

# TIP TOP WEEKLY

"An ideal publication for the American Youth"

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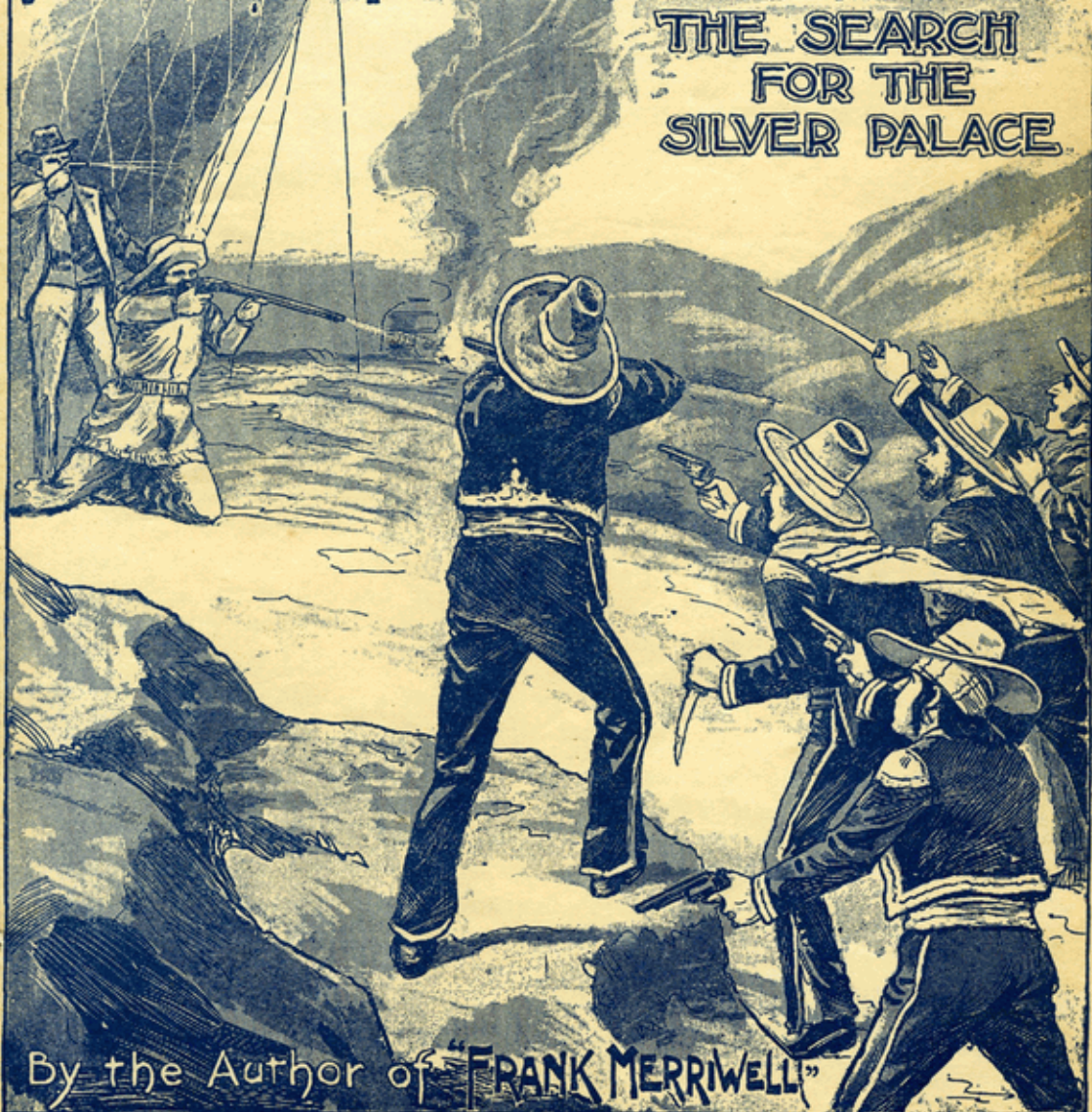
August 8, 1896.

Vol. 1. No. 17.

Price Five Cents.

## FRANK MERRIWELL IN MEXICO

OR  
THE SEARCH  
FOR THE  
SILVER PALACE



By the Author of "FRANK MERRIWELL"

BUSHNELL OPENED FIRE, AND FRANK MERRIWELL FOLLOWED HIS EXAMPLE. SEVERAL BANDITS WERE SEEN TO FALL.



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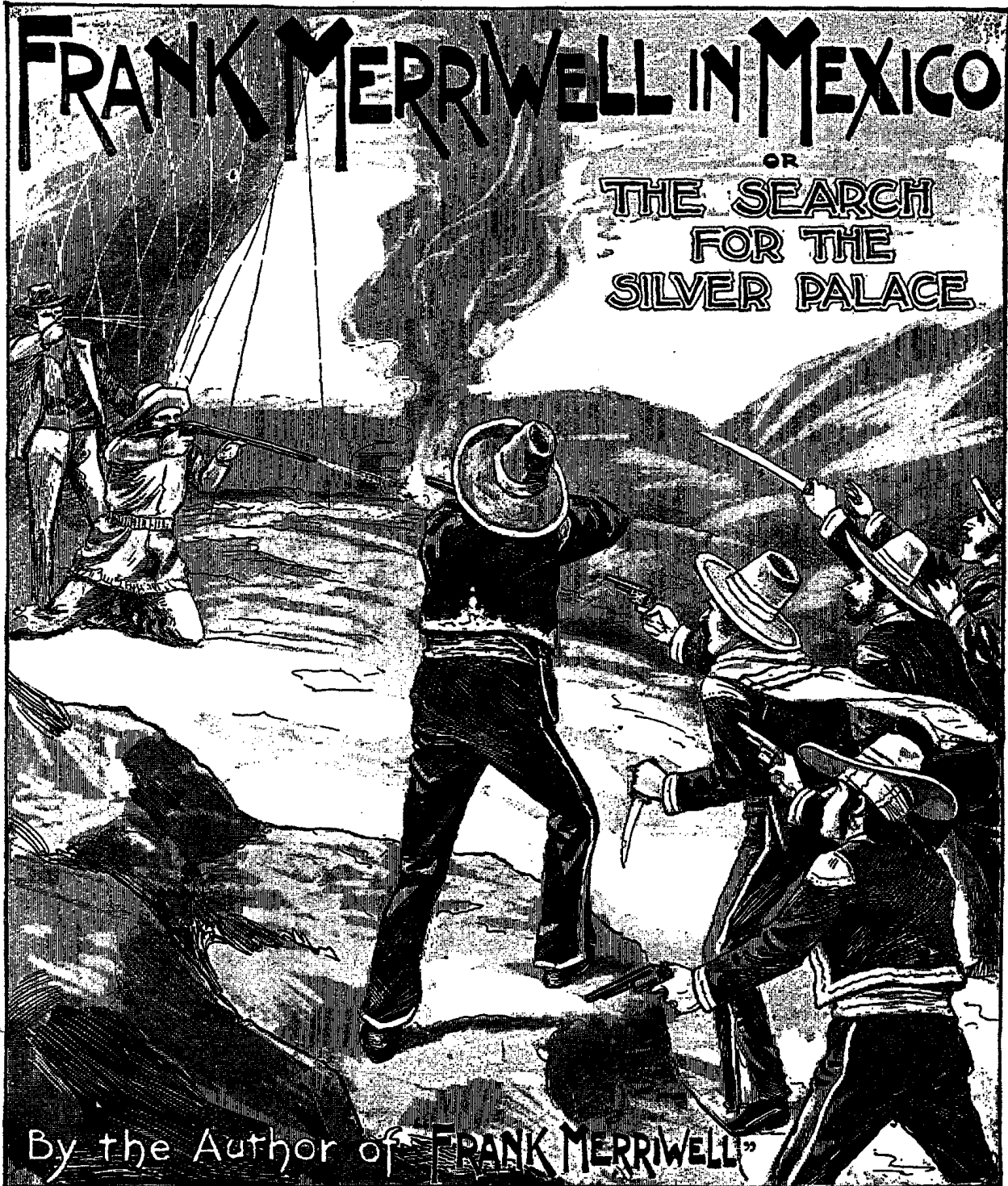
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## FRANK MERRIWELL IN MEXICO; OR, THE SEARCH FOR THE SILVER PALACE.

By the Author of "FRANK MERRIWELL."

### CHAPTER I.

#### A WONDERFUL STORY.

"It is in the heart of the Sierra Madre range, one hundred and twenty-five miles west of Zacatecas," said the dying man. "Across the blue chasm you can see its towers and turrets glistening in the sunshine. It is like a beautiful dream—dazzling, astounding, grand!"

"He wanders in his mind," softly declared Professor Scotch. "Poor fellow! His brain was turned and he was brought to his death by his fruitless search for the mythical Silver Palace."

The man who lay on a bed of grass in one corner of the wretched adobe hut turned a reproachful look on the little professor.

"You are wrong," he asserted, in a voice that seemed to have gained strength for the moment. "I am not deranged—I am not deceived by an hallucination. With my eyes I have seen the wonderful Silver Palace—yes, more than that, I have stood within the palace and beheld the marvelous treasures which it contains."

The professor turned away to hide the look on his face, but Frank Merriwell,

deeply interested, bent over the unfortunate man, asking:

"By what route can this wonderful palace be reached?"

"There is no route. Between us and the Silver Palace lie waterless deserts, great mountains, and, at last, a yawning chasm, miles in width, miles in depth. This chasm extends entirely round the broad plateau on which the wonderful palace stands like a dazzling dream. The bottom of the chasm is hidden by mists which assume fantastic forms, and whirl and sway and dash forward and backward, like battling armies. Indians fear the place; Mexicans hold it in superstitious horror. It is said that these mist-like forms are the ghosts of warriors dead and gone, a wonderful people who built the Silver Palace in the days of Cortez—built it where the Spaniard could not reach and despoil it."

Despite his doubts, the professor was listening with strong interest to this remarkable tale.

The fourth person in the hut was the Dutch boy, Hans Dunnerwust, who sat on the ground, his back against the wall, his jaw dropped and his eyes bulging. Occasionally, as he listened to the words of the dying man, he would mutter:

"Shimminy Gristmas!"

With surprising strength, the man on the bed of grass sat up, stretching out his hands, gazing away across the sunlit sandplain beyond the open door of the hut, and cried:

"I see it now—I see it once again! There, there—see it gleaming like a dazzling diamond in the sunshine! See its beautiful towers and turrets! That dome is of pure gold! Within those walls are treasures untold! There are great vaults of gold and silver ornaments, bars and ingots! There are precious stones in profusion! And all this treasure would make a thousand men rich for life! But it's not for me—it's lost to me forever!"

