration were far from agreeable to him. However, he had not heard how it happened that Elsie was there, and, by way of turning the tide of conversation, he asked that the matter be explained.

Then Captain Bellwood told how there had been trouble brewing among the sailors for some time, and how it had been necessary to put the irons on Ostergoth and confine him in the hold. The Swede had sworn to have revenge, and had awaited his time.

Another sailor, Bob Buntline, a restless and quarrelsome fellow, had expressed his hatred for Captain Bellwood, and the two had plotted to strike a blow at the master of the *Saucy Susan*.

The very day that Frank and Ephraim started up the river with Professor Bonner the captain had gone ashore, permitting Elsie to accompany him for the first time.

While the captain was trading in the village, the girl had left him for a few moments. When he came to look for her she could not be found.

Of course an alarm was raised immediately. Elsie had disappeared most mysteriously, and it was some time before the captain could learn anything of her.

At last he found that Ostergoth, Buntline, and another fellow by the name of Bill Jones were missing.

A little later it was discovered that certain natives had disappeared from the village.

Then Captain Bellwood became convinced of treachery; but it was not easy to track the kidnapers and their native allies. After a time he found they had proceeded up the river, and he organized an expedition to follow.

Elsie had been lured from her father's side by Bill Jones, whom she did not suspect of treachery. Professing to have something very wonderful to show her, Jones had enticed her away, a blanket had been cast over her head, and she had been dragged into the forest by Jones, Buntline and Ostergoth.

The three ruffians had lost no time in getting away. They had hired some natives to furnish a boat and accompany them, after which they had blackened their faces and bodies, had dressed like natives as far as possible, had placed the bound and gagged girl in the bottom of the boat, and had escaped up the river without attracting much of any attention.

Ostergoth, who was the real leader of the party, had a wild scheme to hurry up the river, pass the professor and the boys, arouse the natives, attack the professor's party, plunder it of the goods, and then go still farther inland with the girl.

The Swede did not believe they could be followed very far inland, and it was his conviction that the interior of Africa was a second Eden, where any one could lay around without work and live on wild fruits and game. He painted a very alluring picture for his comrades in crime.

Ostergoth had a scheme to become king of some inland tribe, and to hold Elsie Bellwood as his wife.

But Buntline and Jones were smitten by the girl's

charms, and a quarrel arose among the villainous trio as to which one should have the unfortunate captive.

Elsie's sufferings were intense. Much of the trip seemed like a moving nightmare. After the gag was removed from her aching jaws, she was kept silent much of the time under threats of death, but sometimes she did break forth and express her agony in cries of distress.

Frank Merriwell had heard her cry out as she was being carried past the village of Goumbi in the night. That cry had aroused him from deep slumber, and had haunted him afterward.

As the party proceeded, the quarrel over the girl became more violent. At last it was decided that they should draw lots to see who should have her.

Jones was the one who drew her, much to the girl's relief, for, although he was a rascal, she did not fear him so much as the others.

But Ostergoth was not satisfied. He sulked, and was sullen; he declared he had been robbed.

And then, when the opportunity came, the Swede kidnaped her and fled into the forest with her.

The man must have been deranged, else he would not have attempted such a wild project. His companions followed him, swearing they would kill him on sight, and he hid in the jungle, again forcing Elsie to be silent under threat of death.

But Ostergoth simply rushed to his doom. Elsie told how they came suddenly upon the gorilla, how the sailor had fired hastily at the beast, missing in his excitement, how she had broken away and fled as the monster charged upon the Swede.

The girl had fled till exhausted, but, with the seeming intelligence of a human being, the gorilla had followed her. The brute had made her a captive, but had not offered her any harm, for the boys came upon him

almost immediately, and he had fled, swinging into a tree with ease, for all of his living burden.

Then Frank Merriwell had shot the monster, and Elsie was saved.

Frank was greatly aroused when he heard the girl's story. He felt like organizing a hunting party and tracking Buntline and Jones down, and he urged such a course.

Elsie, however, rejoiced at her final safe escape from the ruffians, objected to this.

"Let them go," she pleaded. "They will not dare return to the coast, and they are liable to perish in the wilds of the forest."

Captain Bellwood had been greatly aroused against the kidnapers, but he listened to Elsie's words, feeling that he must not long leave the *Saucy Susan* without a master.

