

Standish Burt L.

**Frank Merriwell's New
Comedian: or, The
Rise of a...**



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«Public Domain»

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Burt L. Standish

Frank Merriwell's New Comedian; Or, The Rise of a Star

CHAPTER I. – “NEVER SAY DIE!”

It is not a pleasant experience to wake up on a beautiful morning to the realization that one has failed. There seems a relentless irony in nature herself that the day that dawns on a night when our glittering hopes have become dead, dull ashes of despair and ruin should be bright and warm with the sun's genial rays.

So Frank Merriwell felt this fine morning in Puelbo, Colorado. The night before, with high hopes, he had produced his new play, “For Old Eli.” He recalled the events of that first production with almost a shudder. “For Old Eli” had been a failure, a flat, appalling, stupefying failure. From the rise of the curtain everything and everybody had gone wrong; lines were forgotten, Ephraim Gallup had had stage fright, his own best situations had been marred.

How much of this was due to the lying handbills which had been scattered broadcast, asserting that he was not the real Frank Merriwell, but an impostor, a deadbeat and a thorough scoundrel, Frank could not tell. He believed that these efforts to ruin him had little effect, for when, at the close of the performance, he had made a speech from the stage, assuring the audience that he would bring his play back and give a satisfactory performance, his reception had been cordial.

But the play had failed. Parker Folansbee, his backer, had acted queerly, and Frank knew that, after the company had reached Denver, the relations between him and his backer would cease. “For Old Eli” had been well-nigh ruinous, and when they got back to Denver, Merry and his friends would be without funds.

Then the thought came to him of the prejudice expressed against a poor black cat he had allowed to travel with the company. He could not restrain a smile as he perceived that the superstitious members of the company would feel that the cat had hoodooed them. As if a cat could affect the fortunes of men!

The thought of the cat gave a pleasant turn to his reflections, and he cheered up immensely. He had failed?

No!

He would not acknowledge failure, defeat, disaster. He would not lie down and abandon the struggle, for he was not built of such weak material.

Where was the fault? Was it in the piece, or in the way it had been played?

He realized that, although the piece was well constructed, it was not of a high, artistic character, such as must appeal by pure literary merit to the best class of theater patrons.

It could not be ranked with the best productions of Pinero, Jones, Howard, Thomas, or even Clyde Fitch. He had not written it with the hope of reaching such a level. His aim had been to make a “popular” piece, such as would appeal to the masses.

He fell to thinking over what had happened, and trying to understand the cause of it all. He did not lay the blame entirely on the actors.

It was not long before he decided that something about his play had led the spectators to expect more than they had received.

What was it they had expected?

While he was thinking of this alone in his room at the hotel, Bart Hodge, his old friend and a member of his company, came in. Hodge looked disgruntled, disappointed, disgusted. He sat down on the bed without speaking.

"Hello, old man," said Frank, cheerfully. "What's the matter with your face? It would sour new milk."

"And you ought to have a face that would sour honey!" growled Bart. "I should if I were in your place."

"What's the use? That wouldn't improve things."

"If I were in your place, I'd take a gun and go forth and kill a few stiff."

"I always supposed a 'stiff' was dead. Didn't know one could be killed over again."

"Oh, you can joke if you want to, but I don't see how you can feel like joking now. Anybody else would swear."

"And that would be foolish."

"Perhaps so; but you know, as well as I do, that your play was murdered and mangled last night."

"That's so, b'gosh!" drawled a doleful voice, and Ephraim Gallup, another of the company, Frank's boy friend from Vermont, came stalking into the room, looking quite as disgusted and dejected as Hodge. "An' I'm one of the murderers!"

Frank looked Ephraim over and burst out laughing.

"Why," he cried, "your face is so long that you'll be hitting your toes against your chin when you walk, if you're not careful."

"Whut I need is somebuddy to hit their toes against my pants jest where I set down, an' do it real hard," said Ephraim. "I wisht I'd stayed to hum on the farm when I went back there and giv up the idee that I was an actor. I kin dig 'taters an' saw wood a darn sight better'n I kin act!"

"You're all right, Ephraim," assured Merry. "You had to fill that part in a hurry, and you were not sure on your lines. That worried you and broke you up. If you had been sure of your lines, so that you would have felt easy, I don't think there would have been any trouble as far as you were concerned."

"I dunno abaout that. I never felt so gosh-darn scat as I did larst night. Why, I jest shook all over, an' one spell I didn't think my laigs'd hold me up till I got off ther stage. It was awful!"

"You had an attack of stage fright. They say all great actors have it once in their lives."

"Waal, I never want to feel that air way ag'in! An' I spoilt that scene in the dressin' room of the clubhaouse. Oh, jeewhillikins! I'm goin' aout of the show business, Frank, an' git a job paoundin' sand. It don't take no brains to do that."

"Cheer up! You are going to play that same part in this play, and you'll play it well, too."

"Whut? Then be yeou goin' to keep right on with the play?" asked the Vermonter, in astonishment.

"No," said Merry, "I am not going to keep right on with it. I am going to put it into shape to win, and then I'm going out with it again. My motto is, 'Never say die.' You heard what I told the audience last night. I promised them that I would play in this town and would make a success. I shall keep that promise."

Hodge shook his head.

"You are smart, Frank, but there's a limit. I'm afraid your luck has turned. You are hoodooed."

Just then a coal-black cat came out from under the bed and walked across the room.

"And I suppose you think this is my hoodoo?" smiled Merry, as the cat came over and rubbed against his leg. "That's where you are away off. This cat is my mascot, and she shall travel with me till the piece wins. She has stuck to me close enough since she walked onto the stage where we were rehearsing in Denver."

"The cat is not the hoodoo," said Bart, shaking his head. "I know what is."

“You do?”

“Sure.”

“Name it.”

“I am!”

“You?”

“Yes.”

Frank stared at Bart in surprise, and then burst out laughing.

“Well, how in the world did you happen to get such a foolish notion into your head?” he cried.

“It’s not foolish,” declared Bart, stubbornly. “It’s straight, I know it, and you can’t make me think differently.”

Frank rose and walked over to Hodge, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Now you are talking silly, old man,” he said. “You never were bad luck to me in the past; why should you be now. You’re blue. You are down in the mouth and your head is filled with ridiculous fancies. Things would have happened just as they have if you had not joined the company.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You always were superstitious, but I believe you are worse than ever now. You have been playing poker too much. That’s what ails you. The game makes every man superstitious. He may not believe in luck at the beginning, but he will after he has stuck to that game a while. He will see all the odd things that happen with cards, and the conviction that there is such a thing as luck must grow upon him. He will become whimsical and full of notions. That’s what’s the matter with you, Hodge. Forget it, forget it!”

“I think you are likely to forget some things altogether too early, Merriwell. For instance, some of your enemies.”

“What’s the use to remember unpleasant things?”

“They remember you. One of them did so to an extent that he helped ruin the first presentation of your play.”

“How?”

“It isn’t possible that you have forgotten the lying notices circulated all over this city, stating that you were not the real Frank Merriwell, accusing you of being a fake and a thief?”

Something like a shadow settled on Merry’s strong face.

“No, I have not forgotten,” he declared, “I remember all that, and I’d like to know just who worked the game.”

“It was a gol-dinged measly trick!” exploded Ephraim.

“You thought it would not hurt you, Frank,” said Hodge. “You fancied it would serve to advertise you, if anything. It may have advertised you, but it did you damage at the same time. When the audience saw everything was going wrong, it grew angry and became convinced that it was being defrauded. Then you had trouble with that big ruffian who climbed over the footlights with the avowed purpose of breaking up the show.”

“Oh, well,” smiled Merry, in a peculiar way, “that fellow went right back over the footlights.”

“Yes, you threw him back. That quieted the audience more than anything else, for it showed that you were no slouch, even if you were a fake.”

“Oh, I suppose I’ll find out some time just who did that little piece of advertising for me.”

“Perhaps so; perhaps not.”