With a stifled moan, he fell back into Frank's arms, and was lowered on the bed of grass.

Professor Scotch hastily felt the man's pulse, listened for the beating of his heart, and then cried:

"Quick, Frank—the brandy! It may be too late, but we'll try to give him a few more minutes of life."

"That's right!" palpitated Frank. "Bring him back to consciousness, for we have not yet learned how to reach the Silver Palace."

"There is no such place as the Silver Palace," sharply declared the professor, as he forced a few drops of brandy between the lips of the unfortunate man. "The fellow has dreamed it."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps! Why, Frank, I took you for a boy of more sense! Think—think of the absurdity! It is impossible!"

"It may be."

"I know it is."

"Vell, maype you don'd nefer peen misdooken, brofessor?" insinuated Hans, recovering for a moment from his dazed condition.

The professor did not notice the Dutch's boy's words, for the man on the bed of

grass drew a long, fluttering breath and slowly opened his eyes.

"I thought I saw the palace once more," he whispered. "It was all a delusion."

"That is true," nodded the professor, "it is all a delusion. Such a place as this Silver Palace is an absurd impossibility. The illness through which you have passed has affected your mind, and you dreamed of the palace."

"It is not so!" returned the man, reproachfully. "I have proof! You doubt me—you will not believe?"

"Be calm—be quiet," urged the professor. "This excitement will cut your life short by minutes, and minutes are precious to you now."

"That is true; minutes are precious," hastily whispered the man. "It is not the fever I am dying of—no, no! The water from the spring you may see behind the hut—it has destroyed many people. This morning, before you came, a peon found me here. He told me—he said the spring was poison. The water robs men of strength—of life. I could not understand him well. He went away and left me. I could see him running across the desert, as if from a plague. And now I am dying—dying!"

"But the Silver Palace?" fluttered Frank Merriwell. "You are forgetting that."

"Yah," nodded the Dutch lad; "you peen forgetting dot, ain'd id?"

"The proof," urged Frank. "You say you have proof."

"Yah," put in Hans; "you say you haf der broof. Vere id peen?"

"It is here," declared the unfortunate, as he fumbled beneath the straw. "You are my countrymen—you have been kind to me. Alwin Bushnell may never return. It is terrible to think all that treasure may be lost—lost forever!"

"Who is Alwin Bushnell?"

"My partner—the one who was with me when I found the palace."

"Where is he now?"

"Heaven knows! He went for another balloon."

"Another balloon?"

"Yes; it was with the aid of a balloon that we reached the Silver Palace. Without it we could not have crossed the gulf."

"Absurd!" muttered the professor.

Despite the fact that the word was merely murmured, the miserable man on the bed of grass did not fail to catch it.

"Oh, I will convince even you!" he exclaimed, gasping for breath, and continuing to fumble beneath the straw.

"You shall see—you shall know! But our balloon—we had no means of obtaining a further supply of gas. It was barely sufficient to take us across the gulf, with a few pieces of treasure. We struck against the side of the bluff—we were falling back into the abyss! Barely were we able to scramble out of the car and cling to the rocks. Then we saw the balloon rise a little, like a bird freed of burden; but it suddenly collapsed, fluttered downward, and the mists leaped up and clutched it like a thousand exulting demons, dragging it down from our sight. We crawled up from the rocks, but it was a close call—a close call."

He lay exhausted, his eyes closed, his hand ceasing to fumble beneath the straw. Once more Professor Scotch gave him a little of the brandy.

Frank Merriwell was more than interested; he could feel his heart trembling with excitement. Something seemed to tell him that this man was speaking the truth, and he was eager to hear more.

For a long time the unfortunate lay gasping painfully for breath, but, at last, he was easier. He opened his eyes, and saw Frank watching him steadily, with an anxious expression.

"Ah!" he murmured, exultantly, "you

believe me—you do not doubt! I must tell you everything. You shall be Jack Burk's heir. Think of it—heir to wealth enough to make you richer than Monte Cristo! Witness—witness that I make this boy my heir!"

He turned to the professor and Hans, and both bowed, the former saying:

"We are witnesses."

"Good! We escaped with our lives, but we brought little of the treasure with us. I was determined to find the way back there, and I made a map. See, here it is."

He thrust a soiled and crumpled piece of paper into Frank's hand, and the boy saw there were lines and writing on it.

"How we found our way out of the mountains, how we endured the heat of the desert I cannot tell," went on the weak voice of the man on the bed of straw. "We reached Zacatecas, and then Bushnell went for another balloon. He knows friends who have money and power, and he will get the balloon—if he lives."

"But the proof—the proof that you were going to show us?"

"It is here! Look!"

From beneath the straw Jack Burk drew forth a queer little figure of solid gold—a figure like the pictures of Aztec gods, which Frank had seen.

"This is proof!" declared the man. "It is some of the treasure we brought from the palace. Bushnell took all the rest."

The professor excitedly grasped the little image, and gazed searchingly at it.

"It is all right—it is genuine!" he finally exclaimed.

"Of course it is genuine," said the man on the bed of grass. "And there are more in the Silver Palace. There the treasures of the Aztecs were hidden, and there they have remained. The country all around is full of fierce natives, who hold the palace in awe and prevent others from reaching it. They have kept the secret well, but

——"

"Vot vos dot?" cried Hans.

At some distance on the plain outside the hut were wildly galloping horses, for they could hear hoof-beats and wild cries. Then came a fusillade of pistol-shots!

## CHAPTER II.

### GONE.

"Bandits!" cried Jack Burk. "It may be Pacheco!"

"Pacheco?" questioned Frank.

"Pacheco, the Human Hawk! He haunts the mountains and the desert. He pursued us across the desert, but we escaped him. I have been in hiding here to avoid him. He believes we brought much treasure from the mountains."

The professor had leaped to the door, and was looking away on the plain. Now he cried, excitedly:

"Look here! A band of horsemen pursuing a white man—plainly an American. Look, he is shooting again!"

Once more the shots were heard.

Frank ran to the door, catching up a rifle that had been leaning against the wall of the hut.

"Stand aside!" he shouted, forcing his way past the professor. No countryman of mine can be in danger that I do not try to give him a helping hand."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Get a crack at those greasers."

"You are crazy! You will bring the entire band down on us!"

"Let 'em come! One Yankee is good for six greasers."

Past the hut at a distance a single horseman was riding, hotly spurring the animal which bore him. At least a dozen dark-faced, fierce-looking ruffians, mounted on hardy little ponies, were in pursuit.

As Professor Scotch had said, the fugitive was plainly an American, a native of the United States. He had

turned in the saddle to send bullets whistling back at his pursuers.

Frank ran out and dropped on one knee. The professor followed him, and Hans came from the hut.

Just as Frank lifted the rifle to his shoulder and was on the point of shooting, the voice of Jack Burk sounded from the doorway, to which he had dragged himself:

"It is Bushnell, my partner! Al, Al—Al Bushnell!"

His voice was faint and weak, and it did not reach the ears of the man out on the plain.

Then Frank began shooting, and his first bullet brought down one of the ponies of the pursuers, sending a bandit rolling over and over in the dust, to leap up like a cat, and spring behind a comrade on the back of another pony.

"Dot peen britty goot, Vrankie," complimented Hans Dunnerwust.

Again and again Frank fired, and the bandits quickly swerved away from the hut, feeling their ponies sway or fall beneath them.

In an astonishingly brief space of time the course of pursuit was deflected, giving the fugitive a chance to get away into Mendoza, which lay at a distance of about three miles from the hut.

The man in flight heard the shots, saw the figures in front of the hut, and waved his hand to them.

The professor excitedly beckoned for Bushnell to come to the hut, but the horseman did not seem to understand, and he kept straight on toward the town.

"Confound him!" exploded the professor. "Why didn't he come?"

"He don'd like a trap to run into," said Hans.

"But there is no trap here "

"How he known dot?"

"Well, I don't know as I blame him. Of course he could not be sure it was not a trap, and so he was cautious."

Frank was calmly refilling the magazine of the rifle with fresh cartridges.

"Why you didn't shoot some of der pandits dead, Vrankie?" asked Hans.

"I do not wish to shed human blood if I can avoid it."

"You don't done dot if you shoot six or eleven of dose togs."

"Oh, they are human beings."

"Don't you belief me. Dey vos volves—kiotes."

"Well, I did not care to shoot them if I could aid the man in any other way, and I succeeded. See, they have given up the pursuit, and the fugitive is far away in that little cloud of dust."

"Frank."

"Yes, professor."

"We should follow him, and bring him back to his dying partner."

"And leave Jack Burk here alone—possibly to die alone?"

"We can't do that."

"Of course not."

"What then?"

"We'll have to consider the matter. But Burk— Look—see there, professor! He is flat on his face in the doorway! He fell like that after trying to shout to his partner."

Frank leaped forward, and turned the man on his back. It was a drawn, ghastly face that the trio gazed down upon.

Professor Scotch quickly knelt beside the motionless form, feeling for the pulse, and then shaking his head gravely.

"What is it?" anxiously asked Frank.

"Has he—"

He was silent at a motion from the professor, who bent to listen for some movement of the man's heart.

After a few seconds, Professor Scotch straightened up, and solemnly declared:

"This is the end for him. We can do nothing more."

"He is dead?"

"Yes."

There was an awed hush.

"Now we can leave him," the professor finally said. "Pacheco, the bandit, cannot harm him now."

They lifted the body and bore it back to the wretched bed of straw, on which they tenderly placed it.

"The idol—the golden image?" said the professor. "You must not forget that, Frank. You have it?"

"Little danger that I shall forget it. It is here, where it fell from my fingers as I ran out."

He picked up the image, and placed it in one of his pockets.

Then, having covered the face of Jack Burk with his handkerchief, Frank led the way from the hut.

Their horses had been tethered near at hand, and they were soon mounted and riding away toward Mendoza.

The sun beat down hotly on the plain of white sand, and the sky was of a bright blue, such as Frank had never seen elsewhere.

Outside Mendoza was a narrow canal, but a few feet in width, and half filled with water, from which rose little whiffs of hot steam.

Along the side of the canal was a staggering rude stone wall, fringed with bushes in strips and clumps.

Beyond the canal, which fixed the boundary of the plain of sand, through vistas of tree trunks, could be seen glimpses of brown fields, fading away into pale pink, violet, and green.

The dome and towers of a church rose against the dim blue low down, and on every side were spots of cream-white, red, and yellow, with patches of dark green intervening, revealing bits of the town, with orange groves all about.

Across the fields ran a road that was ankle deep with dust, and along the road a string of burrows, loaded with great bundles of green fodder, were crawling into the town.

An undulating mass of yellow dust

finally revealed itself as a drove of sheep, urged along by peons.