It was decided that the captain's party should return to the schooner in the morning.

By this time night had fallen, and the hunters had not yet returned with the dead gorilla, although they had been sent out for the beast immediately upon the return of Frank and Ephraim to the camp.

Professor Bonner had been much exhausted by the day's journey, and he sought sleep at an early hour.

The black men who had paddled the boats were likewise tired, and they soon slept.

A few of the Commi men sat about the fires and told stories of gorilla hunts. They regarded Frank with the greatest admiration.

Captain Bellwood and the first mate of the *Saucy Susan* smoked and talked, while Ephraim listened, reclining on his elbow.

Where the firelight and shadows mingled, beneath the wide-spreading branches of a great tree, Frank and Elsie

were sitting. In a great measure the girl had recovered from the frightful adventures through which she had passed, and, although she was tired, knowing she must part from Frank in the morning, she remained awake, chatting with him.

"You had better go back with me, Frank," urged the girl.

"Oh, no, Elsie. I have started with Professor Bonner on this search for the Missing Link, and I cannot turn back at the outset."

"But think of the perils you will encounter."

"Some way perils add a fascination to this sort of venture."

"But think of Professor Scotch, your guardian. The poor man will go crazy when he learns of this last venture of yours."

"Not when he knows I am with Johnson Bonner, his former schoolmate and friend."

"But I am afraid to return alone to the vessel."

"Afraid?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, see what befell me as soon as you left. If you had been there I do not fancy those wretches would have succeeded in carrying me off."

"Thank you, Elsie. You say that very prettily, and I appreciate it, but it is useless to urge me to return now. I am not in the habit of giving up so easily when I have set out on an undertaking."

She gave a deep sigh.

"Well, I see it is useless to talk to you; you're set as the hills, and I think you are just perfectly mean."

Then both laughed softly.

One by one, the black men were falling asleep; the fires were dying down, and the talk between Captain

Bellwood and the mate had ceased. Frank Merriwell listened, a strange feeling of dread seizing upon his heart of a sudden.

It seemed that the mighty forest was holding its breath, even the droning of nocturnal insects being hushed.

The fire flared from no apparent cause, and flung fantastic shadows amid the underbrush.

What were those moving forms? Had the hunters returned with the dead gorilla? Were they silently bringing the king of beasts into the camp?

Frank leaned forward, peering sharply at the shadows. His hand sought the butt of a revolver.

"What is it?" panted Elsie in his ear, frightened by his manner.

He did not answer, but he snatched out his revolver.

"Halt, there!" he cried.

A fierce yell rang through the forest, a yell that seemed answered by a hundred echoes. Like panthers, the black shadows shot forward into the firelight. They were human beings, armed with old muskets, spears, war axes and other implements. Their faces and their bodies were painted in many colors, and they were frightful to behold.

Some of these frightful beings who had guns began firing at the recumbent figures of the Commi men. Some of them pinned the Commi men to the ground with their long spears. Some of them brained the unresisting Commi men with war axes.

In a moment frightful slaughter had begun.

"The Bakalai! the Bakalai!" shrieked the frightened black men from the coast.

Hearing this, Frank knew the fiercest warriors of Equatorial Africa had made this night attack.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### UNFORTUNATE ELSIE.

“Up, Ephraim!—up, everybody!” shouted Frank. “Fight—fight for your lives!”

He began firing into the ranks of the assailants, taking care to make every bullet count if possible.

As Ephraim Gallup scrambled blindly to his feet a hideously painted warrior attempted to run him through with a spear.

Frank shot the warrior dead in his tracks.

Ephraim rose with his rifle in his grasp.

“Gol dern my punkins!” he shouted. “I jest wish I hed a Maxim gun! Git aout, you painted niggers!”

Then he began firing. He closed both eyes and blazed away into the thick of the attacking warriors.

Captain Bellwood and the mate got upon their feet and joined in the battle.

The Commi men seemed demoralized and unable to offer any resistance, but this was not true of the white men of the party. The sailors were slightly bewildered at first, but they realized that they must fight for their lives, and they lost little time in getting about it.

Captain Bellwood had thoroughly armed his party before venturing into the wilderness, which was very fortunate.

The Bakalai warriors continued to howl like a hundred fiends from the infernal region, and their shrieks were sufficient to unnerve an ordinary man.