Tap, tap, tap – a knock on the door.

“Come!” Frank called.

The door opened, and Billy Wynne, the property man, looked in.

“Letter for you, Mr. Merriwell,” he said.

Frank took the letter, and Wynne disappeared, after being thanked for bringing it.

“Excuse me,” said Merry, and he tore open the envelope.

A moment later, having glanced over the letter, he whistled.

“News?” asked Bart.

“Just a note from the gentleman we were speaking of just now,” answered Frank. “It’s from the party who gave me the free advertising.”

“Waal, I’ll be kicked by a blind kaow!” exploded Gallup. “An’ did he hev ther gall to write to ye?”

“Yes,” said Frank. “Listen to this.”

Then he read the letter aloud.

“Mr. Frank Merriwell.

“Dear Sir: By this time you must be aware that you are not the greatest thing that ever happened. You received it in the neck last night, and I aided in the good work of knocking you out, for I circulated the ‘warning’ notice which denounced you as an impostor, a deadbeat and a thief. The public swallowed it all, and, in disguise, I was at the theater to witness your downfall. It was even greater than I had dared hope it would be. I understand the managers in other towns have canceled with you, Folansbee has declined to back your old show any longer, and you are on the beach. Ha! ha! ha! This is revenge indeed. You are knocked out at last, and I did it. You’ll never appear again as the marvelous young actor-playwright, and the name of Frank Merriwell will sink into oblivion. It is well. Yours with satisfaction,
LESLIE LAWRENCE.”

“I knew well enough it was that dirty rascal who did the job!” cried Hodge, springing up. “The cur!”

“Waal, dinged if he hadn’t oughter be shot!” burst from Gallup. “An’ he knows Folansbee’s gone back on ye.”

“It’s no use, Frank,” said Hodge, disconsolately; “you are done for. The story is out. Folansbee has skipped us, and – ”

“He has not skipped us. He’s simply decided to go out of the theatrical business. It was a fad with him, anyhow. As long as everything was going well, he liked it; but I see he is a man who cannot stand hard luck. He is changeable and that makes him a mighty poor man to back a venture. It takes a man with determination and a fixed purpose to win at anything. Changing around, jumping from one thing to another, never having any clear ideas is enough to make a failure of any man. Folansbee doesn’t need to follow the show business for a living. He went into it because it fascinated him. The glamour is all worn off now, and he is ready to get out if it. Let him go.”

“It’s all right to say let him go, but what are you going to do without him? You are talking about putting your play out again, but how will you do it?”

“I’ll find a way.”

“That is easier said than done. You have been lucky, Frank, there is no question about that. You can’t be that lucky all the time.”

“There are more ways than one to catch an angel.”

“I rather think you’ll find that angels are not so thick. Once in a while there is a soft thing who is ready to gamble with his money by putting it behind a traveling theatrical company, but those soft things are growing scarcer and scarcer. Too many of them have been bitten.”

“Still, I have a feeling that I’ll find a way to succeed.”

“Of course you can advertise for a partner to invest in a ‘sure thing,’ and all that, but those games are too near fraud. Rascals have worked those schemes so much that honest men avoid them.”

“I shall not resort to any trickery or deception. If I catch an ‘angel’ I shall get one just as I obtained Folansbee, by telling him all the risks and chances of failure.”

“Well, you’ll not get another that way.”

“Darned if I ain’t afraid now!” nodded Ephraim. “But Mr. Folansbee’s goin’ to take keer of this comp’ny, ain’t he? He’s goin’ to take it back to Denver?”

“He has agreed to do so.”

At this moment there was another sharp rap on the door, which, happening to be near, Frank opened.

Cassie Lee walked in, followed by Roscoe Havener, the soubrette and the stage manager of “For Old Eli,” Cassie showed excitement.

“Well, what do you think of him?” she cried.

“Of whom – Havener?” asked Merry,

“No, Folansbee.”

“What about him?”

“He’s skipped.”

“Skipped?”

“Sure thing. Run away.”

“Impossible!”

“It’s a straight fact,” declared the little soubrette.

“There’s no doubt of it,” corroborated Havener.

“Waal, may I be tickled to death by grasshoppers!” ejaculated Gallup.

“This caps the whole business!” burst from Hodge.

“I can’t believe that,” said Merriwell, slowly. “How do you know, Havener?”

“His baggage is gone. Garland and Dunton traced him to the station. They were just in time to see him board an eastbound train as it pulled out. He has deserted us.”

CHAPTER II. – DARKNESS AND DAWN

Frank could not express his astonishment.

“I can’t believe it,” he repeated. “Folansbee would not do such a thing.”

Hodge laughed shortly, harshly.

“You have altogether too much confidence in human nature, Merry,” he said. “I never took much stock in this Folansbee. He is just the sort of person I would expect to do such a trick.”

“The company is hot, Merriwell,” said Havener. “They’re ready to eat you.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“For getting them into this scrape.”

“I don’t see how they can blame me.”

There came a sound of feet outside and a bang on the door, which was flung open before Frank could reach it. Into the room stalked Granville Garland, followed by the remainder of the company. Plainly all were excited.

“Well, Mr. Merriwell,” said Garland, assuming an accusing manner and striking a stage pose, “we are here.”

“So I see,” nodded Frank, calmly. “What’s the matter?”

“You engaged us to fill parts in your play.”

“I did.”

“We hold contracts with you.”

“I beg your pardon. I think you are mistaken.”

“What?”

“I made no contracts with you; I simply engaged you. You hold contracts with Parker Folansbee.”

“Folansbee has deserted us, sir,” declared Garland, accusingly. “We have been tricked, fooled, deceived! We hold contracts. You were concerned with Folansbee in putting this company on the road, and you are responsible. We have come to you to find out what you mean to do.”

“I am very sorry – ” began Frank.

“Being sorry for us doesn’t help us a bit,” cut in Garland, rudely. “I believe you knew Folansbee was going to skip.”

Frank turned his eyes full on the speaker, and he seemed to look his accuser straight through and through.

“Mr. Garland,” he said, “you are rude and insulting. I do not fancy the way you speak to me.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” put in Lloyd Fowler. “I want my money. I didn’t come out here to be fooled this way.”

“Mr. Fowler,” spoke Frank, “you have not earned any money. Instead, you have earned a fine by appearing on the stage last night in a state of intoxication.”

“Who says so?”

“I do.”

“Then you li – ”

Fowler did not quite finish the word. Frank had him by the neck and pinned him against the wall in a moment. Merry’s eyes were flashing fire, but his voice was steady, as he said:

“Take it back, sir! Apologize instantly for that!”

Garland made a move as if he would interfere, but Bart Hodge was before him in an instant, looking straight into his face, and saying:

“Hands off! Touch him and you get thumped!”

“Get out!” cried Garland.

“Not a bit of it. If you want a scrap, I shall be pleased to give you what you desire.”

“Here, fellows!” called Garland; “get in here all of you and give these two tricksters a lesson! Come on!”

“Wait!” cried Havener, stepping to the other side of Merriwell. “Don’t try it, for I shall stand by him!”

“Me, too, boys!” cried Cassie Lee, getting into line with her small fists clinched, and a look of determination on her thin face. “Don’t nobody jump on Frank Merriwell unless I take a hand in the racket.”

The rest of the company were astonished. They realized that Frank had some friends, but it was not until after he had awakened to realize just what the situation meant that Ephraim Gallup drew himself together and planted himself with Merry’s party.

“Whe-ee!” he squealed. “If there’s goin’ ter be a ruction, yeou kin bet I’ll fight fer Merry, though I ain’t much of a fighter. I’d ruther run then fight any day, onless I have ter fight, but I reckon I’ll hev ter fight in this case, if there is any fightin’.”

Immediately Granville Garland became very placid in his manner.

“We didn’t come here to fight,” he said, “but we came here to demand our rights.”

“An’ to sass Frank,” put in the Vermonter. “But, b’gosh! yeou are barkin’ up ther wrong tree when yeou tackle him! He kin jest natterally chaw yeou up.”