Groups of natives were strolling in both directions, seeking the shadows along the canal. The women were in straw hats, with their black hair plaited, and little children strung to their backs; the men wore serapes and sandals, and smoked cigarettes.

Along the side of the canal were scattered scores of natives of all ages and both sexes, lolling beneath the bushes or soaking their bodies in the water, while their heads rested on the ground.

Those stretched in the shadow of the bushes had taken their bath, and were waiting for their bodies to dry, covered simply by serapes.

From beneath such a covering dark-eyed native girls stared curiously at the passing trio, causing Hans no small amount of confusion.

"I say, Vrankie," said the Dutch boy, "vot you dinks apoudt dot pusiness uf dakin' a path in public mit der roadt beside?"

"It seems to be the custom of the country," smiled Frank; "and they do not seem to think it at all improper."

"Vell, somepody better toldt dem to stob id. Id keeps mein plood mein face in so much dot I shall look like you hat peen drinking."

"They think nothing of it," explained the professor. "You will notice with what deftness they disrobe, slipping out of their clothes and into the water without exposing much more than a bare toe."

"Oxcuse you!" fluttered Hans. "I don'd like to took mein chances py looking. Somepody mighd make a misdake."

The sun was low down as they rode into the town.

"We have no time to lose," said Frank. "We must move lively, if we mean to return to the hut before night-fall."

"That's right," nodded Professor Scotch.

They were successful in finding a native undertaker, but the fellow was very lazy, and he did not want to do anything till the next day.

"To-morrow, senors, to-morrow," he said.

That did not satisfy, however, and he was soon aroused by the sight of money. Learning where the corpse was, he procured a cart and a burro, and they again set out along the road.

They found whole families soaking in groups in the canal, sousing their babies in the water, and draining them on the bank.

Young Indian girls in groups were combing out their hair and chatting merrily among themselves and with friends in the water.

"Dere oughter peen some law for dot," muttered Hans.

Leaving the canal, they set out upon the sand-plain, the undertaker's burro crawling along at an aggravating pace, its master refusing to whip it up, despite urging.

The sun had set, and darkness was settling in a blue haze on the plain when the hut was reached.

Frank lighted a pocket lamp he always carried, and entered.

A cry of astonishment broke from his lips.

"Professor! professor!" he called; "the body is gone!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### HELD FOR RANSOM.

"Gone!"

The professor was astonished.

"Shimminy Gristmas! I don'd toldt you dot!"

Hans Dunnerwust was dazed.

"Yes, gone," repeated Frank, throw-



ing the light about the room and finally bringing it back to the bed of grass.

"But—but it's impossible."

"Impossible or not, it is true, as you may see."

"But the man was dead—as dead as he could be!"

"Yah!" snorted Hans. "Py shingoes! dot peen der trute. Dot man vos teader as a goffin nail, und don'd you vorget him!"

The trio were silent, staring in stupefied amazement at the bed of grass.

An uncanny feeling began to creep over Frank, and it seemed that a chill hand touched his face and played about his temples.

Hans' teeth began to chatter.

"I am quite ill," the professor faintly declared, in a feeble tone of voice. "The exertions of the day have been far too severe for me."

"Yah, yah!" gurgled the Dutch lad. "You vos anodder. Oxcuse me while I go oudt to ged a liddle fresh air."

He made a bolt for the open door, and Professor Scotch was not long in following. Frank, however, was determined to be thoroughly satisfied, and he again began looking for the body of the dead man, once more going over the entire hut.

"The body is gone beyond a doubt," he finally muttered.

"There is no place for it to be concealed here, and dead men do not hide themselves."

He went out, and found Professor Scotch and Hans awaiting his appearance with no small amount of anxiety.

"Ah!" said the professor, with a deep breath of relief; "you are all right."

"All right," said Frank, with amusement; "of course I am. What did you think? Fancy I was going to be spirited away by spooks?"

The little man drew himself up with an assumption of great dignity.

"Young man," he rumbled, in his deepest tone, "don't be frivolous on such

an occasion as this. You are quite aware that I do not believe in spooks or anything of the sort; but we are in a strange country now, and strange things happen here."

"Yah," nodded Hans. "Dot peen exactly righdt."

"For instance, the disappearance of that corpse is most remarkable."

"Dot peen der first dime I nefer known a deat man to ged ub un valk away all alone mit hinseluf by," declared Hans.

"What do you think has happened here, professor?" asked Frank.

"It is plain Jack Burk's body is gone."

"Sure enough."

"And it does not seem reasonable that he walked away himself."

"Vell, you don'd know apout dot," broke in Hans. "Maype he don'd pelief we vos goin' pack here to bury him, und he got turet uf vaiting for der funerals."

"There must have been other people here after we left," said Frank.

"Right," nodded the professor.

"Whom?"

"You say."

"Bandits?"

"Bushnell?"

"One or the other."

"Perhaps both."

Frank fell to examining the ground for "sign," but, although his eyes were unusually keen, he was not an expert in such matters, and he discovered nothing that could serve as a revelation.

"The man was dead beyond a doubt, professor—you are sure?"

"Sure?" roared the little man, bristling in a moment. "Of course I am sure! Do you take me for a howling idiot?"

"Don't get excited, professor. The best of us are liable to err at times. It would not be strange if you——"

"But I d. ln't—I tell you I didn't! The body may have been removed by the bandits which hang about this section."

"Or by Al Bushnell, Burk's partner."

"Yes; Bushnell may have recognized him, although he did not seem to do so. In that case, he has been here——"

"And that explains everything."

"Everything."

"He took the body away to give it decent burial."

"And we have had our trouble for nothing."

By this time the native undertaker got the drift of the talk, and set up a wail of lamentation and accusation. He had come all that distance at great expense to himself and great waste of time during which he might have been sleeping or smoking. It was robbery, robbery, robbery. It was like the Americanos. He had a wife and many—very many children depending on him. He had been tricked by the Americanos, and he would complain that he had been cheated. They should be arrested; they should be compelled to pay.

"Oh, come your perch off, und gone took a fall to yourseluf!" cried Hans, in disgust. "You gif me der lifer gomblaint!"

The native continued to wail and lament and accuse them till Frank succeeded in quieting him by paying him three times as much as he would have asked had the body been found in the hut. The old fellow saw how he could make it appear as a clean case of deception on the part of the strangers, and he worked his little game for all there was in it. Having received his money, he lost no time in turning his cart about and heading back toward Mendoza, evidently fearing the body might be found at last and forced upon him.

"We'd better be going, too," said Professor Scotch.

"That's right," agreed Frank. "There is no telling what danger we may encounter on the plain after nightfall."

"Vell, don'd let us peen all nighd apout gedding a mofe on," fluttered Hans, hastening toward the horses.

So they mounted and rode away toward Mendoza, although Frank was far from satisfied to do so without solving the mystery of the remarkable disappearance.

Darkness was falling heavily on the plain, across which a cool and refreshing breath came from the distant mountains.

Frank kept his eyes open for danger, more than half expecting to run upon a gang of bandits at any moment. As they approached the town they began to breathe easier, and, before long, they were riding along the dusty road that led into the little town.

Entering Mendoza they found on each hand low buildings connected by long white adobe walls, against which grew prickly pears in abundance, running in straggling lines away out upon the open country.

About the edges of the town were little fires, winking redly here and there, with earthen pots which were balanced on smoldering embers raked out from the general mass.

Withered and skinny old hags were crooning over the pots, surrounded by swarthy children and lazy men, who were watching the preparation of the evening meal.

Groups of peons, muffled to the eyes with their serapes, were sitting with their backs to the adobe walls, apparently fast asleep; but Frank noted that glittering black eyes peered out from between the serapes and the huts, and he had no doubt but that many of the fellows would willingly cut a throat for a ridiculously small sum of money.

Within the town it was different. All day the window-shutters had been closely barred, but now they were flung wide, and the flash of dark eyes or the low musical laugh of a senorita told that the maidens who had lolled all the hot day were now astir.

Doors were flung wide, and houses which at midday had seemed uninhabited

were astir with life. In the patios beautiful gardens were blooming, and through iron gates easy-chairs and hammocks could be seen.

Many of the señoritas had come forth, and were strolling in groups of threes or fours, dressed in pink and white lawn, with Spanish veils and fans. The most of them wore white stockings and red-heeled slippers.

Many a witching glance was shyly cast at Frank, but his mind was so occupied that he heeded none of them.

The hotel was reached, and they were dismounting when a battered and tattered old man, about whose shoulders were cast a ragged blanket, and whose face was hidden by a scraggly white beard, came up with a faltering step.

"Pardon me," he said, in a thin, cracked voice, "I see you are Americans, natives of the States, Yankees, and, as I happen to be from Michigan, I hasten to speak to you. I know you will have pity on an unfortunate countryman. My story is short. My son came to this wretched land to try to make a fortune. He went into the mines, and was doing well. He sent me home money; and I put a little aside, so that I had a snug little sum after a time. Then he fell into the hands of Pacheco, the bandit. You have heard of Pacheco, gentlemen?"

"We have," said Frank, who was endeavoring to get a fair look into the old man's eyes.

"We surely have," agreed the professor.

"Vell, you can pet my poots on dot," nodded Hans.

"The wretch—the cut-throat!" cried the old man, shaking his clinched hand in the air. "Why didn't he kill me? He has robbed me of everything—everything!"

"Tell us—finish your story," urged the professor.

Frank said nothing. The light from a

window shone close by the old man. Frank was waiting for the man to change his position so the light would shine on his face.

For some moments the man seemed too agitated to proceed, but he finally went on.

"My son—my boy fell into the hands of this wretched bandit. Pacheco took him captive. Then he sent word to me that he would murder my son if I did not appear and pay two thousand dollars ransom money. Two thousand dollars! I did not have it in the world. But I had a little home. I sold it—I sold everything to raise the money to save my boy. I obtained it. And then—then, my friends, I received another letter. Then Pacheco demanded three thousand dollars."

"Der brice vos on der jump," murmured Hans.

"But that is not the worst!" cried the old man, waving his arms excitedly. "Oh, the monster—the demon!"

He wrung his hands and groaned as if with great anguish.

"Be calm, be calm," urged Professor Scotch. "My dear sir, you are working yourself into a dreadful state."

"Almost as pad as der Sdate uf New Jersey," muttered the irrepressible Dutch boy, catching his breath convulsively.

"How can I be calm!" groaned the stranger. "It is not possible to be calm and think of such a terrible thing!"

"What terrible thing?" asked Frank. "You have not told the entire story, and we do not know what you mean."

"True, true. Listen! With that letter Pacheco—the monster!—sent one of my boy's little fingers!"

"Shimminy Gristmas! I don'd toldt you dot, do I?"

"Horrible! horrible!"