But the black warriors knew little of magazine rifles and revolvers, and they were astonished beyond measure

when the white men continued to shoot without stopping to reload. That was a marvel they could not understand.

"They are wizards! they are wizards!" shouted the Bakalai in their own language.

As they saw their warriors dropping before the continued firing of the white men, consternation seized upon them. The chief sounded the retreat, and they disappeared into the darkness of the forest, vanishing like shadows, as they had come like shadows.

There were many dead and wounded on the ground, but, for all of the unexpected assault of the Bakalai, it was seen that they had suffered most. The work of the repeating rifles and revolvers had been deadly, and many of the painted blacks lay dead upon the ground.

The whites had not entirely escaped. One poor fellow had been run through with a spear, and had died quickly. Two others were wounded, and they feared the weapons which had inflicted the wounds were poisoned.

Frank Merriwell, Ephraim Gallup, Captain Bellwood, and Professor Bonner had escaped without a scratch.

As soon as it was certain the Bakalai had given over the assault and retreated, Frank turned to look for Elsie.

She was gone!

He had believed she was close behind him, and he had fought like a Trojan to defend her, now he was startled and astonished to find she was not beneath the tree.

There was great confusion in the camp. The Commi men were dispatching the Bakalai warriors who had been too severely wounded to get away, and shrieks and cries of rage mingled. Black forms rushed hither and thither. In the midst of this Frank looked for Elsie.

"Where is she?" he asked himself. "Where has she fled?"

He felt that she must be near at hand, and yet his heart

was filled with alarm. He searched hastily through the camp, but found nothing of her.

The thought that she had been carried away by the Bakalai warriors was too horrible to entertain for a moment, but still it kept forcing itself upon him.

Beneath the overspreading trees he called to her, peering into the shadows:

"Elsie! Elsie! Elsie!"

No answer.

Strong hands clutched Frank, a hoarse voice cried in his ear:

"Where is she—where is my child?"

The firelight showed the smoke-grimed, anxious face of Captain Bellwood. His fingers seemed to sink into the boy's arm.

Frank lifted one hand, partially averting his head. The gesture spoke plainer than words, and a groan escaped the captain.

"My Heaven! what has happened to her? Have they killed her?"

"She is gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes. I have searched through the camp—I have called her. I cannot find her, and she does not answer."

"But she must be near—she must be near. She is hiding somewhere! She fled to some place of hiding when the attack began."

"We will hope so."

The entire camp was soon searching for the missing girl; but they found no trace of her. She had vanished, and the conviction that she had been carried away by the Bakalai warriors forced itself upon them.

Captain Bellwood's anguish was terrible. He was like a man bereft of reason.

Frank did not say much, but his face was hard and

cold, and there was a terrible glitter in his eyes. He drew Ephraim aside.

"It is my fault," he said. "I should have watched her closer."

"It ain't yeour fault," declared the boy from Vermont. "Yeou s'posed she was clost behind ye all ther time."

"But I should have made sure of it."

"Haow could ye?"

"I should have warned her not to leave me—I should have told her to remain close behind me."

"I don't knaow haow a feller could think uv everything in such a case as that. By gum! ther way them painted skunks jumped aout uv the dark an' began ter spear us like we was suckers was enough ter rattle anybody. We're dern lucky ter be alive."

Frank's head was bowed; his eyes were upon the ground. For some moments he was silent, hearing Captain Bellwood raving like a maniac. Then he shook himself as if awakening from a trance.

"It cannot be that she remained close behind me," he said. "If she had I should have heard her scream when she was clutched by those black fiends."

"That's so," nodded Ephraim.

"If I had heard her—well, they would not have dragged her away while I breathed!"

"I know it, Frank. Yeou'd 'a' fit, fought an' died fer her."

"And still I feel that I am to blame—I should have protected her. I cannot help feeling that way."

"Yeou ain't to blame."

"But I shall ever feel that I am. I cannot look Captain Bellwood in the face. His eyes accuse me. I turn from them. For the first time in my life I feel like a guilty thing."

"Wal, what be yeou goin' ter do?"

"Do!" cried Frank, fiercely. "I'll not rest till I have found and rescued Elsie—or avenger her!"

"By gosh! that's ther talk! I'm with ye, too!"