Frank still held Fowler against the wall. Now he spoke to the fellow in a low, commanding tone:

“Apologize at once,” he said. “Come, sir, make haste!”

“I didn’t mean anything,” faltered the frightened actor. “I think I was too hasty. I apologize.”

“Be careful in the future,” advised Merry, releasing him.

Then Merry turned to the others, saying:

“Ladies and gentlemen, until Havener just brought the news, I did not know that Parker Folansbee was gone. It was a great surprise for me, as I did not dream he was a person to do such a thing. Even now I cannot feel that he has entirely deserted us. He may have left town rather than face us, but I hope he has been man enough to leave money behind that will enable us to return to Denver, at least. You must see that we are in the same box together. I am hit as hard as any of you, for I had hoped that Folansbee would stand by me so that I would be able to put the play in better shape and take it out again. I have lost him as a backer, and if he has skipped without leaving us anything, I have barely enough money to enable me to get back to Denver.”

“Haven’t you any way of getting hold of money?” asked Harper.

“Unfortunately, I have not,” answered Merry. “If I had money in my pocket I would spend the last cent to square this thing with you.”

“And I know that’s on the level!” chirped Cassie Lee.

“Well, it’s mighty tough!” muttered Billy Wynne. “That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“We’ll have to get up some kind of a benefit for ourselves,” said Havener. “That’s the only thing left to do.”

“Come up to my room,” invited Miss Stanley, “and we’ll try to devise a scheme for raising the dust. Come on.”

They followed her out, leaving Ephraim, Bart and Frank.

“Whew!” breathed Gallup, sitting down on the bed. “Hanged if I didn’t kinder think there was goin’ to be a ruction one spell. I wanted to run, but I warn’t goin’ to leave Frank to be thrashed by a lot of hamfatters, b’gee!”

“They were excited when they came in,” said Merry, apologizing for the ones who had departed. “If it hadn’t been for that, they would not have thought of making such a scene.”

“Well, Frank,” spoke Bart, “I hope this will teach you a lesson.”

“How?”

“I hope it will teach you not to put so much confidence in human nature after this. Have less confidence and do more business in writing. I haven’t a doubt but Folansbee would have stuck by you all right if the new play had proved a winner, but he saw a chance to squeal when it turned out bad, and he jumped you.”

“I had a contract with him about the other piece,” said Merry; “but you know he did not return from St. Louis till just before we were ready to start out, and so I had not been able to arrange matters about this piece.”

“And that lets him out easy.”

“Yes, he gets out without any trouble, and I don’t believe I can do a thing about it.”

Again there came a rap on the door. When it was opened, a bell boy, accompanied by a gray-bearded gentleman, stood outside.

“Mr. Merriwell,” said the bell boy, “here is a gentleman to see you.”

The man entered.

“Walk right in, sir,” invited Merry. “What can I do for you?”

Frank closed the door. The stranger slowly drew off his gloves, critically looking Merriwell over.

“So you are Mr. Frank Merriwell?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“I recognize you,” nodded the man. “Do you remember me?”

“No, sir; I can’t say that I do, although I believe I have seen your face before.”

“I think you have, but I did not wear a full beard then.”

“Ah! Then it is possible the beard has made the change that prevents me from recognizing you.”

“Quite likely.”

“Will you sit down?”

“I have some important business with you,” explained the stranger, with a glance toward Gallup and Hodge.

Immediately Bart started for the door.

“See you later, Frank,” he said. “Come on, Ephraim.”

Gallup followed Hodge from the room.

When they were gone, Frank again invited the stranger to be seated.

“Thank you,” said the man, as he accepted a chair. “For reasons I wish you would look at me closely and see if you recognize me. I recognize you, although you are older, but I must proceed with the utmost caution in this matter, and I wish you would recognize me and state my name, so that I may feel absolutely certain that I am making no mistake.”

Frank sat down opposite the gentleman, at whom he gazed searchingly. He concentrated his mind in the effort to remember. Frank had found that he could do many difficult things by concentration of his mental forces. Now he sought to picture in his mind the appearance of this man without a beard. Gradually, he felt that he was drawing nearer and nearer the object he sought. Finally he made a request:

“Please speak again, sir.”

“Why do you wish me to, speak again?” said the stranger, smiling.

“So that your voice may aid me in remembering. I wish to associate your voice and your face.”

“Very well. What do you wish me to say?”

“You have said enough. I have your voice now.”

“I’m afraid you’ll not be able to remember,” said the stranger. “It doesn’t make any great difference, for I recognize you, and I can make assurance doubly sure by asking you a few questions. First, I wish to ask – ”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Merry. “You are from Carson City, Nevada. You are connected with the bank in Carson, where I deposited a certain amount of valuable treasure, found by myself and some friends years ago in the Utah Desert. Your name is Horace Hobson.”

“Correct!” cried the man, with satisfaction. “Now, can you produce the receipt given you for that treasure?”

“Yes, sir,” nodded Frank, immediately producing a leather pocketbook and opening it. “I have it here.”

In a moment he had found the paper and handed it to Mr. Hobson.

The gentleman adjusted some gold-rimmed nose-glasses and looked the receipt over.

“This is the receipt,” he nodded. “You instructed the bank officials to use every effort and spare no expense to find the relatives of Prof. Millard Fillmore and the rightful heirs to the treasure.”

“I did.”

“I am here to inform you that the bank has carried out your instructions faithfully.”

“Then you have found Prof. Fillmore’s relatives?” quickly asked Merry, his heart sinking a bit.

“On the contrary, we have found that he has no relatives living. He seems to have been the last of his family – the end of it – ”

“Then – ”

“It has been necessary for us to go to considerable expense to settle this point beyond a doubt, but we have done so, in accordance with your directions. Of course, we shall not lose anything. We have ascertained the exact value of the treasure, and have deducted for our expense and trouble. At a meeting of the bank directors I was instructed to turn over the remainder to you. I have here papers showing the exact valuation of the treasure as deposited with us. Here is a complete account of all our expenses and charges. We have found a balance remaining of forty-three thousand seven hundred and thirty-eight dollars. I was sent to turn this money over to you, as I could identify you beyond doubt, and there could be no mistake. To make it certain in my own mind, I wished you to recognize me. You did so, and I knew I could not be making a mistake. I will take up this receipt here, and in return will give you a check for the amount, if that is satisfactory to you.”

Frank sat like one dazed, staring at Horace Hobson. Was it possible that he was not dreaming? Was he in his hour of need to receive this immense sum of money? No wonder he fancied he was dreaming.

At last he gave himself a slight shake, and his voice did not falter as he said:

“It is perfectly satisfactory to me, sir. I will accept the check.”

CHAPTER III. – MERRIWELL'S GENEROSITY

Mr. Hobson departed, and then Frank rang for a bell boy and sent for Bart and Ephraim. Merry's two friends came in a short time.

"I have called you up," said Merry, "to talk over the arrangements for putting 'For Old Eli' on the road again without delay. I have decided on that. It will take some little time to manufacture the costly mechanical effect that I propose to introduce into the third act, and we shall have to get some new paper. I believe I can telegraph a description to Chicago so a full stand lithograph from stone can be made that will suit me, and I shall telegraph to-day."

Hodge stared at Frank as if he thought Merry had lost his senses.

"You always were a practical joker," he growled; "but don't you think it's about time to let up? I don't see that this is a joking matter. You should have some sympathy for our feelings, if you don't care for yourself."

Merry laughed a bit.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I assure you I was never more serious. I am not joking. I shall telegraph for the paper immediately."

"Paper like that costs money, and the lithographers will demand a guarantee before they touch the work."

"And I shall give them a guarantee. I shall instruct them to draw on the First National Bank of Denver, where my money will be deposited."

"Your money?" gasped Hodge.

"Jeewhillikins!" gurgled Gallup.

Then Frank's friends looked at each other, the same thought in the minds of both.

Had Merry gone mad? Had his misfortune turned his brain?