The professor and Hans uttered these exclamations, but Frank was calm and apparently unmoved, still with his eyes fastened on the face of the old man.

"How you toldt dot vos der finger uf your son, mister?"

"That's it, that's it—how could you tell?"

"My son—my own boy—he added a line to the letter, stating that the finger had been taken from his left hand, and that Pacheco threatened to cut off his fingers one by one and send them to me if I did not hasten with the ransom money."

"Dot seddled you!"

"You recognized the handwriting as that of your son?"

"I did; but I recognized something besides that."

"What?"

"The finger."

"Oh, you may have been mistaken in that—surely you may."

"I was not."

"How do you know?"

"By a mark on the finger."

"Ah! What sort of a mark?"

"A peculiar scar like a triangle, situated between the first and second joints. Besides that, the nail had once been crushed, after which it was never perfect."

"That was quite enough," nodded Professor Scotch.

"Yah," agreed Hans; "dot peen guide enough alretty."

Still Frank was silent, watching and waiting, missing not a word that fell from the man's lips, missing not a gesture, failing to note no move.

This silence on the part of Merriwell seemed to affect the man, who turned to him, saying a trifle sharply:

"Boy, boy, have you no sympathy with me? Think of the suffering I have passed through! You should pity me."

"What are you trying to do now?" asked Frank, quietly:

"I am trying to raise some money to ransom my son."

"But I thought you did raise money."

"So I did, but not enough."

"Finish the story."

"Well, when I received that letter I immediately hastened to this land of bandits and half-breeds. I did not have three thousand dollars, but I hoped that what I had would be enough to soften Pacheco's heart—to save my poor boy."

"And you failed?"

The old man groaned again.

"My boy is still in Pacheco's power, and I have not a dollar left in all the world! Failed—miserably failed!"

"Well, what do you hope to do—what are you trying to do?"

"Raise five hundred dollars."

"How?"

"In any way."

"By begging?"

"I do not know how. Anyway, anyway will do!"

"But you cannot raise it by begging in this land, man," said the professor.

"This is a land of beggars. Everybody seems to be poor and wretched."

"But I have found some of my own countrymen, and I hoped that you might have pity on me—oh, I did hope!"

"What? You didn't expect us to give you five hundred dollars?"

"Think of my boy—my poor boy! Pacheco has threatened to murder him by inches—to cut him up and send him to me in pieces! Is it not something terrible to contemplate?"

"Vell, I should dink id vos!" gurgled the Dutch boy.

"But how did you lose your money?"

"I was robbed."

"Robbed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Pacheco."

"The bandit himself?"

"Yes."

"How did it happen?"

"I fell into his hands."

"And he took your money without setting your son free?"



"He did."

"Did you tell him it was all you had in the world?"

"I told him that a score of times."

"What did he say?"

"Told me to raise more, or have the pleasure of receiving my boy in pieces."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three days."

"Near here?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been in Mendoza?"

"Two days, and during that time I have received this from Pacheco."

He took something from his pocket—something wrapped in a handkerchief. With trembling fingers he unrolled it, exposing to view—

A bloody human finger!

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### UNMASKED.

Hans Dunnerwust and Professor Scotch uttered exclamations of horror, starting back from the sight revealed by the light that came from the window set deep in the adobe wall.

Frank Merriwell's teeth came together with a peculiar click, but he uttered no exclamation, nor did he start.

This seemed to affect the old man unpleasantly, for he turned on Frank, crying in an accusing manner and tone:

"Have you no heart! Are you made of stone?"

"Hardly," was the quiet reply.

"This finger—it is the second torn from the hand of my boy by Pacheco, the bandit—Pacheco, the monster!"

"Pacheco seems to be a man of great determination."

Professor Scotch gazed at Frank in astonishment, for the boy was of a very sympathetic and kindly nature, and he now seemed quite unlike his usual self.

"Frank, Frank, think of the suffering of this poor father!"

"Yah," murmured Hans; "shust dink how pad you would felt uf you efer been py his blace," put in Hans, sobbing chokingly.

"It is very, very sad," said Frank; but there seemed to be a singularly sarcastic ring to the words which fell from his lips.

"Have you seen your son since he fell into the hands of Pacheco, sir?" asked the professor.

"Yes, I saw him; but I could scarcely recognize him, he was so changed—so wan and ghastly. The skin is drawn tightly over his bones, and he looks as if he were nearly starved to death."

"Did he see you?"

"Yes."

"Recognizé you?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

The man wrung his hands with a gesture of unutterable anguish.

"Oh, his appeal—I can hear it now! He begged me to save him, or to give him poison that he might kill himself!"

"Where is he now?"

"In a cave."

"Where is the cave?"

"That I cannot tell, for I was blindfolded all the time, except while in the cave where my boy is kept."

"It is near Mendoza?"

"It must be within fifty miles of here."

"Perhaps it is nearer?"

"Possibly."

"But you have no means of knowing in which direction it lies?"

"No."

"Your only hope is to raise the five hundred dollars?"

"That is my only hope, and that can scarcely be called a hope, for I must have the money within a day or two, or my boy will be dead."

"Hum! hum!" coughed the professor.

"This is a very unfortunate affair—very

unfortunate. I am not a wealthy man, but I——”

“You will aid me?” shouted the old man, joyously. “Heaven will bless you, sir—Heaven will bless you!”

“I have not said so—I have not said I would aid you,” Scotch hastily said. “I am going to consider the matter—I’ll think it over.”

“Then I have no hope.”

“Why not?”

“If your heart is not opened now, it will never open. My poor boy is lost, and I am ready for death!”

The old man seemed to break down and sob like a child, burying his face in his hands, his body shaking convulsively.

Frank Merriwell made a quick gesture to the others, pressing a finger to his lips as a warning for silence.

In a moment the old man lifted his face, which seemed wet with tears.

“My last hope is gone!” he sighed. “And you are travelers—you are rich!”

He turned to Frank, to whom, with an appealing gesture, he extended a hand that was shaking as if with the palsy.

“You—surely you will have sympathy with me! I can see by your face and your bearing that you are one of fortune’s favorites—you are rich. A few dollars——”

“My dear man,” said Frank, quite calmly, “I should be more than delighted to aid you, if you had told the truth.”

The old man fell back. He was standing fairly in the light which shone from the window.

“What do you mean?” he hoarsely asked. “Do you think I have been lying to you—do you fancy such a thing?”

“I fancy nothing; I know you have lied!”

“Frank!” cried Professor Scotch, in amazement.

“Shimminy Gristmas!” gurgled Hans Dunnerwust, in a dazed way.

The manner of the old man changed in a twinkling.

“You are insolent, boy! You had better be careful!”

“Now you threaten,” laughed Frank. “Well, I expected as much from a beggar, a fraud, and a scoundrel!”

Professor Scotch and Hans fell into each other’s arms, overcome with excitement and wonder.

Frank was calm and deliberate, and he did not lift his voice above the tone used in ordinary conversation.

Still another step did the man fall back, and then a grating snarl broke from his lips, and he seemed overcome with rage. He leaned forward, hissing:

“You insulting puppy!”

“The truth must always seem like an insult to a scoundrel.”

“Do you dare?”

“What is there to fear?”

“Much.”

Frank snapped his fingers.

“Your tune has changed in the twinkling of an eye. You are no longer the heart-broken father, begging for his boy; but you have flung aside some of the mask, and exposed your true nature.”

Professor Scotch saw this was true, and he was quaking with fear of what might follow this remarkable change.

As for Hans, it took some time for ideas to work their way through his brain, and he was still in a bewildered condition.

For a moment the stranger was silent, seeming to choke back words which rose in his throat. Finally, he cried:

“Oh, very well! I did not expect to get anything out of you; but it would have been far better for you if I had. Now——”

“What?”

Frank asked the question, as the speaker faltered.

“You shall soon learn what. I am

going to leave you, but we shall see more of each other, don't forget that."

"Wait—do not be in a hurry. I am not satisfied till I—see your face!"

With the final words, Frank made a leap and a sweep of his hand, clutching the white beard the man wore, and tearing it from his face!

The beard was false!

The face exposed was smoothly shaved and weather-tanned.

"Ha!" cried Frank, triumphantly. "I thought so! This poor old man is Carlos Merriwell, my villainous cousin!"

## CHAPTER V.

### KIDNAPED.

Carlos Merriwell was Frank's deadly enemy, although they were blood cousins.

Carlos was the son of Asher Merriwell, the brother of Frank's father.

At the time of his death Asher Merriwell was supposed to be a crusty old bachelor, a man who had never cared for women and had never married. But he had not been a woman-hater all his life, and there was a romance in his career.

Asher Merriwell had been snared by the wiles of an adventuress, and he had married her. By this woman he had a son, but the marriage had been kept a secret, so that when she deceived him and they quarreled they were able to separate and live apart without the fact becoming public that Merriwell had been married.

Fortunately the woman died without openly proclaiming herself as the wife of Asher Merriwell. In her veins there had been Spanish blood, and her son was named Carlos.

After the death of his wife, Asher Merriwell set about providing for and educating the boy, although Carlos continued to bear his mother's maiden name of Durcal.

As Carlos grew up he developed into a

wild and reckless young blade, making no amount of trouble and worry for his father.

Asher Merriwell did his best for the boy, but there was bad blood in the lad's veins, and it cost the man no small sums to settle for the various "sports" in which Carlos participated.

Finally Carlos took a fancy to strike out and see the world for himself, and he disappeared without telling whither he was going.

After this, he troubled his father at intervals until he committed a crime in a foreign country, where he was tried, convicted, and imprisoned for a long term of years.

This was the last straw so far as Asher Merriwell was concerned, and he straightway proceeded to disown Carlos and cut him off without a cent.

It was afterward reported that Carl Durcal had been shot by guards while attempting to escape from prison, and Asher Merriwell died firmly believing himself to be sonless.

At his death, Asher left everything to the son of his brother, Frank Merriwell, and provided that Frank should travel under the guardianship of Professor Scotch, as the eccentric old uncle believed travel furnished the surest means for "broadening the mind."

But Carlos Merriwell had not been killed, and he had escaped from prison. Finding he had been cut off without a dollar and everything had been left to Frank, Carlos was furious, and he swore that his cousin should not live to enjoy the property.

In some ways Carlos was shrewd; in others he was not. He was shrewd enough to see that he might have trouble in proving himself the son of Asher Merriwell by a lawful marriage, and so he did not attempt it.

But there was a still greater stumbling-block in his way, for if he came out and

announced himself and made a fight for the property, he would be forced to tell the truth concerning his past life, and the fact that he was an escaped convict would be made known.

Having considered these things, Carlos grew desperate. If he could not have his father's property, he swore again and again that Frank should not hold it.