Captain Bellwood was no less determined to save his child if possible, but he was too distracted to listen to reason. He believed it possible to follow the Bakalai at once, and it was with no little difficulty that he was restrained from rushing away into the forest in wild pursuit of them.

The Commi men, being peaceable and unwarlike, had been overcome with terror and consternation by the attack of the Bakalai, whom they feared. Several of the Commi had been killed, and their friends were wailing with grief over the corpses, beating their breasts, and going through fantastic ceremonies.

Professor Bonner was greatly disturbed by what had taken place.

"It is most unfortunate—most unfortunate," he declared to Frank, when he found an opportunity to speak to the youth. "I fear it will ruin our expedition in search of the Missing Link."

"Hang the Missing Link!" exclaimed Ephraim, who was standing near. "It's the pore little gal we're thinkin' of naow."

"That's right, professor," nodded Frank. "It is Elsie Bellwood that we must think of now. We must rescue her, or avenge her. My blood freezes when I think of the fate that may befall her amid those black devils."

"We'll do our best to find her," said the professor; "but I fear it will be a fruitless search."

"Not for me," came hoarsely from Frank's lips. "If necessary, I will devote the rest of my life to the task of tracing her and learning her fate."

"I believe you, and I hope you may succeed; but it is a terrible task you have before you. However, for the

time being, I shall forget my mission in Africa, and render you such assistance as possible."

It was found that the Commi men were so badly frightened that they felt like turning back and hastening to their homes.

Frank, who had read much about the Bakalai, argued against this, telling them that this was a band of raiders who had attacked them, and that the band was far from its own people, being in a land of strangers and enemies.

The Bakalai, when on their raids, move swiftly and make short halts. The party that had attacked the camp would hasten from that vicinity, fearing that tribes of that section would be aroused against them.

The black fellows listened attentively to Frank, boy though he was. They had seen him do wonderful shooting with his guns which he did not seem to reload, and they considered him a wizard. It was not strange then that, being a magician, he should know so much of the habits of the Bakalai, even though his skin was white.

After much "palaver," it was finally decided that the relatives of the dead and wounded Commi men should take them back down the river in a boat, while the others should stand by the expedition and go forward.

Having carried that point, Frank planned to induce them to pursue the Bakalai raiders, and he was finally successful in his efforts.

The pursuit continued a full week, and then it was said that they were on the very border of the Bakalai country, and there the Commi men revolted and refused to go farther.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### THE DEADLY MBOUNDOU.

The tom-toms of Ouanga were beating, and the whole village was in an uproar. Men and women were screaming and rushing about like frantic creatures. All were armed, their eyes were blazing, and they seemed to thirst for human blood.

Ouanga was a large village in the heart of the Bakalai country, and to that place captive Elsie had been taken.

On the journey the two sailors, Buntline and Jones, had been seen and captured. The poor wretches were nearly starved, and they offered but a feeble resistance.

The sailors were treated as slaves, but they dared not rebel against the black men, for they had been disarmed, and were wholly in the power of their captives.

Several days had been occupied in the journey to Ouanga, and poor Elsie was nearly crazed with despair when the place was finally reached. It did not seem possible that her friends could follow her there and save her from her black captors.

And what filled her with the greatest horror was the knowledge that she was being taken to the king of the Bakalai, who had long desired a white wife, having seen a white woman once upon a time.

She was treated with the utmost consideration by the fierce, warlike black men, who, believing she would some day have influence with Adouma, their king, did not wish her to enter complaint against them.

Buntline and Jones were forced to do a great deal of heavy work and bear large burdens during the marches.

At first Elsie had pitied them, but when they looked at her there was something in their eyes that made her shrink from them, and, after a little, she began to trust more to the black men.

But it was not destined that Adouma should possess a white wife, for, within an hour after Elsie had been brought into the village, he fell ill, and his illness grew swiftly, so that he was completely prostrated in a short time.

Several doctors attended the king. They beat on drums and kettles about the bed on which he lay, trying to drive out the "evil spirits" which had taken possession of him. They made racket enough to kill a man who was moderately ill.

Adouma did not get better, despite the efforts of the doctors. On the fourth day after being taken ill he died.

Then a sad wailing filled the village and chilled the blood of poor Elsie. It was the saddest sound she had ever heard.