"I believe I can have the effect I desire to introduce manufactured for me in Denver," Frank went on. "I shall brace up that third act with it. I shall make a spectacular climax on the order of the mechanical horse races you see on the stage. I shall have some dummy figures and boats made, so that the boat race may be seen on the river in the distance. I have an idea of a mechanical arrangement to represent the crowd that lines the river and the observation train that carries a load of spectators along the railroad that runs beside the river. I think the swaying crowd can be shown, the moving train, the three boats, Yale, Harvard and Cornell, with their rowers working for life. Harvard shall be a bit in the lead when the boats first appear, but Yale shall press her and take the lead. Then I will have the scene shifted instantly, so that the audience will be looking into the Yale clubhouse. The rear of the house shall open direct upon the river. There shall be great excitement in the clubhouse, which I will have located at the finish of the course. The boats are coming. Outside, along the river, mad crowds are cheering hoarsely, whistles are screeching, Yale students are howling the college cry. Here they come! Now the excitement is intense. Hurrah! Yale has taken the lead! The boats shoot in view at the back of the stage, Yale a length ahead, Harvard next, Cornell almost at her side, and in this form they cross the line, Yale the victor. The star of the piece, myself, who has escaped from his enemies barely in time to enter the boat and help win the race, is brought on by the madly cheering college men, and down comes the curtain on a climax that must set any audience wild."

Hodge sat down on the bed.

"Frank," he said, grimly, "you're going crazy! It would cost a thousand dollars to get up that effect."

"I don't care if it costs two thousand dollars, I'll have it, and I'll have it in a hurry!" laughed Merriwell. "I am out for business now. I am in the ring to win this time."

"Yes, you are going crazy!" nodded Hodge. "Where is all the money coming from?"

“I’ve got it!”

Bart went into the air as if he had received an electric shock.

“You – you’ve what?” he yelled.

“Got the money,” asserted Frank.

“Where?” shouted Bart.

“Right here.”

“May I be tickled to death by muskeeters!” gasped Gallup.

“Got two thousand dollars?” said Hodge. “Oh, come off, Merriwell! You are carrying this thing too far now!”

“Just take a look at this piece of paper,” invited Frank, as he passed over the check he had received from Horace Hobson.

Bart took it, he looked at it, he was stricken dumb.

Gallup looked over Bart’s shoulder. His jaw dropped, his eyes bulged from his head, and he could not utter a sound.

“How do you like the looks of it?” smiled Merry.

“What – what is it?” faltered Bart.

“A check. Can’t you see? A check that is good for forty-three thousand seven hundred and thirty-eight dollars.”

“Good for that? Why, it can’t be! Now, is this more of your joking, Merriwell? If it is, I swear I shall feel like having a fight with you right here!”

“It’s no joke, old man. That piece of paper is good – it is good for every dollar. The money is payable to me. I’ve got the dust to put my play out in great style.”

Even then Bart could not believe it. He groped for the bed and sat down, limply, still staring at the check, which he held in his hand.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“It’s for the Fillmore treasure, which I found in the Utah Desert,” exclaimed Frank. “It was brought to me by the man who came in here a little while ago.”

Then Gallup collapsed.

His knees seemed to buckle beneath him, and he dropped down on the bed.

“Waal, may I be chawed up fer grass by a spavin hoss!” he murmured.

Hodge sat quite still for some seconds.

“Merry,” he said, at last, beginning to tremble all over, “are you sure this is good? Are you sure there is no crooked business behind it?”

“Of course I am,” smiled Frank.

“How can you be?” asked Bart.

“I received it from the very man with whom I did the business in Carson when I made the deposit. In order that there might be no mistake he came on here and delivered it to me personally.”

“I think I’m dyin’!” muttered Ephraim. “I’ve received a shock from which I’ll never rekiver! Forty-three thousan’ dollars! Oh, say, I know there’s a mistake here!”

“Not a bit of a mistake,” assured Merriwell, smiling, triumphant.

“And all that money is yourn?”

“No.”

“Why – why, ther check’s made out to yeou.”

“Because the treasure was deposited by me.”

“And yeou faound it?”

“I found it, but I did so while in company with four friends.”

Now Hodge showed still further excitement.

“Those friends were not with you at the moment when you found it,” he said. “I’ve heard your story. You came near losing your life. The mad hermit fought to throw you from the precipice. The

way you found the treasure, the dangers you passed through, everything that happened established your rightful claim to it. It belongs to you alone.”

“I do not look at it in that light,” said Frank, calmly and positively. “There were five of us in the party. The others were my friends Diamond, Rattleton, Browning, and Toots.”

“A nigger!” exclaimed Bart. “Do you call him your friend?”

“I do!” exclaimed Merry. “More than once that black boy did things for me which I have never been able to repay. Although a coward at heart so far as danger to himself was concerned, I have known him to risk his life to save me from harm. Why shouldn’t I call him my friend? His skin may be black, but his heart is white.”

“Oh, all right,” muttered Hodge. “I haven’t anything more to say. I was not one of your party at that time.”

“No.”

“I wish I had been.”

“So yeou could git yeour share of the boodle?” grinned Ephraim.

“No!” cried Hodge, fiercely. “So I could show the rest of them how to act like men! I would refuse to touch one cent of it! I would tell Frank Merriwell that it belonged to him, and he could not force me to take it. That’s all.”

“Mebbe the others’ll do that air way,” suggested the Vermont youth.

“Not on your life!” sneered Bart. “They’ll gobble onto their shares with both hands. I know them, I’ve traveled with them, and I am not stuck on any of them.”

“I shall compel them to take it,” smiled Frank. “I am sorry, fellows, that you both were not with me, so I could bring you into the division. I’d find a way to compel Hodge to accept his share.”

“Not in a thousand years!” exploded Bart.

“Waal,” drawled Ephraim, “I ain’t saying, but I’d like a sheer of that money well enough, but there’s one thing I am sayin’. Sence Hodge has explained why he wouldn’t tech none of it, I be gol-dinged if yeou could force a single cent onter me ef I hed bin with yeou, same as them other fellers was! I say Hodge is jest right ababout that business. The money belongs to yeou, Frank, an’ yeou’re the only one that owns a single dollar of it, b’gosh!”

“That’s right, Ephraim,” nodded Hodge. “And there isn’t another chap in the country who would insist on giving away some of his money to others under similar circumstances. Some people might call it generosity; I call it thundering foolishness!”

“I can’t help what you call it,” said Frank; “I shall do what I believe is right and just, and thus I will have nothing to trouble my conscience.”

“Conscience! conscience! You’ll never be rich in the world, for you have too much conscience. Do you suppose the Wall Street magnates could have become millionaires if they had permitted their conscience to worry them over little points?”

“I fancy not,” acknowledged Merry, shaking his head. “I am certain I shall never become wealthy in just the same manner that certain millionaires acquired their wealth. I’d rather remain poor. Such an argument does not touch me, Hodge.”

“Oh, I suppose not! But it’s a shame for you to be such a chump! Just think what you could do with forty-three thousand dollars! You could give up this show business, you could go back to Yale and finish your course in style. You could be the king-bee of them all. Oh, it’s a shame!”

“Haow much’ll yeou hev arter yeou divide?” asked Ephraim.

“The division will give the five of us eight thousand seven hundred and forty-six dollars and eighty cents each,” answered Frank.

“He’s figured that up so quick!” muttered Hodge.

“I snum! eight thaousan’ dollars ain’t to be sneezed at!” cried the Vermonter.

“It’s a pinch beside forty-three thousand,” said Bart.

“Yeou oughter be able to go back to college on that, Frank.”

“He can, if he’ll drop the show business,” nodded Bart.

“And confess myself a failure! Acknowledge that I failed in this undertaking? Would you have me do that?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t confess anything of the sort. What were you working for? To go back to Yale, was it not?”

“Sure.”

“Well, I don’t suppose you expected to make so much money that you would be able to return with more than eight thousand dollars in your inside pocket?”