With all the reckless abandon of his nature, Carlos made two mad attempts on Frank's life, both of which were baffled, and then the young desperado was forced to make himself scarce.

But Carlos had become an expert crook, and he was generally flush with ill-gotten gains, so he was able to put spies on Frank. He hired private detectives, and Frank Merriwell was continually under secret surveillance.

Thus it came about that Carlos knew when Frank set out upon his travels, and he set a snare for the boy in New York city.

Straight into this snare Frank walked, but he escaped through his own exertions, and then baffled two further attempts on his life.

By this time Carlos found it necessary to skip again, and Frank had neither seen nor heard from him till this moment when the fellow stood unmasked in the Mexican town of Mendoza.

Frank had become so familiar with his villainous cousin's voice and gestures that Carlos had not been able to deceive him. From the first Frank had believed the old man a fraud, and he was soon satisfied that the fellow was Carlos.

On Carlos Merriwell's cheek was a scar that had been hidden by the false beard—a scar that he would bear as long as he lived.

Professor Scotch nearly collapsed in a helpless heap, so completely astounded that he could not utter a word.

As for Hans, he simply gasped:  
"Shimminy Gristmas!"

A snarling exclamation of fury broke from Carlos' lips.

"Oh, you're too sharp, my fine cousin!" he grated, his hand disappearing beneath the ragged blanket. "You are too sharp to live!"

Out came the hand, and a knife flashed in the light that shone from the window of the hotel. He made a leap and a blow.

A cry of horror broke from the lips of Professor Scotch, for it seemed that Frank must be stabbed by the young desperado.

Frank Merriwell, however, was on the alert, and was watching for just such a move. With a twisting movement, he drew his body aside, so the knife clipped down past his shoulder, cutting open his sleeve, but failing to reach his flesh.

"That was near it," he said, as he whirled and caught Carlos by the wrist.

Frank had a clutch of iron, and he gave Carlos' wrist a wrench that forced a cry from the fellow's lips and caused the knife to drop to the ground.

"You are altogether too handy with such a weapon," said the boy, coolly. "It is evident your adaptness with a dagger comes from your mother's side. Your face is dark and treacherous, and you look well at home in this land of dark and treacherous people."

Carlos ground forth a fierce exclamation, making a desperate move to fling Frank off, but failing.

"Oh, you are smart!" the fellow with the scarred face admitted. "But you have been lucky. You were lucky at Fardale, and you were lucky in New York. Now you have come to a land where I will have my turn. You'll never leave Mexico alive!"

"I have listened to your threats before this."

"I have made no threats that shall not come true."

"What a desperate wretch you are, Carlos! I would have met you on even



terms and come to an agreement with you, if you——”

“Bah! Do you think I would make terms? Not much! You have robbed me of what is rightfully mine, and I have sworn you shall not take the good of it. I’ll keep that oath!”

A strange cry broke from his lips, as he found he could not tear his wrist from Frank’s fingers.

Then came a rush of cat-like footfalls and a clatter of hoofs. All at once voices were heard crying:

“Ladrones! ladrones!”

Dark figures appeared on every hand, sending natives fleeing to shelter. Spanish oaths sounded on the evening air, and the glint of steel was seen.

“Shimminy Gristmas!” gurgled Hans Dunnerwust. “Uf we don’d peen in a heap uf drouble, you vos a liar!”

“It’s the bandits, Frank!” called Professor Scotch. “They have charged right into the town, and they——”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Carlos. “You fear the bandits! They are my friends. They are here, and it is my turn!”

A horseman was riding straight down on Frank Merriwell, and the boy flung Carlos aside, making a leap that took him out of the way.

Something, glittering brightly, descended in a sweep toward Frank’s head, but the blow was stopped by Carlos, who shouted something in Spanish.

Frank understood Spanish well enough to catch the drift of the words, and he knew his cousin had not saved him through compassion, but for quite another purpose.

Carlos coveted the riches into which Frank had fallen, and he meant to have a portion of the money. If Frank were killed, there was little chance that he would ever handle a dollar of the fortune, so he had cried out that his cousin was to be spared, captured, and held for ransom.

That was enough to warn Frank Merriwell of the terrible peril that overshadowed him at the moment.

Out came his revolvers, and his back went against the wall. Upward were flung his hands, and the weapons began to bark.

Two horses fell, sent down by the two first bullets from the pistols of the boy at bay.

But Frank Merriwell found he could not shoot horses and save himself, for dark forms were pressing upon him, and he must fall into the clutches of the bandits in another moment unless he resorted to the most desperate measures.

“If you will have it, then you shall!” he muttered, through his set teeth, turning his aim on the human forms.

Spouts of red fire shot from the muzzles of the revolvers, and the cracking of the weapons was followed by cries and groans.

Through a smoky haze Frank saw some of the dark figures fling up their arms and topple to the ground within a few feet of him.

He wondered what had become of Hans and the professor, for he could see nothing of either, and they had been close at hand a moment before.

In the midst of all this, Frank wondered at his own calmness. His one thought was that not a bullet should be wasted, and then he feared he would find his weapons empty and useless before the desperadoes were rebuffed.

But this reception was something the bandits had not expected from a boy. They had no heart to stand up before a lad who could shoot with the skill of a Gringo cowboy, and did not seem at all excited when attacked by twenty men.

Mexican half-bloods are cowards at heart, and, by the time they saw two or three of their number fall before the fire from Frank’s revolvers they turned and took to their heels like a flock of frightened sheep.

“Say, holdt on avile und led me ged a few pullets indo you, mein friendts.”

It was Hans’ voice, and, looking down, Frank saw the Dutch lad on the ground at his feet, wither he had crept on hands and knees.

“What are you down there for, Hans?”

“Vot you dink, Vrankie? You don’d subbose I sdood up all der dime und ged in der vay der pullets uf? Vell, you may oxcuse me! I don’d like to peen a deat man alretty yet.”

“That’s good stuff, Hans. I admire your judgment.”

“Dank you, Vrankie. I admire der vay you vork dose revolfers. Dot peat der pand, und don’d you vorged him!”

At this moment, a horse with a double burden swept past in the flare of light.

"Help! Frank—Frank Merriwell! Help—save me!"

"Merciful goodness!" cried Frank. "It is the professor's voice!"

"Und he vos on dot horse!"

"Yes—a captive!"

"Dot's vat he vos!"

"They are carrying him off!"

"You pet!"

"Our own horses—where are they? We must pursue! What have become of our horses?"

"Dose pandits haf dooken them, I suspect."

This was true; Frank had killed two of the horses belonging to the bandits, but the desperadoes had escaped with the three animals hired by our friends.

But that was not the worst, for Professor Scotch had been captured and carried away by the bold ruffians.

Frank heard the professor's appeals for help, and heard a mocking, cold-blooded laugh that he knew came from the lips of Carlos Merriwell.

Then the clatter of hoofs passed on down the street, growing fainter and fainter, left the town for the open plain, and finally died out in the night.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CARRIED INTO THE MOUNTAINS.

In vain Frank attempted to organize a party to pursue the bandits. The citizens of Mendoza were completely terrorized, and they had no heart to follow the desperadoes out upon the plain, which was the bandits' own stamping-ground.

Frank urged, entreated, begged, and finally grew furious, but he simply wasted his breath.

"No, no, senor," protested a Mexican. "You no find anybody dat chase Pacheco dis night—no, no, not much!"

"Pacheco? You don't mean to say—you can't mean——"

"Dat was Pacheco and his band, senor."

Frank groaned.

"Pacheco!" he muttered, huskily—"Pacheco, the worst wretch in all Mexico! He is utterly heartless, and the professor

will—— But Pacheco is not the worst!" he suddenly gasped. "There is Carlos Merriwell, who must be one of the bandits. He may take a fancy to torture Professor Scotch simply because the professor is my guardian."

"What you say, senor?" asked the curious Mexican. "I do not understand all dat you speak."

Frank turned away with a gesture of despair.

"Vot you goin' to done, Vrankie?" asked Hans, dolefully.

"I do not seem able to do anything now. This matter must be placed before the authorities, but I do not fancy that will amount to anything. The officers here are afraid of the bandits, and the government is criminally negligent in the matter of pushing and punishing the out-laws. The capture of an American to be held for ransom will be considered by them as a very funny joke."

"Vel, I don'd seen vot you goin' to done apout id."

"I do not see myself, but come on, and we will find out."

He sought the highest officials of the town, and laid the matter before them. In the most polite manner possible, they protested their pained solicitation and commiseration, but when he urged them to do something, they replied:

"To-morrow, senor, or the next day, we will see what we may be able to do."

"To-morrow!" cried Frank, desperately. "With you everything is to-morrow, to-morrow! To-day, to-night, now is the time to do something! Delays are fatal, particularly in pursuing bandits and kidnapers."

But they shook their heads sadly, and continued to express sympathy and regret, all the while protesting it would be impossible to do anything before to-morrow or the next day.

Frank was so furious and desperate that he even thought of following the bandits with Hans as an only companion, but the man of whom he had obtained the horses in the first place would not let him have other animals.

That was not all. This man had gone through some kind of proceeding to lawfully seize Frank and Hans and hold them till the animals captured by the

bandits were paid for at the price he should name, and this he proceeded to do.

Now Frank did not have the price demanded for the three horses, and he could not draw it that night, so he was obliged to submit, and the two boys were prisoners till near three o'clock the next afternoon, when the money was obtained and the bill paid.

To a certain extent, Frank relieved his feelings by expressing his mind very freely.

But nearly eighteen hours had passed since the encounter of the previous evening and the kidnaping of Professor Scotch, so he felt that all hope of hot pursuit and capture of the bandits was gone.

At the hotel he found a letter awaiting him, and, to his unbounded amazement, it was from the professor.

With haste he tore it open, and these words are what he read:

"DEAR FRANK:—Pacheco commands me to write this letter. We are at the headwaters of the Rio de Nieves, but we move on to the westward as soon as I have written. He tells me we are bound for the mountains beyond Huejuguilla el Alto, which is directly west of Zacatecas as the bird flies one hundred and ten miles. He bids me tell you to follow to Huejuguilla el Alto, where he says arrangements will be made for my ransom. Remember Jack Burk. He spoke of the mountains to the west of Zacatecas. Pacheco threatens to mutilate me and forward fragments to you if you do not follow to the point specified. He is watching me as I write, and one of his men will carry this letter to Mendoza and deliver it. The situation is desperate, and it strikes me that it is best to comply with Pacheco's demands in case you care to bother about me. If you want me to be chopped up bit by bit and forwarded to you, do not bother to follow. I have no doubt but Pacheco will keep his word to the letter in this matter. I am, my dear boy,

"Your devoted guardian and tutor,  
"HORACE ORMAN TYLER SCOTCH."