In the king's last moments his wives had come to him, and, one by one, had flung themselves upon him, encircling his form with their arms, pouring out torrents of endearing phrases, singing songs of love, and entreating him not to leave them, while the whole village stood around wailing with sorrow.

It was a touching spectacle. Elsie had witnessed it from a distance, and her heart had been filled with pity for the poor unenlightened black people.

The African negro has very vague ideas of the hereafter, and when a friend or relatives dies he says: "He is gone, he is dead, he is no more; we shall never see him again."

And yet they believe in witchcraft, sorcery and spirits, and they fear their dead, as a rule. The Fans, alone, who are cannibals, seem devoid of this fear.

On the day after the death of Adouma proceedings were begun to discover the person or persons who had bewitched him. It was not thought possible that he had died of natural causes.

From far up the river a woman witch doctor was brought. When she came into Ouanga no one seemed to know. She suddenly appeared in the village.

In front of the house of the dead king this witch doctor squatted, violently jangling a harsh bell. Two attendants stood near, one of them beating a board with two sticks, the other making strange and mysterious passes with his hands.

The people of the village came together on a run. The attendants motioned them back, and they stood at a respectful distance. All were armed, and the tom-toms beat. For a time great confusion existed, and then a strange and awful silence fell on the black throng.

Elsie looked out from the door of the hut in which she was confined, and she beheld a most horrible spectacle.

The sun was sinking, and the afternoon was drawing toward its close.

The witch doctor had on a high headdress of black feathers. Her eyelids were painted red, and a red stripe from the nose upward divided the forehead into two parts. Another red stripe passed around her head. The face was painted white, and on either side of her mouth were two round red spots. Around her neck was hung a necklace of glass, and a little cord which held a box against her breast. This little box was supposed to be sacred and contain spirits.

About the breast of the witch doctor, and exposed about her person, were several strips of leopard skins, all of which were supposed to be charmed. From each shoulder down to the hands were white stripes. One

hand was painted white; the other was blood red. There was a string of small bells around her body.

This horrible-looking object squatted before a box that contained charms. On this box stood a looking-glass, beside which lay a buffalo horn, containing some black powder. This horn was said to be the refuge of many spirits.

The witch doctor had a little basket of snake bones, which she shook at intervals. She also shook some skins, to which small bells were attached.

Over and over she kept repeating a strange gibberish, while the attendant on her right beat on the board, and the one on her left made the mystic passes.

After a time the witch doctor seemed to fall into a trance.

Then a most horrible hubbub followed, gradually settled into a wild, weird chant to the spirit of the moon, which was now seen pale and wan in the sky, the sun having set.

The song was as follows:

“Ilogo, we ask thee!  
Tell who hath bewitched the king!

“Ilogo, we ask thee,  
Tell who hath destroyed the king!

“The forests are thine, Ilogo!  
The rivers are thine, Ilogo!  
The moon is thine!  
O moon! O moon! O moon!  
Thou art the house of Ilogo!  
Why did the king die?  
Who slew the king?

“Ilogo, we ask thee!  
For the king is dead;  
We would know who hath destroyed him.”

Fascinated and filled with fear, Elsie Bellwood watched this ceremony from the door of the house where she was confined.

Fires were kindled, throwing flaring lights on the town and the river, which seemed to lie, without current, like a sluggish pool.

At last the witch doctor stirred and sat up. Instantly an expectant silence fell on the assembled throng.

"I have seen Ilogo," declared the fakir. "Ilogo spoke to me. He told me there were three strangers in your town—three strangers whose faces are white as the face of the moon.

"It is true," muttered many voices.

"One of them is a woman," said the witch doctor. "She it was who bewitched the king."

A mad howl of fury went up from the mob.

"She shall drink the mboundou!" cried the witch doctor.

"She shall drink the mboundou!" howled the crowd.

"But there are others," cried the witch doctor.

"There are others!" shrieked the throng. "Let us know them! They shall drink the mboundou!"

The "mboundou" is a poison decoction which the witch doctors seem able to drink in large quantities, but which invariably kills all others. By the witch doctors it is said to be a test of innocence. If the one charged with the crime drinks it and lives, it proves him innocent.

"The tall white man aided in bewitching the king," declared the witch doctor. "He hoped to become king in Adouma's stead."