“Hardly.”

“Then what is crawling over you? If you are fool enough to make this silly division, you can go back with money enough to take you through your course in style.”

“And have the memory of what happened in this town last night rankle in my heart! Hardly! I made a speech from the stage last night, in which I said I would play again in this city, and I promised that the audience should be satisfied. I shall keep that promise.”

“Oh, all right! I suppose you’ll be thinking of rewarding the ladies and gentlemen who called here a short time ago and attempted to bulldoze you?”

“I shall see that the members of the company, one and all, are treated fairly. I shall pay them two weeks salary, which will be all they can ask.”

Hodge got up, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and stared at Frank, with an expression on his face that was little short of disgust.

“You beat them all!” he growled. “I’d do just like that – I don’t think! Not one of those people has a claim on you. I’d let them all go to the deuce! It would be serving them right.”

“Well, I shall do nothing of the sort, my dear fellow.”

“I presume you will pay Lloyd Fowler two weeks salary?”

“I shall.”

Bart turned toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going out somewhere all alone by myself, where I can say some things about you. I am going to express my opinion of you to myself. I don’t want to do it here, for there would be a holy fight. I’ve got to do it in order to let off steam and cool down. I shall explode if I keep it corked up inside of me.”

He bolted out of the room, slamming the door fiercely behind him.

Frank and Ephraim went up to the room of Stella Stanley, which was on the next floor. They found all the members of the company packed into that room.

“May we come in?” asked Merry, pleasantly.

“We don’t need him,” muttered Lloyd Fowler, who was seated in a corner. “Don’t get him into the benefit performance. Let him take care of himself.”

“Come right in, Mr. Merriwell,” invited Stella Stanley. “I believe you can sing. We’re arranging a program for the benefit, you know. Shall we put you down for a song?”

“I hardly think so,” smiled Frank.

“Ah!” muttered Fowler, triumphantly. “He thinks himself too fine to take part in such a performance with the rest of us.”

“I rather think you’ve hit it,” whispered Charlie Harper.

“And I know you are off your trolley!” hissed Cassie Lee, who had not missed the words of either of them. “He’s on the level.”

“Really!” exclaimed Miss Stanley, in surprise and disappointment. “Do you actually refuse?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because there will be no performance.”

“Won’t?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I refuse to permit it,” said Frank, a queer twinkle in his eyes.

Then several of the company came up standing, and shouted:

“What!”

“That beats anything I ever heard of in my life!” said Fowler.

“For genuine crust, it surely does!” spoke up Harper.

Cassie Lee looked surprised, and Havener was amazed.

“Surely you are not in earnest, Merriwell?” the stage manager hastened to say.

“Never more so in my life!” answered Frank, easily.

“Then you’re crazy.”

“Oh, I guess not.”

“Well, you are,” said Garland. “You have gone over the limit. We are not engaged to you in any way. You said so. You explained that we could not hold you responsible. You cannot come here and dictate to us. We shall carry out this performance. If you try to prevent it, you will make a great mistake.”

“Be calm,” advised Merry. “You are unduly exciting yourself, Mr. Garland.”

“Well, it’s enough to excite anyone!”

“Meow!”

Out of the room trotted Frank’s black cat, which had followed him up the stairs.

“Put that cat out!” cried Agnes Kirk. “It has caused all our bad luck!”

Frank picked the cat up.

“I told you the cat was a mascot,” he said. “It has proved so!”

“I should say so!” sneered Fowler.

“Let him take himself out of here, cat and all!” cried Charlie Harper.

“Let him explain what he means by saying we shall not give a benefit performance,” urged Havener, who really hoped that Frank could say something to put himself in a better light with the company.

“Yes,” urged Cassie. “What did you mean by that, Frank?”

“Such a performance is quite unnecessary,” assured Merry.

“We’ve got to do something to raise money to get out of this city.”

“I will furnish you with the money, each and every one.”

“You?” shouted several.

“Yes.”

“How?” asked Havener. “You said a short time ago that you hadn’t enough money to amount to anything.”

“At that time I hadn’t. Since then I have been able to make a raise.”

Now there was another bustle of excitement.

“Oh!” cried several, “that’s different.”

“I knew there was something behind it!” exclaimed Cassie, with satisfaction. “Have you been able to raise enough to take us all back to Denver, Frank?”

“I think so, and I believe I shall have a few dollars left after we arrive there.”

“How much have you raised?” asked Havener.

“Forty-three thousand dollars,” answered Frank, as coolly as if he were saying forty-three dollars.

For a moment there was silence in the room, then expressions of incredulity and scorn came from all sides.

Fowler set up a shout of mocking laughter.

“Well, of all the big bluffs I ever heard this is the biggest!” he sneered.

“Say, I don’t mind a joke,” said Stella Stanley; “but don’t you think you are carrying this thing a trifle too far, Mr. Merriwell?”

“I would be if it were a joke,” confessed Frank, easily; “but, as it happens to be the sober truth, I think no one has a chance to ask. I will not only pay your fare to Denver, but each one shall receive two weeks salary, which I think you must acknowledge is the proper way to treat you.”

“I’ll believe it when I get my hands on the dough,” said Fowler. “Forty-three thousand fiddlesticks!”

“Any person who doubts my word is at liberty to take a look at this certified check,” said Merry, producing the check and placing it on the little table.

Then they crushed and crowded about that table, staring at the check.

Fowler nudged Harper, to whom he whispered:

“I believe it’s straight, so help me! I’d like to kick myself!”

“Yes, it’s straight,” acknowledged Harper, dolefully. “I am just beginning to realize that we have made fools of ourselves by talking too much.”

“What can we do?”

“Take poison!”

“We’ll have to eat dirt, or he’ll throw us down.”

“It looks that way.”

Thus it came about that Fowler was almost the first to offer congratulations.

“By Jove, Mr. Merriwell,” he cried, “I’m delighted! You are dead in luck, and you deserve it! It was pretty hard for you to be deserted by Folansbee, in such a sneaking way. I have said all along that you were a remarkably bright man and merited success.”

“That’s right,” put in Harper; “he said so to me last night. We were talking over your hard luck. I congratulate you, Mr. Merriwell. Permit me!”

“Permit me!”

Both Harper and Fowler held out their hands.

Frank looked at the extended hands, but put his own hands in his pockets, laughing softly, somewhat scornfully.

“It is wonderful,” he said, “how many true friends a man can have when he has money, and how few true friends he really has when he doesn’t have a dollar.”

“Oh, my dear Mr. Merriwell!” protested Fowler. “I know I was rather hasty in some of my remarks, but I assure you that you misunderstood me. It was natural that all of us should be a trifle hot under the collar at being used as we were. I assure you I did not mean anything by what I said. If I spoke too hastily, I beg a thousand pardons. Again let me congratulate you.”

Again he held out his hand.

“You are at liberty to congratulate me,” said Merry, but still disdaining the proffered hand. “I shall pay you the same as the others. Don’t be afraid of that. But I shall give you your notice, for I shall not need you any more. With several of the others I shall make contracts to go out with this piece again, as soon as I can make some alterations, get new paper, and start the company.”

Fowler turned green.

“Oh, of course you can do as you like, sir,” he said. “I don’t think I care to go out with this piece again. It is probable I should so inform you, even if you wanted me.”

Harper backed away. He did not wish to receive such a calling down as had fallen to the lot of Fowler.

Cassie Lee held out her hand, her thin face showing actual pleasure.

“You don’t know how glad I am, Frank!” she said, in a low tone. “Never anybody deserved it more than you.”

“That’s right,” agreed Havener.

Douglas Dunton had not been saying much, but now he stood forth, struck a pose, and observed:

“Methinks that, along with several of me noble colleagues, I have made a big mistake in making offensive remarks to you, most noble high muck-a-muck. Wouldst do me a favor? Then apply the toe of thy boot to the seat of me lower garments with great vigor.”

Frank laughed.

“The same old Dunton!” he said. “Forget it, old man. It’s all right. There’s no harm done.”