That this letter was genuine there could be no doubt, as it was written in the professor's peculiar style of chirog-

raphy; but it did not sound like the professor, and Frank knew well enough that it had been written under compulsion, and the language had been dictated by another party.

"Poor old professor!" murmured the boy. "Poor old professor! He shall be saved! He shall be saved! He knows I will do everything I can for him."

"Yah, but he don'd seem to say dot der ledder in," observed Hans, who had also read every word.

"Huejuguilla el Alto is one hundred and ten miles west of Zacatecas."

"Vere you belief they findt dot name, Vrankie?"

Frank did not mind the Dutch lad's question, but bowed his head on his hand and fell to thinking.

"We must have horses, and we must follow. 'Remember Jack Burk.' Surely the professor put that part of the letter in of his own accord. He did not speak of the Silver Palace, but he wished to call it to my mind. That palace, according to Burk, lies directly west of Zacatecas, somewhere amid the mountains beyond this place he has mentioned. The professor meant for me to understand that I would be proceeding on my way to search for the palace. Perhaps he hopes to escape."

"Yah," broke in Hans, "berhaps he meant to done dot, Vrankie."

"We would be very near the mountains—it must be that we would be in the mountains."

"I guess dot peen shust apoudt vere we peen, Vrankie."

"If he escaped, or should be rescued or ransomed, we could easily continue the search for the palace."

"You vos oxactly ightdt."

"We must have horses and a guide."

"We can ged dem mit money."

"We had better proceed to Zacatecas, and procure the animals and the guide there."

"Shust oxactly vot I vould haf suggestet, Vrankie."

"We will lose no time about it."

"Vell, I guess nod!"

"But Carlos—Carlos, my cousin. It is very strange, but Professor Scotch does not mention him."

"Py shimminy! dot peen der trute."

"And I am certain it was Carlos that captured the professor. I heard the fellow laugh—his wicked, triumphant laugh!"

"I heardt dot meinseluf, Vrankie?"

"Carlos must be with the band."

"Yah."

"And Pacheco is carrying this matter out to suit my cousin."

"Yah."

"Hans, it is possible you had better remain behind."

"Vot vos dot?" gurgled the Dutch lad, in blank amazement. "Vot for vos I goin' to gone pehindt und stay, Vrankie."

"I see a trap in this—a plot to lead me into a snare and make me a captive."

"Vell, don'd I stood ub und took mein medicine mit you all der dimes? Vot vos der maddetr mit me? Vos you lost your courage in me alretty yet?"

"Hans, I have no right to take you into such danger. Without doubt a snare will be spread for me, but I am going to depend on fate to help me avoid it."

"Vell, I took some stock dot fate in meinseluf."

"If I should take you along and you were killed——"

"I took ycur chances on dot, mein poy. Vot vos I draveling aroundt mit you vor anyhow you vant to know ain'd id!"

"You are traveling for pleasure, and not to fight bandits."

"Uf dot peen a bard der bleasure uf, you don'd haf some rightt to rob me uf id. Vrank Merriwell, dit you efer know me to gone pack mit you on?"

"No, Hans."

"Dot saddles dot. You nefer vill. Shust count me indo dis racket. I am going rightt along mit you, und don'd you rememper dot!"

Frank laughed.

"Hans," he said, "you are true blue. We will stick by each other till the professor is saved from Pacheco and Carlos Merriwell."

"Yah, we done dot."

"Shake!"

"You pet!"

They clasped hands, and that point was settled.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CAMP IN THE DESERT.

Without unnecessary delay, they took the train from Mendoza to Zacatecas, which was a much larger place.

In Zacatecas they set about the task of finding a reliable guide, which was no easy matter, as they soon discovered.

The Mexican half-bloods were a lazy, shiftless set, and full-blooded Spaniards did not seem to care about taking the trip across the desert.

Till late that night Frank searched in vain for the man he wanted, and he was finally forced to give over the task till another day.

Such a delay made him very impatient, and he felt much like starting out without a guide, depending on a compass, with which he believed he would be able to make his way due west to Huejugilla el Alto.

The landlord of the hotel at which they stopped that night was a fine-appearing man, and Frank ventured to lay the matter before him.

The landlord listened to the entire story, looking very grave, shook his head warningly, and said:

"Do not think of attempting to cross the desert alone, young senors. Without a guide you might get lost and perish for water. By all means take a guide."

"But how are we to obtain a trustworthy guide, sir?"

"That is truly a problem, but I think I may be able to assist you in the morning."

"If you can, it will be a great favor."

"Many thanks, young senor. I will see what can be done. If you would take my advice, you would not go to Huejugilla el Alto."

"Why not?"

"It is far from the railroad, and is situated in a very wild region. If you were to go there and should never be heard of again, it would not be easy for your friends to discover what had become of you. Pacheco directed you to go there, and he means you no good. It is likely you will walk into a trap that Pacheco has set for you."

"I have considered that," said Frank, quietly; "and I have decided to go."



"Oh, very well," with a gesture expressive of regret. "I know it is quite impossible to change the determination of you Americans. If you have firmly decided to go, you will go, even though you knew all the deadly dangers that may lay in wait for you."

Being again assured that the landlord would do his best to obtain a guide, Frank proposed to retire for the night.

For all of the troubles that beset him, Frank was able to sleep soundly, having trained himself to sleep under almost any circumstances. Hans also slept and snored, to be awakened in the morning by Frank, who was shaking him roughly.

"Come, Hans, it is time we were stirring."

"Vot vos dot?" cried the Dutch lad, in surprise. "We don'd peen asleep more as fifteen minutes alretty yet."

"It is morning."

"I don'd toldt you so! Vell, dot peats der pand!"

Hans got up and dressed with great reluctance, yawning and declaring over and over that the nights in Mexico were not more than fifteen or twenty minutes in length.

The landlord had prepared a special breakfast for them, and it proved the best they had found since leaving "the States," so they ate heartily and felt much better afterward.

After breakfast the landlord himself informed them that he had been able to obtain a guide.

"He is the very person you want, young senors, for he knows the desert and he knows the mountains. You may depend on him to lead you straight across to Huejügilla el Alto."

The guide was waiting for them, wrapped to his chin in a crimson poncho, and smoking a cigarette. He was a dark-faced, somewhat sinister-looking fellow, and he gave his name as Pedro.

While Frank did not like the appearance of the man, he felt that it was not policy to delay longer, and a bargain was soon made. Pedro not only agreed to take them quickly across the desert, but he contracted to furnish horses for them.

The forenoon was not far advanced when they rode out of Zacatecas, and,

with the sun at their backs, headed toward the west.

Before the day passed Pedro showed by many things that he was quite familiar with the desert. He knew where shade and water were to be found, and, at noon-day, they rested long beside a spring, with the sun beating on the wide waste of sand, over which the heat haze danced, and where no cooling breath seemed astir.

The heat affected Hans much more than it did Frank. The Dutch boy suffered, but he made no complaint.

With the sun well over into the western sky, they pushed onward again. They did not halt as the grateful shadows of night lay on the desert, but followed Pedro on and on.

At last, far across the desert, they saw the twinkling of a light that seemed like a fallen star.

"It's a camp-fire," declared Pedro, in Spanish. "Who can be there?"

"It may be bandits," suggested Frank, somewhat wary.

"No," declared the guide, "bandits do not build fires on the open plains. Bandits it cannot be."

He did not hesitate to lead them straight toward the fire.

Frank whispered to Hans:

"Have your weapons ready. This may be the trap."

As they approached the fire they were able to make out the figures of two or three horses, but no human being was to be seen, although a coffee-pot sat on some coals, fragrant steam rising from the nozzle.

Pedro stopped, seeming somewhat uneasy for the first time.

"What is it?" asked Frank, with apprehension.

"Yah, vot id vos?" asked Hans. "Vos der camp left all alone mit ids lonesome?"

"Not that, senors; but we have been heard, and the ones at the camp are hiding and watching."

"Vell, I like dot. Maype dey haf der trop on us alretty soon."

"That is likely," said Frank.

Pedro called out something in Spanish, but there was no answer, save that one of the horses lifted its head and neighed.

Then Frank tried it in English:

"Ho, the camp! Who is there, and where are you?"

Almost instantly a man's voice replied:

"I'm out hyar whar I kin take a peep at yer, as I heard yer comin'. Didn't know but you wus greasers, an' I ain't got no use fer ther onery varmints. As yer kin talk United States, just mosey right up ter ther fire and join me at supper."

There was a hearty freedom about the invitation that dispelled Frank's fears immediately, and they rode forward into the firelight.

As they did so a man rose from where he had been stretched on the sand, and came forward to meet them.

"Great Scott!" shouted Frank, as the firelight fell on the man's face. "It's Alwin Bushnell, Jack Burk's partner!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE TREASURE SEEKER.

"Thet thar's my handle," acknowledged the man; "but I'm derved ef I understand how you 'uns happen ter know it!"

He stared at the boys and the guide in blank amazement. Seeing Pedro's face fairly, he gave a slight start, and then looked still more closely.

"There's no doubt," palpitated Frank.

"You are Alwin Bushnell?"

"That's whatever," nodded the camper.

"And you are alone?"

"Certun sure."

"Bound west?"

"I reckon."

"For the mountains and the Silver

Frank caught himself and stopped short, remembering Pedro, and knowing the guide's ears and eyes were wide open to hear and see everything.

Bushnell fell back a step, a look of still greater surprise coming to his bronzed and bearded face.

"W'at's thet thar you wus goin' ter say?" he demanded.

"Wait," said Frank; "I will tell you later. It is better."

Plainly Alwin Bushnell was puzzled and not a little amazed.

"You know my handle, an' you seem

ter know whatever way I'm trailin'. This yere lays over me, as I acknowledges instanter."

"That's not hard to explain."

"Then I begs yer to explain it without delay none whatever."

"Your partner told us of you."

"Old Jack?"

"Yes."

"When, and whar?"

"Two days ago, outside of Mendoza."

"He wuz thar?"

"Yes."

"But how did yer know me?"

"We saw you."

"When?"

"When you were pursued across the plain by bandits."

Bushnell slapped his thigh.

"Thar!" he cried; "I remembers yer now! You wuz near a doby hut, an' yer opened up on ther pizen skunks as wuz arter me."

"That's right."

"Wal, I'm much obliged, fer you socked ther lead ter them critters so they switched off an' let me get away. You kin shoot, boy."

"Some."

"Some! Wa'al, that's right, you bet! Give us a wag of your fin! I'm mortal glad ter clap peepers on yer, fer I never expected ter see yer an' thank yer fer thet trick."

Frank swung from the saddle, and surrendered his hand into the broad "paw" of the rough and hearty Westerner, who gave it a crushing grip and a rough shake, repeating:

"I'm mortal glad ter see yer, thet's whatever! But I want ter know how you happened ter chip inter thet thar little game. You took a hand at jest ther right time ter turn ther run of ther cards, an' I got out without goin' broke."