"He shall drink the mboundou!" shouted the mob, waving their weapons in the air.

"The short white man aided in bewitching the king," asserted the witch doctor. "He was tired of being a slave."

"He shall drink the mboundou!"

"These are the three who destroyed the king. Bring them quickly. The mboundou shall be prepared. Bring them to me."

Away rushed the wild mob. Elsie had retreated, horrified and cowering with terror, into the house. They did not wait to enter; they tore down the house about her, and dragged her away to the witch doctor.

A great calm came to the unfortunate girl. She did not weep, and she did not show despair.

"It is better so," she said, in a whisper. "This fate is preferable to becoming the wife and slave of one of these black wretches."

She saw Buntline and Jones dragged to the place of execution. They were nearly naked, and their eyes were filled with unspeakable fear.

The poison draught was prepared, and the executioner appeared. He was a giant, fierce of face, with teeth filed to points, and stained black. He carried a short, heavy sword.

Once more a hush had fallen on the mad throng. They stood staring and waiting, quivering in every limb, their nostrils dilated. The witch doctor chanted fiercely, seeming to rejoice in her bloody work. More than ever did she look like some Satanic thing.

The "mboundou" was passed to Buntline. He shrank back. Then he was ordered to drink it, or die at once, and the executioner raised his weapon.

With a curse, the sailor took the bowl and drank. For some moments it did not affect him visibly, and something like a feeling of disappointment was coming to the spectators when he was seen to stagger.

Instantly a mad howl went up. Buntline was caught and held, and, a second later, his head fell to the ground, severed from his body by the sword of the executioner.

The bloody work was repeated with Jones. The man struggled with all his strength to resist the poison draught, but his efforts were of no avail. At last he swayed, and then that fierce howl went up again. A second later his head dropped.

Then the bowl of poison was offered to Elsie!

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE FIRE WIZARD.

Elsie lifted her eyes, and her lips moved in prayer. The ghostly moonlight rested on her pale, sweet face. Her golden hair, tangled and twisted, fell about her shoulders.

"Drink!" harshly cried the witch doctor.

"Drink!" roared the multitude of black men and women.

She reached out her hands to take the fatal bowl.

At that moment there was a report like the roar of many cannon, causing the ground to reel beneath her feet. On the four sides of the town clouds of fire leaped toward the sky, making the night bright as day for one fearful moment, and then dying out, to leave the darkness dense and terrible, for a pall of smoke arose and obscured the thin white moon.

The fires within the town flared and sank, the roof of a hut fell in with a crash, and the natives were paralyzed with fear.

Then a most frightful creature advanced toward the spot where the executions were taking place. It was like a man, but every part of its body seemed glowing with fire, red flames leaped from the top of its head, in its right hand it held a whirling wheel of colored fire, while in its left hand was a squirming serpent of green and blue. It opened its mouth and poured forth a stream of fire and smoke.

"Ilogo—it is Ilogo!" shrieked the appalled natives, and they fell prostrate on their faces, covering their eyes from the frightful spectacle.

For a long time they remained thus. When they looked up, the terrible vision of fire had vanished, and the white maiden was not to be seen.

The natives looked at each other, wonder and fear written on their faces.

"Ilogo has taken her away," they said. "He has carried her to the moon! Great is Ilogo!"

Elsie had been scarcely less startled than the natives when the explosion took place and the fiery vision appeared. She stood with the fatal cup still clutched in her hands, seeming turned to stone.

The creature of fire advanced straight toward her. When the natives fell on their faces, the flaming being flung aside the whirling wheel of flame and the squirming serpent, dashed the blazing thing from its head, with its hands beat out some burning spots about its person, and then clutched Elsie.

The girl did not cry out; fear froze her tongue. She felt herself lifted with wonderful strength, flung over a strong shoulder, carried away as if she were a sack of grain.

The girl felt that nothing more appalling could happen than had already taken place, and she resigned herself to fate.

After a little she heard the one who was carrying her begin to breathe heavily. They were beyond the limits of the town, and darkness had closed around them, pierced dimly by the misty moonlight.

"I have saved you, little sweetheart—I have saved you! We arrived in time, thank Heaven!"

She was lowered to the ground, strong arms were about her, and a familiar voice sounded in her ears.

"Frank!"