While the members of the company were crowding around Merriwell, Fowler and Harper slipped out of the room and descended the stairs.

Straight to the bar of the hotel they made their way. Leaning against the bar, they took their drinks, and discussed Frank’s fortune.

Another man was drinking near them. He pricked up his ears and listened when he heard Merriwell’s name, and he grew excited as he began to understand what had happened.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, after a time. “I do not wish to intrude, but I happen to know Mr. Merriwell. Will you have a drink with me?”

They accepted. They were just the sort of chaps who drink with anybody who would “set ’em up.”

“Do you mind telling me just what has happened to Mr. Merriwell?” asked the stranger, who wore a full beard, which seemed to hide many of the features of his face. “Has he fallen heir to a fortune?”

“Rather,” answered Harper, dryly. “More than forty-three thousand dollars has dropped into his hands this morning.”

“Is it possible?” asked the stranger, showing agitation. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure. I saw the certified check on a Carson City bank. He was broke this morning, but now he has money to burn.”

The stranger lifted a glass to his lips. His hand trembled somewhat. All at once, with a savage oath, he dashed the glass down on the bar, shivering it to atoms. As he did so, the hairs of his beard caught around the stone of a ring on his little finger, and the beard was torn from his face, showing it was false.

The face revealed was black with discomfiture and rage.

It was the face of Leslie Lawrence!

Frank’s old enemy was again discomfited!

CHAPTER IV. – IN THE SMOKER

So Frank took the company back to Denver. He was able to do so without depositing the check till Denver was reached, as Horace Hobson furnished the funds, holding the check as security.

Hobson went along at the same time.

While on the train Frank made arrangements with several members of his company in the revised version of "For Old Eli," when the play went on the road again.

He said nothing to Lloyd Fowler nor Charlie Harper. Although he did not make arrangements with Granville Garland, he asked Garland if he cared to go out with the company again, informing him that he might have an opening for him.

Fowler saw Merry talking with some of the members, and he surmised what it meant. He began to feel anxious as time passed, and Frank did not come to him. He went to Harper to talk it over.

Harper was in the smoker, pulling at a brierwood pipe and looking sour enough. He did not respond when Fowler spoke to him.

"What's the matter?" asked Fowler. "Sick?"

"Yes," growled Harper.

"What ails you?"

"Disgusted."

"At what?"

"Somebody."

"Who?"

"Myself for one."

"Somebody else?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You're it."

Fowler fell back and stared at Harper. He had taken a seat opposite his fellow actor. Harper returned his stare with something like still greater sourness.

"What's the matter with me?" asked Fowler, wondering.

"You're a confounded idiot!" answered Harper, bluntly.

"Well, I must say I like your plain language!" exclaimed Fowler, coloring and looking decidedly touched. "You were in a bad temper when we started for Denver, but you seem to be worse now. What's the matter?"

"Oh, I see now that I've put a foot in the soup. I am broke, and I need money. All I am liable to get is the two weeks salary I shall receive from Merriwell. If I'd kept my mouth shut I might have a new engagement with him, like the others."

"Then some of the others have a new engagement?"

"All of them, I reckon, except you and I. We are the fools of the company."

"Well, what shall we do?"

"Can't do anything but keep still and swallow our medicine."

"Perhaps you think that, but I'm going to hit Merriwell up."

"Well, you'll be a bigger fool if you do, after the calling down you received from him to-day."

At that moment Frank entered the smoker, looking for Hodge, who had been unable to procure a good seat in one of the other cars. Bart was sitting near Harper and Fowler.

As Frank came down the aisle, Fowler arose.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Merriwell," he said.

"All right," nodded Frank. "Go ahead."

"I have heard that you are making new engagements with the members of the company."

"Well?"

"You haven't said anything to me."

"No."

"I suppose it is because I made some foolish talk to you this morning. Well, I apologized, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I presume you will give me a chance when you take the play out again?"

"No, sir."

Frank said it quietly, looking Fowler full in the face.

"So you are going to turn me down because I made that talk? Well, I have heard considerable about your generosity, but this does not seem very generous."

"Ever since joining the company and starting to rehearse, Mr. Fowler, you have been a source of discord. Once or twice you came near flatly refusing to do some piece of business the way I suggested. Once you insolently informed me that I was not the stage manager. You completely forgot that I was the author of the piece. I have heard that you told others not to do things as I suggested, but to do them in their own way. Several times before we started out I was on the verge of releasing you, which I should have done had there been time to fill your place properly. Last night you were intoxicated when the hour arrived for the curtain to go up. You went onto the stage in an intoxicated condition. You did not do certain pieces of business as you had been instructed to do them, but as you thought they should be done, therefore ruining a number of scenes. You were insolent, and would have been fined a good round sum for it had we gone on. In a number of ways you have shown that you are a man I do not want in my company, so I shall let you go, after paying you two weeks salary. I believe I have given the best of reasons for pursuing such a course."

Then Frank stepped past Fowler and sat down with Hodge.

The actor took his seat beside Harper, who said:

"I hope you are satisfied now!"

"Satisfied!" muttered Fowler. "I'd like to punch his head off!"

"Very likely," nodded Harper; "but you can't do it, you know. He is a holy terror, and you are not in his class."

Behind them was a man who seemed to be reading a newspaper. He was holding the paper very high, so that his face could not be seen, and he was not reading at all. He was listening with the keenest interest to everything.

As Frank sat down beside Hodge he observed a look of great satisfaction on Bart's face.

"Well, Merriwell," said the dark-faced youth, with something like the shadow of a smile, "you have done yourself proud."

"Let's go forward," suggested Merry. "The smoke is pretty thick here, and some of it from those pipes is rank. I want to talk with you."

So they got up and left the car.

As they went out, Fowler glared at Merriwell's back, hissing:

"Oh, I'd like to get even with you!"

Instantly the man behind lowered his paper, leaned forward, and said:

"I see you do not like Mr. Merriwell much. If you want to get even with him, I may be able to show you how to do it."

With startled exclamations, both Harper and Fowler turned round. The man behind was looking at them over the edge of his paper.

"Who are you?" demanded Fowler.

"I think you know me," said the man, lowering his paper.

Lawrence sat there!

In Denver Frank was accompanied to the bank by Mr. Hobson. It happened that Kent Carson, a well-known rancher whom Frank had met, was making a deposit at the bank.

"Hello, young man!" cried the rancher, in surprise. "I thought you were on the road with your show?"

"I was," smiled Frank, "but met disaster at the very start, and did not get further than Puelbo."

"Well, that's tough!" said Carson, sympathetically. "What was the matter?"

"A number of things," confessed Frank. "The play was not strong enough without sensational features. I have found it necessary to introduce a mechanical effect, besides rewriting a part of the play. I shall start out again with it as soon as I can get it into shape."

"Then your backer is all right? He's standing by you?"

"On the contrary," smiled Merry, "he skipped out from Puelbo yesterday morning, leaving me and the company in the lurch."

"Well, that was ornery!" said Carson. "What are you going to do without a backer?"

"Back myself. I have the money now to do so. I am here to make a deposit."

Then it came about that he told Mr. Carson of his good fortune, and the rancher congratulated him most heartily.

Frank presented his check for deposit, asking for a check book. The eyes of the receiving teller bulged when he saw the amount of the check. He looked Frank over critically.

Mr. Hobson had introduced Frank, and the teller asked him if he could vouch for the identity of the young man.

"I can," was the answer.

"So can I," spoke up Kent Carson. "I reckon my word is good here. I'll stand behind this young man."

"Are you willing to put your name on the back of this check, Mr. Carson?" asked the teller.

"Hand it over," directed the rancher.

He took the check and endorsed it with his name.

"There," he said, "I reckon you know it's good now."

"Yes," said the teller. "There will be no delay now. Mr. Merriwell can draw on us at once."

Frank thanked Mr. Carson heartily.

"That's all right," said the cattleman, in an offhand way. "I allow that a chap who will defend a ragged boy as you did is pretty apt to be all right. How long will it take to get your play in shape again?"