"I chipped in because I saw you were a white man, and you were hard pressed by a villainous crew who must be bandits. I believe in white men standing by white men."

"Say, thet's a great motter, young man. 'White men stand by white men.' As fer me, I don't like a greaser none whatever."

As he said this, Bushnell gave Pedro

another searching look, and the guide scowled at the ground in a sullen way.

"Now," continued the Westerner, "w'at I wants ter know next is w'at yer knows about Jack Burk. We had a place all agreed on ter meet w'en I returned, but he wusn't thar, an' I hed ter go it alone. That's why I'm yere alone."

"It was not Burk's fault that he did not meet you."

"Say you so? Then lay a straight trail fer me ter foller."

"He was sick."

"Is that whatever? Wa'al, derned ef I could seem ter cut his trail anywhar I went, an' I made a great hustle fer it."

"He was in the hut where you saw us."

"Wa'al, dern my skin! Ef I'd knowed thet, I'd made a straight run fer thet yere ranch, bet yer boots!"

"He came to the door and shouted to you."

"You don't tell me thus! An' I didn't hear him! Wa'al, wa'al! Whar wuz my ears? Whar is he now?"

"Dead."

Bushnell reeled.

"Is he that?" he gasped, recovering.

"An' I didn't get to see him! Say, this clean upsets me, sure as shootin'!"

The man seemed greatly affected.

"Poor old Jack!" he muttered. "We've made many a tramp together, an' we struck it rich at last, but he'll never git ther good of thet thar strike."

Then he seemed to remember that he was watched by several eyes, and he straightened up, passing his hand over his face.

"Jack shall hev a big monumint," he cried. "Tell me whar my old pard is planted."

"That is something I do not know, Mr. Bushnell."

The man was astonished.

"Don't know? Why, how's thet?"

Frank told the entire story of Burk's death and mysterious disappearance, to which Bushnell listened with breathless interest. When it was finished, the man cried:

"Thet thar beats me! I don't understand it none whatever."

"No more do I," confessed Frank. "There is no doubt but Burk was dead, and the corpse did not walk away of its

own accord. It was my intention to investigate the mystery, but later events prevented."

Frank then explained about the kidnaping of Professor Scotch by the bandits.

While the boy was relating this, Bushnell was closely studying the guide's face, as revealed by the firelight. Frank noted that a strange look seemed to come into the eyes of the Westerner, and he appeared to be holding himself in check.

When this explanation was finished, Bushnell asked:

"And you are on your way ter Huejuggilla el Alto with ther hope of rescuin' ther professor?"

"We are," replied Frank.

"You pet my life," nodded Hans.

"This is the guide who was recommended to you in Zacatecas?"

"Yes."

"You trust him fully?"

"We are obliged to do so."

"Wa'al, boys, ef this yere critter can't take yer straight ter Pacheco, nobody kin."

"What do you mean?"

"Jest this!" cried Bushnell, explosively; "this yere greaser galoot w'at yer calls Pedro is nobody but Ferez!"

"Who is Ferez?"

"He's Pacheco's lieutenant!"

Frank uttered a cry of amazement and anger, wheeling quickly on the Mexican, his hand seeking the butt of a revolver.

But the dark-faced rascal seemed ready for such an exposure, for, with a yell of defiance, he dropped behind his horse, and the animal shot like a rocket from the firelight into the shadows which lay thick on the desert.

Bushnell opened up with a brace of revolvers, sending a dozen bullets whistling after the fellow in less than as many seconds.

At the first shot, Hans Dannerwust fell off his horse, striking on his back on the sand, where he lay, faintly gurgling:

"Uf you don'd shood der odder vay, I vos a tead man!"

"Don't let him escape with a whole skin!" shouted Frank, as he began to work a revolver, although he was blinded by the flashes from Bushnell's weapon so that he was forced to shoot by guess.

Ferez seemed to bear a charmed life, for he fled straight on into the night, sending back a mocking shout of laughter. From far out on the waste, he cried:

"Bah, Gringo dogs! You cannot harm me! I will see you again, Americanoes! This is not the last."

With an exclamation of disappointment and anger, Bushnell flung his empty revolvers on the sand at his feet.

"Dern an' double dern a fool!" he roared. "Ef I'd done my shootin' first, an' my talkin' arterward, he wouldn't got away."

But Ferez had escaped, and they could no more than make the best of it.

When this was over and the excitement had subsided, they sat about the fire and discussed the situation. Frank then showed the golden image which Burk had given him, and explained how the dying man had told of the Silver Palace.

Bushnell listened quietly, a cloud on his face. At the conclusion of the story, he rose to his feet, saying:

"Ef Jack Burk made you his heir, thet goes, an' I ain't kickin' none whatever. Old Jack didn't hev no relatives, so he hed a right to make any galoot his heir. But thar's goin' ter be plenty of worry fer anybody as tries ter reach ther Silver Palace. How'd you 'spect ter git 'crost ther chasm?"

"As yet, I have not taken that into consideration. The kidnaping of Professor Scotch has banished thoughts of everything else from my mind."

"Wa'al, ef Jack Burk made you his heir, you're entitled ter your half of ther treasure, providin' you're ready ter stand your half of ther expenses ef we fail ter git thar."

"You may depend on me so far as that is concerned."

"Wa'al, then, you see I hev three hawses. One is fer me ter ride, another is ter kerry provisions, and ther third is ter tote ther balloon."

"The balloon!"

"Thet's whatever. I hev another balloon with which ter cross thet thar chasm. It's ther only way ter git over. In crossin' ther balloon will be loaded with a ballast of sand; but when we come back, ther ballast will be pure gold!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE PROFESSOR'S ESCAPE.

They did not expect to reach Huejugilla el Alto without being molested by bandits, for it was presumed that Pacheco's lieutenant would carry the word to his chief, and the desperadoes would lose no time in moving against them.

Knowing their danger, they were exceedingly cautious, traveling much by night, and keeping in concealment by day, and, to their surprise, the bandits made no descent upon them.

Huejugilla el Alto proved to be a wild and picturesque place. Being far from the line of railroad, it had not even felt the touch of northern civilization, and the boys felt as if they had been transported back to the seventeenth century.

"Hyar, lads," said Bushnell, "yer will see a town thet's clean greaser all ther way through, an' it's ten ter one thar ain't nary galoot besides ourselves in ther derned old place thet kin say a word of United States."

The Westerner could talk Spanish after a fashion, and that was about all the natives of Huejugilla el Alto were able to do, with the exception of the few whose blood was untainted, and who claimed to be aristocrats.

However, for all of their strange dialect and his imperfect Spanish, Bushnell succeeded in making himself understood, so they found lodgings at a low, rambling adobe building which served as a hotel. They paid in advance for one day, and were well satisfied with the price, although Bushnell declared it was at least double ordinary rates.

We ain't likely ter be long in town before Ferez locates us an' comes arter his hawses. Ther derned bandits are bold enough 'long ther line of ther railroad, but they lay 'way over thet out hyar. Wuss then all, ther people of ther towns kinder stand in with ther pizen varmints."

"Stand in with them—how?"

"Why, hide 'em when ther soldiers is arter 'em, an' don't bother 'em at any other time."

"I presume they are afraid of the bandits, which explains why they do so."

"Afeared? Wa'al, I'll allow as how they may be; but then thar's something



of ther bandit in ev'ry blamed greaser I ever clapped peepers on. They're onery, they are."

Frank had noted that almost all Westerners who mingled much with the people of Mexico held Spaniards and natives alike in contempt, calling them all "greasers." He could not understand this, for, as he had observed, the people of the country were exceedingly polite and chivalrous, treating strangers with the utmost courtesy, if courtesy were given in return. Rudeness seemed to shock and wound them, causing them to draw within themselves, as a turtle draws into its shell. Indeed, so polite were the people that Frank came to believe that a bandit who had decided to cut a man's throat and rob him would first beg the man's pardon for such rudeness and then proceed about the job with the greatest skill, suavity, and gentleness.

Having settled at the hotel, Bushnell ordered a square meal, and, when it was served, they proceeded to satisfy the hunger which had grown upon them with their journey across the desert.

Bushnell also took care to look after the horses and equipments himself.

"Ef Ferez calls fer his hawses, I don't want him ter git away with this yar balloon an' gas generator," said the Westerner, as he saw the articles mentioned were placed under lock and key. "Ef we should lose them, it'd be all up with us so fur as gittin' ter ther Silver Palace is concerned."

Frank expected to hear something from Pacheco as soon as Huejugilla el Alto was reached, but he found no message awaiting him.

"Poor professor!" he said. "I expect he has suffered untold torments since he was kidnaped."

"Yah," nodded Hans. "Uf Brofessor Scotch don'd peen britty sick uf dis vild life mit Mexico, you vos a liar."

That night they were sitting outside the hotel when they heard a great commotion at the southern end of the town.

"Vot vos dot?" gasped the Dutch boy, in alarm. "Sounds like dere vos drouple aroundt dot locality."

"That's right," agreed Frank, feeling for his revolvers; "and it is coming this way as fast as it can."

"Mebbe another revolution has broke out," observed Bushnell, lazily. "Best git under kiver, an' let ther circus go by."

They could hear the clatter of horses' hoofs, the cracking of pistols, and a mingling of wild cries.

All at once Frank Merriwell became somewhat excited.

"On my life, I believe I hear the voice of Professor Scotch!" he shouted.

"Yah!" said Hans; "I belief I hear dot, too!"

"They may be bringin' ther professor in," said Bushnell. "Ef he's thar, we'll take an interest in ther case, you bet yer boots!"

Into the hotel he dashed, and, in a moment, he returned with his Winchester.

Along the street came a horseman, clinging to the back of an unsaddled animal, closely pursued by at least twenty wild riders, some of whom were shooting at the legs of the fleeing horse, while one was whirling a lasso to make a cast that must bring the animal to a sudden halt.

"Ten to one the fugitive is the professor!" shouted Frank, peering through the dusk.

"Then, I reckon we'll hev ter chip in right hyar an' now," said Bushnell, calmly.

He flung the Winchester to his shoulder, and a spout of fire streamed from the muzzle in an instant.

The fellow who was whirling the lasso flung up his arm and plunged headlong from the horse's back to the dust of the street.

"Professor! professor!" shouted Frank. "Stop—stop here!"

"Can't do it," came back the reply. "The horse won't stop."

"Jump off—fall off—get off some way!"

"All right, here goes."

In another moment Professor Scotch, for it really was the professor, flung himself from the back of the animal he had ridden, struck the ground, rolled over and over like a ball, and lay still within thirty feet of Frank, groaning dolefully.