She nearly swooned from joy as the word came from

her lips. She clutched him with all her strength, and she clung to him, panting :

“Don’t let them take me away from you again! Don’t let them kill me, as they killed Buntline and Jones! Oh, it was terrible—terrible!”

“Never fear, dearest! They shall not take you from me again. They may kill us both, but they shall not take you from me while I live!”

She feared it was all a dream—feared she would awaken to find herself still a captive among the terrible savages.

“If it is a dream, I hope I may never awaken!” she murmured.

“It is no dream, Elsie,” he assured her; “I am here, and you are saved.”

“But how can it be true? They carried me miles upon miles into this wild land. How could you find me?”

“We followed—your father, Professor Bonner, Ephraim and myself. The Commi men came to the very borders of Bakalai land and then their hearts failed them. Mpomo and Okandaga we induced to stand by us and follow the trail. They led us here. By our united efforts we have rescued you, although we came near being too late.”

He kissed her again and again, and the joy of that moment seemed to smother her so it was with great difficulty that she could breathe.

After a time she asked :

“Father—where is he?”

“We shall find him soon. He aided in exploding the bombs which so frightened the natives. Professor Bonner is a very shrewd man, and he knew fireworks would terrify the natives, so he brought along a supply for that very purpose, in case it was necessary to give them a fright. All this afternoon, since finding where they had

taken you, we have been at work manufacturing bombs, every one of which was exploded on opposite sides of the town at a given signal. Then I appeared with a fire fountain on my head, a pinwheel in one hand, and a fire-serpent in the other, while some powders burned on various parts of my person. Years ago I learned the magician's trick of blowing fire and smoke from my mouth. I had prepared for that, and it helped to paralyze the natives. The only damage I sustained came from a few burns given me by the blazing powders; but I had to beat out the flames in a hurry when I saw the trick had worked all right, and the black rascals were nearly scared out of their senses."

"It is wonderful—wonderful!" declared Elsie. "I had given up to die—I was ready to drink the poison."

When she had gained her strength somewhat, they moved toward the place of meeting agreed upon by the rescuers. When they arrived there, Captain Bellwood was waiting. He clasped Elsie in his arms, uttering a prayer of thankfulness.

The others came up shortly, and then there was a general handshaking. Mpomo and Okandaga, the two black men who had stood by them and guided them to the village where the captive maiden had been taken, were praised and promised rewards. They were very proud of what they had done.

Elsie told how she had fled in terror when the Bakalai warriors had attacked the camp, and had run straight into the clutches of the savages. One of them had attempted to slay her, but he had been checked by others, and they had carried her away to become the wife of their king.

Although Elsie had been rescued, the little party was far from the coast in a land where perils abounded. They knew the Bakalai might recover and pursue them, and

they knew they might encounter hundreds of dangers; but their hearts were strong when they turned their faces toward the Fernand Vas and the *Saucy Susan*.

\* \* \* \* \*

They passed through many dangers during their retreat to the coast, but Commi land was reached at last, and the band was unbroken.

Mpomo and Okandaga were given many presents, so that they became two of the "richest" men of their tribe, and were much envied by the others.

Captain Bellwood gave thanks when he stood upon the deck of his vessel, with Elsie by his side. He declared it was the happiest moment of his life.

"What do I not owe to you, Frank Merriwell!" he said, regarding the boy affectionately. "Twice you have saved my child from certain death. It is not in my power to sufficiently reward you."

"It may be some time," smiled Frank, with a significant look at Elsie—a look that brought the color to her face.

Professor Bonner had not given up the project of finding the "Missing Link."

"I will penetrate to the land where those creatures are said to be, or I will leave my bones in Africa," he declared.

"Wal," drawled Ephraim Gallup, "I've had about all I want uv this country, by gum! an' I'm reddy to git aout. Frank Merriwell may be a fool an' try it aga'n, but I don't believe he will."

"No," smiled Frank, "I hardly think I will. I have been prevailed upon to sail north with Captain Bellwood. There are other countries I want to see now."

Professor Bonner went back to resume his remarkable search. He disappeared into the great forests of Equatorial Africa, from which he has never come forth. It

may be that he has perished in that dark land, and it may be that he will some day come forth to astound the world with proof of the existence of the "Missing Link."

**THE END.**

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