"Well, I may be three or four days rewriting it. I don't know how long the other work will be."

"Three or four days. Well, say, why can't you come out to my ranch and do the work?"

"Really, I don't see how I can do that," declared Frank. "I must be here to see that the mechanical arrangement is put up right."

"Now you must come," declared Carson. "I won't take no for your answer. You can give instructions for that business. I suppose you have a plan of it?"

"Not yet, but I shall have before night."

"Can you get your business here done to-day?"

"I may be able to, but I am not sure."

"Then you're going with me to-morrow."

"I can't leave my friends who are –"

"Bring them right along. It doesn't make a bit of difference if there are twenty of them. I'll find places for them, and they shall have the best the Twin Star affords. Now, if you refuse that offer, you and I are enemies."

The man said this laughingly, but he placed Frank in an awkward position. He had just done a great favor for Merriwell, and Frank felt that he could not refuse.

“Very well, Mr. Carson,” he said, “if you put it in that light, I’ll have to accept your hospitality.”

“That’s the talk! Won’t my boy at Yale be surprised when I write him you’ve been visiting me? Ha! ha! ha!”

Mr. Carson was stopping at the Metropole, while Frank had chosen the American. The rancher urged Merry to move right over to the Metropole, and the young actor-playwright finally consented.

But Frank had business for that day. First he telegraphed to the lithographers in Chicago a long description of the scene which he wanted made on his new paper. He ordered it rushed, and directed them to draw on his bankers for any reasonable sum.

Then he started out to find the proper men to construct the mechanical effect he wished. He went straight to the theater first, and he found that the stage manager of the Broadway was a genius who could make anything. Frank talked with the man twenty minutes, and decided that he had struck the person for whom he was looking.

It did not take them long to come to terms. The man had several assistants who could aid him on the work, and he promised to rush things. Frank felt well satisfied.

Returning to his hotel, Merry drew a plan of what he desired. As he was skillful at drawing, and very rapid, it did not take him more than two hours to draw the plan and write out an explicit explanation of it.

With that he returned to the stage manager. They spent another hour talking it over, and Frank left, feeling satisfied that the man perfectly understood his wants and would produce an arrangement as satisfactory as it could be if it were overseen during its construction by Frank himself.

Frank was well satisfied with what he had accomplished. He went back to the American and drew up checks for every member of the old company, paying them all two weeks salary. Lloyd Fowler took the check without a word of thanks. The others expressed their gratitude.

Then Frank moved over to the Metropole, where he found Kent Carson waiting for him.

Hodge and Gallup came along with Frank.

“These are the friends I spoke of, Mr. Carson,” explained Frank.

“Where’s the rest of them?” asked the rancher, looking about.

“These are all.”

“All?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why, by the way you talked, I reckoned you were going to bring your whole company along.”

He remembered Hodge, whom he had seen with Frank once before, and he shook hands with both Bart and Ephraim.

“You are lucky to be counted as friends of a young man like Mr. Merriwell,” said the cattleman. “That is, you’re lucky if he’s anything like what my boy wrote that he was. My boy is a great admirer of him.”

“It’s strange I don’t remember your son,” said Frank.

“Why, he’s a freshman.”

“Yes, but I know a large number of freshmen.”

“So my boy said. Said you knew them because some of them had been trying to do you a bad turn; but he was glad to see you get the best of them, for you were all right. He said the freshmen as a class thought so, too.”

“Your son was very complimentary. If I return to Yale, I shall look him up.”

“Then you contemplate returning to college?”

“I do.”

“When?”

“Next fall, if I do not lose my money backing my play.”

“Oh, you won’t lose forty-three thousand dollars.”

“That is not all mine to lose. Only one-fifth of that belongs to me, and I can lose that sum.”

“Then why don’t you let the show business alone and go back to college on that?”

“Because I have determined to make a success with this play, and I will not give up. Never yet in my life have I been defeated in an undertaking, and I will not be defeated now.”

The rancher looked at Frank with still greater admiration.

“You make me think of some verses I read once,” he said. “I’ve always remembered them, and I think they’ve had something to do with my success in life. They were written by Holmes.”

The rancher paused, endeavoring to recall the lines. It was plain to Frank that he was not a highly educated man, but he was highly intelligent – a man who had won his way in the world by his own efforts and determination. For that reason, he admired determination in others.

“I have it!” exclaimed the rancher. “Here it is:

““Be firm! One constant element in luck
Is genuine, solid, old Teutonic pluck.
See yon tall shaft; it felt the earthquake’s thrill,
Clung to its base and greets the sunrise still.
Stick to your aim; the mongrel’s hold will slip,
But only crowbars loose the bulldog’s grip;
Small as he looks, the jaw that never yields
Drags down the bellowing monarch of the fields.””

CHAPTER V. – NATURE'S NOBLEMAN

Frank found the Twin Star Ranch a pleasant place. The house was large and well furnished, everything being in far better taste than he had expected.

Merry knew something of ranches and ranch life which, however, he said nothing about. He was supposed to be a very tender tenderfoot. Nobody dreamed he had ever handled a lariat, ridden a bucking broncho, or taken part in a round-up.

Gallup roamed about the ranch, inspecting everything, and he was a source of constant amusement to the “punchers,” as the cowboys were called.

After one of these tours of inspection, he came back to the room where Frank and Bart were sitting, filled with amazement.

“Vermont farms are different from this one,” smiled Merry.

“Waal, naow yeou’re talkin’! I’d like ter know haow they ever do the milkin’ here. I don’t b’lieve all ther men they’ve got kin milk so menny caows. Why, I saw a hull drove of more’n five hundred cattle about here on the farm, an’ they told me them warn’t a pinch of what Mr. Carson owns. Gosh all hemlock! but he must be rich!”

“Mr. Carson seems to be pretty well fixed,” said Merry.

“That’s so. He’s got a fine place here, only it’s too gol-dinged mernoternous.”

“Monotonous? How?”

“The graound’s too flat. Ain’t any hills to rest a feller’s eyes ag’inst. I tell yeou it does a man good to go aout where he kin see somethin’ besides a lot of flatness an’ sky. There ain’t northin’ in the world purtier than the Varmount hills. In summer they’re all green an’ covered with grass an’ trees, an’ daown in the valleys is the streams an’ rivers runnin’ along, sometimes swift an’ foammin’, sometimes slow an’ smooth, like glars. An’ ther cattle are feedin’ on ther hills, an’ ther folks are to work on their farms, an’ ther farm haouses, all painted white, are somethin’ purty ter see. They jest do a man’s heart an’ soul good. An’ then when it is good summer weather in Varmount, I be dad-bimmed if there’s any better weather nowhere! Ther sun jest shines right daown as if it was glad to git a look at sech a purty country, an’ ther sky’s as blue as Elsie Bellwood’s eyes. Ther birds are singin’ in ther trees, an’ ther bees go hummin’ in ther clover fields, an’ there’s sich a gol-durn good feelin’ gits inter a feller that he jest wants ter larf an’ shaout all ther time. Aout here there ain’t no trees fer ther birds ter sing in, an’ there don’t seem ter be northin’ but flat graound an’ cattle an’ sky.”

Frank had been listening with interest to the words of the country boy. A lover of nature himself, Merry realized that Gallup’s soul had been deeply impressed by the fair features of nature around his country home.

“Yes, Ephraim,” he said, “Vermont is very picturesque and beautiful. The Vermont hills are something once seen never to be forgotten.”

Gallup was warmed up over his subject.

“But when it comes to daownright purtiness,” he went on, “there ain’t nothin’ like Varmount in the fall fer that. Then ev’ry day yeou kin see ther purtiest sights human eyes ever saw. Then is the time them hills is wuth seein’. First the leaves on ther maples, an’ beeches, an’ oaks they begin ter turn yaller an’ red a little bit. Then ther frost comes more, an’ them leaves turn red an’ gold till it seems that ther hull sides of them hills is jest like a purty painted picter. The green of the cedars an’ furs jest orfsets the yaller an’ gold. Where there is rocks on the hills, they seem to turn purple an’ blue in the fall, an’ they look purty, too – purtier’n they do at any other time. I uster jest go aout an’ set right daown an’ look at them air hills by the hour, an’ I uster say to myself I didn’t see haow heaven could be any purtier than the Varmount hills in ther fall.

“But there was folks,” he went on, whut lived right there where all them purty sights was an’ never saw um. They warn’t blind, neither. I know some folks I spoke to abaout how purty the hills looked told me they hedn’t noticed um! Naow, what du yeou think of that? I’ve even hed folks tell me they couldn’t see northin’ purty abaout um! Naow whut do yeou think of that? I ruther guess them folks missed half ther fun of livin’. They was born with somethin’ ther matter with um.

“It uster do me good ter take my old muzzle-loadin’ gun an’ go aout in the woods trampin’ in the fall. I uster like ter walk where the leaves hed fell jest to hear um rustle. I’d give a dollar this minute ter walk through the fallen leaves in the Varmount woods! I didn’t go out ter shoot things so much as I did to see things. There was plenty of squirrels, but I never shot but one red squirrel in my life. He come aout on the end of a limb clost to me an’ chittered at me in a real jolly way, same’s to say, ‘Hello, young feller! Ain’t this a fine day? Ain’t yeou glad yeou’re livin’?’ An’ then I up an’ shot him, like a gol-durn pirut!”

Ephraim stopped and choked a little. Bart was looking at him now with a strange expression on his face. Frank did not speak, but he was fully in sympathy with the tender-hearted country youth.

Bart rose to his feet, heaving a deep sigh.

“I’m afraid I missed some things when I was a boy,” he said. “There were plenty of woods for me, but I never found any pleasure in them. I used to think it fun to shoot squirrels; but now I believe it would have been greater pleasure for me if I had not shot them. I never listened to the music of the woods, for I didn’t know there was any music in them. Gallup, you have shown me that I was a fool.”

Then, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he walked out of the room.

Because Ephraim was very verdant the cowboys on the Twin Star fancied that Mr. Carson’s other visitors must be equally as accustomed to Western ways.

Frank was hard at work on his play, and that caused him to stick pretty close to the house. However, he was a person who believed in exercise when he could find it, and so, on the afternoon of the second day, he went out and asked one of the punchers if he could have a pony.

The man looked him over without being able to wholly conceal his contempt.

“Kin you ride?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered Frank, quietly.

“Hawse or kaow?” asked the cowboy.

“If you have a good saddle horse, I’d like to have him,” said Merry. “And be good enough to restrain your sarcasm. I don’t like it.”

The puncher gasped. He was angry. The idea of a tenderfoot speaking to him in such a way!

“All right,” he muttered. “I’ll git ye a critter, but our Western hawses ain’t like your Eastern ladies’ hawses.”

He departed.

Hodge had overheard all this, and he came up.

“You want to look out, Merry,” he said. “That chap didn’t like the way you called him down, and he’ll bring you a vicious animal.”

“I know it,” nodded Merry, pulling on a pair of heavy gloves. “It is what I expect.”

Bart said no more. He had seen Merry ride, and he knew Frank was a natural horse breaker.

The puncher returned in a short time, leading a little, wiry, evil-eyed broncho. He was followed by several other cowboys, and Merry heard one of them say:

“Better not let him try it, Hough. He’ll be killed, and Carson will fire you.”

“I’ll warn him,” returned the one called Hough, “an’ then I won’t be ter blame. He wants ter ride; let him ride – if he kin.”

Frank looked the broncho over.

“Is this the best saddle horse you have?” he asked.

“Waal, he’s the only one handy now,” was the sullen answer. “He’s a bit onreliable at times, an’ you’d better look out fer him. I wouldn’t recommend him for a lady ter ride.”

“By that I presume you mean he is a buckner?”

“Waal, he may buck some!” admitted the puncher, surprised that Frank should ask such a question.

“You haven’t anything but a hackamore on him,” said Merry. “Why didn’t you put a bit in his mouth? Do people usually ride with hackamores out here?”

“He kinder objects to a bit,” confessed the cowboy, his surprise increasing. “People out here ride with any old thing. Mebbe you hadn’t better try him.”

“Has he ever been ridden?”

“Certainly.”

“You give your word to that?”

“Yep.”

“All right. Then I’ll ride him.”

Frank went into the saddle before the puncher was aware that he contemplated such a thing. He yanked the halter out of the man’s hand, who leaped aside, with a cry of surprise and fear, barely escaping being hit by the broncho’s heels, for the creature wheeled and kicked, with a shrill scream.

Frank was entirely undisturbed. He had put on a pair of spurred riding boots which he found in the house, and now the broncho felt the prick of the spurs.

Then the broncho began to buck. Down went his head, and up into the air went his heels; down came his heels, and up went his head. Then he came down on all fours, and his entire body shot into the air. He came down stiff-legged, his back humped. Again and again he did this, with his nose between his knees, but still the tenderfoot remained in the saddle.

“Good Lord!” cried the wondering cowboys.

Bart Hodge stood at one side, his hands in his pockets, a look of quiet confidence on his face.

From an upper window of the ranch a pretty, sad-faced girl looked out, seeing everything. Frank had noticed her just before mounting the broncho. He wondered not a little, for up to that moment he had known nothing of such a girl being there. He had not seen her before since coming to the ranch.

All at once the broncho began to “pitch a-plunging,” jumping forward as he bucked. He stopped short and whirled end-for-end, bringing his nose where his tail was a moment before. He did that as he leaped into the air. Then he began to go up and down fore and aft with a decidedly nasty motion. He screamed his rage. He pitched first on one side and then on the other, letting his shoulders alternately jerk up and droop down almost to the ground.

“Good Lord!” cried the cowboys again, for through all this Frank Merriwell sat firmly in the saddle.

“Is this yere your tenderfoot what yer told us ye was goin’ ter learn a lesson, Hough?” they asked.

“Waal, I’ll be blowed!” was all the reply Hough made.

The broncho pitched “fence-cornered,” but even that had no effect on the rider.

Hough told the truth when he said the animal had been ridden before. Realizing at last the fruitlessness of its efforts, it suddenly ceased all attempts to unseat Frank. Two minutes later Merriwell was riding away on the creature’s back, and Hough, the discomfited cowboy, was the laughing-stock of the Twin Star Ranch.

CHAPTER VI. – A CHANGE OF NAME

At the open upper window of the ranch the sad-faced, pretty girl watched and waited till Frank Merriwell came riding back over the prairie.

“Here he comes!” she whispered. “He is handsome – so handsome! He is the first man I have seen who could be compared with Lawton.”

Kent Carson had heard of Frank’s departure on Wildfire, the bucking broncho. He found it difficult to believe that his guest had really ridden away on the animal, and he was on hand, together with Bart and Ephraim, when Merry came riding back.

Near one of the corrals a group of cowboys had gathered to watch the remarkable tenderfoot, and make sarcastic remarks to Hough, who was with them, looking sulky and disgusted.

Mr. Carson hurried to greet Frank.

“Look here, young man,” he cried, “I’d like to know where you ever learned to ride bucking bronchos?”

“This is not the first time I have been on a cattle ranch, Mr. Carson,” smiled Frank, springing down from Wildfire.

One of the cowboys came shuffling forward. It was Hough.

“Say, tenderfoot,” he said, keeping his eyes on the ground, “I allows that I made some onnecessary remarks ter you a while ago. I kinder hinted as how you might ride a kaow bettern a hawse. I’ll take it all back. You may be a tenderfoot, but you knows how ter ride as well as any of us. I said some things what I hadn’t oughter said, an’ I swallows it all.”

“That’s all right,” laughed Frank, good-naturedly. “You may have had good reasons for regarding tenderfeet with contempt, but now you will know all tenderfeet are not alike. I don’t hold feelings.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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