In the meantime, Al Bushnell was working his Winchester in a manner that was simply amazing, for a steady stream of fire seemed to pour from the muzzle of the weapon, and the cracking of the weapon echoed through the streets of Hueju-

gilla el Alto like the rattling fire from a line of infantry.

After that first shot Bushnell lowered the muzzle of his weapon, as, in most cases at short range, his motto was to "shoot low," for he well knew more lead could be wasted by shooting too high than in any other manner.

In about three seconds he had thrown the pursuing bandits into the utmost confusion, for they had never before encountered such a reception in Huejugilla el Alto, and it was the last thing they had expected. With all possible haste, they reined about and took to flight, hearing the bullets whistling about them, or feeling their horses leap madly at the sting of lead or go plunging to the ground.

The inhabitants of the town had fled into their houses before the rush of the bandits, so there was little danger that any of Bushnell's bullets would reach innocent persons.

The confusion and rout of the bandits was brought about in a few seconds, and Bushnell was heard to mutter:

"One white man is good fer a hundred onery greasers any time! Ther derved skunks hain't got a blamed bit of sand!"

Frank ran and lifted the fallen professor, flinging the man across his shoulder, and carrying him into the hotel.

Hans followed with frantic haste, and Bushnell came sauntering lazily in after the bandits had been routed and driven back.

"Are you badly hurt, professor?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"I'm killed!" groaned Scotch, dolefully. "I'm shot full of holes, and every bone in my body is broken! Farewell, my boy! We'll meet in a better land, where there are no bandits to molest or make afraid."

"Where are you shot?"

"Everywhere—all over! You can't touch me where I am not shot! They fired more than four hundred bullets through me! I am so full of holes that I wonder you can see me at all!"

Bushnell made a hasty examination of the professor, who lay on the floor, groaning faintly, his eyes closed.

"Look hyar, pard," said the Westerner roughly "ef you want ter pass in yer chips ye'll hev ter stand up an' let me put a few

more holes in yer. I can't find a place whar you're touched by a bullet an' I'm blowed ef I 'low you broke a bone when ye tumbled from ther hawse."

The professor sat up with a sudden snap.

"What's that?" he cried. "I'm not shot? I'm not all broke up? Is it possible? Can I believe you?"

"Yah," nodded Hans, gravely; "I can belief me. You vas all right professor und dot is sdraight."

"Wow!" shouted Scotch, bounding to his feet like a rubber ball. "That's what I call great luck! Why, I thought I must be killed sure! I don't know how I escaped all those bullets. And then the fall! Providence must have been with me."

"Vell, I don'd know apoudt dot pefore you come der town in," said Hans; "but you vos alone mit yourself when we saw you, professor."

The landlord of the hotel came bustling up in a perfect tumult of terror, wringing his hands and almost weeping.

"Oh, senors!" he cried, in Spanish, "what have you done? You have ruined me! You stopped at my house, and you shoot the ladrones. Ah, senors, you know not what that means to me. Pacheco will come down on me—he will raid my house, I am a ruined man, and you are responsible for it. You must leave my house without delay! If you remain here, the whole town will rise against me! All the people will know this must make Pacheco very angry, and they will know he must take revenge on the place. They will be angry with me because I allow it. Carramba! How could I help it? I could do nothing. It came, and it was all over before I know what was doing. Senors, you must have pity on me—you must leave my house immediately."

Bushnell caught enough of this to translate it to the others.

"Ther best thing we kin do is ter git out instanter," he said. "Ef we wait, ther outlaws will watch every road out of ther town, an' we'll hev trouble in gittin' away."

"Then let's get away immediately," fluttered the professor. "If I fall into their hands again, I'm a dead man!"

"Yes, we will get out immediately," decided Frank; "but we'll do it as secretly and silently as possible."

Bushnell nodded his satisfaction, and, thirty minutes later, the party was ready to move. They left the hotel by a back way, and, guided by the landlord, made their way along dark and narrow streets, creeping cautiously through the town till the outskirts were reached.

There Frank gave the landlord some money, and, after calling down blessings on their heads, he quickly slipped away and disappeared.

"Now we'll hustle right along," said the Westerner. "We'll put a good long stretch between ourselves an' Huejugilla el Alto before mornin'. We're off, bound straight inter ther mountains——"

"And straight for the Silver Palace," added Frank.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE AVENGER.

They were fortunate in getting away without being seen by any of the bandits, and at dawn they were well up into the mountains, where Bushnell found a secluded place for them to camp and rest, as rest was something of which they all sorely stood in need.

Bushnell prepared breakfast, and Frank insisted that Professor Scotch should explain how he escaped from Pacheco's gang.

"Don't ask me," sighed the little man, fondling his red whiskers. "I can't explain it—really I can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, I don't know how I happened to do it. They forced me to write that letter against my will, two of them standing over me with drawn daggers while I was writing, and prodding me a bit whenever I refused to put down the words Pacheco ordered written."

"Then Pacheco speaks English?"

"As well as I do."

"What does he look like?"

"I do not know."

"How is that?"

"He kept his face concealed with his serape quite up to his eyes."

"Thar's a mystery about Pacheco," broke in Bushnell. "No one seems ter know jest what ther varmint looks like."

"Go on, professor," urged Frank; "tell us just how you escaped."

"I tell you I do not know myself. All I know is that they tied me to a horse, and brought me across a plain of burning sand, where I nearly perished for want of water, and was nearly sawed in two by the backbone of the horse I rode. I believed it was a case of gone goose with me. At last they camped in a wild spot, and I was so badly used up that I could scarcely eat or do anything but lay around and groan. They seemed to think there was no need of watching me very closely, and I noticed that I was alone sometimes. Then, feeling utterly reckless, I began to watch for a chance to sneak away. I didn't care if I were shot, or if I escaped and perished from hunger and thirst. I was bound to make the attempt. Last night I made it. A saddleless horse strayed along where I was, and I made a jump for the animal. Before they knew what I was doing, I was on the beast's back and yelling into its ears like a maniac. The horse scooted out of the camp, and I clung on. The bandits pursued me, and everything else is a haze till I heard Frank calling for me to jump off. I recognized his voice and fell off the horse, although I had not the least idea in the world where I was."

"Wa'al," chuckled Bushnell, "thet's w'at I call dead fool luck, beggin' yer pardon fer speakin' so open like, at which I means no harm whatever."

"Oh, ye-needn't beg my pardon," quickly said Professor Scotch. "I don't want any credit for getting away. It wasn't a case of brains at all."

Breakfast was prepared, and they ate heartily, after which Frank, Hans, and the professor lay down to sleep, while Bushnell smoked a black pipe.

But even Bushnell was not made of iron, and the pipe soothed him to slumber, so the entire party slept, with no one on guard.

All at once, some hours later, they were awakened by an exclamation from Frank, who sat up and stared at the form of a stranger, the latter being quietly squatting in their midst, calmly puffing at a cigarette, while his puncho was wrapped about him to his lips.

Frank's exclamation awakened Bushnell like an electric shock, and, even as his eyes opened, his hand shot out, the

fingers grasping the butt of a revolver that was pointed straight at the stranger.

"Stiddy, thar!" called the Westerner. "I hev ther drop on yer, an' I'll sock yer full of lead ef yer wiggle a toe-nail! You hear me chirp!"

The stranger continued smoking, his coal-black eyes being the only part of him to move, for all of the threatening revolver.

Hans sat up, gasping:

"Shimminy Gristmas! Der pandits haf caught us alretty soon!"

At this Professor Scotch gave a groan of dismay, faintly gurgling:

"Then I'm a goner!"

That the stranger was a half-blood could be seen at a glance.

"Drap thet derved cigaroot, an' give an account of yerself instanter right off!" ordered Bushnell, threateningly. "Who in blazes be yer?"

The cigarette fell from the man's lips, and he answered:

"I am Rodeo."

"Wa'al, who is Rodeo?"

"The brother of Pacheco."

"Don'd I toldt you dot!" panted the Dutch boy.

Professor Scotch groaned again, and rolled a little farther from the half-blood, but still made no effort to sit up.

"Wa'al, dern your skin!" cried Bushnell. "You've got a nerve to come hyar! I s'pose Pacheco an' his gang of onery varmints is within whoopin' distance?"

"I am alone; there is no one within call."

"Wa'al, w'at be yer hyar fer, thet's what I wants ter know?"

"I found you asleep, and I came to warn you."

"Of what?"

"Danger. The ladrones are on your trail already. Before the sun sinks behind the mountains they will be here. If you are not gone, you must all fall into their hands."

Bushnell looked doubtful and suspicious, while a puzzled expression came into his bronzed face.

"Look hyar," he said; "you're up ter some game, an' I'm derved ef I know what she am, but yer wants ter understand yer can't monkey with this old cocn none whatever. I hold the drop on yer,

Old Socks, an' I may take a fancy ter bore yer once jest fer fun, so ye'd best talk straight an' squar', an' be lively about it."

"Yah," nodded Hans, threateningly, "you petter peen in a plamed pig hurry apoudt dot talking pusiness."

"What do you wish me to say, senors?"

"Explain why you're hyar ter warn us."

"Because I'm the brother of Pacheco."

"Thet don't go down with this old coon. Pacheco is ther leader of ther bandits."

"He was the leader of the bandits."

"Was the leader?"

"Si, senior."

"An' ain't he now?"

"No, senior."

"How long since?"

"At least one month."

"Oh, say, thet thar won't do—I tells yer it won't, fer we know er blamed sight better! Rodeo, lying is dangerous with me 'round."

"Senior, I do not lie; I tell you the truth. One month ago Pacheco was the leader of the band; now he is dead, and another is in his place. This other killed him in a battle, and by that he won the right to be leader of the band. He has taken my brother's name, and he calls himself Pacheco. Senors, I swear to you I speak the truth—I swear by all the saints! My brother is dead, and there is an impostor in his place."

Frank was impressed, and his hand fell on Bushnell's arm.

"I believe the fellow really speaks the truth," he said. "He seems sincere, and his eyes are square and steady."

"Yer can't tell about ther skunks," muttered the Westerner; "but still this one does seem ter be layin' a straight trail."

"I have taken my oath," continued the half-blood, a red light in his dark eyes—"I have sworn to kill the murderer of my brother, and I will keep the oath. That's why I am here. I have been watching the band for two weeks; I know every move they will make. I know when you leave Huejugilla el Alto, and I know they will follow. I make sure of that, and then, with my heart full of joy, I ride fast in advance. At last—at last they go to my country in the mountains! My people are

there—my other brothers, my cousins, my relatives. They will all stand by me, and they will be ready to avenge Pacheco. The wrath of my people shall fall on the head of the impostor! You wonder why I warn you? I will explain. You are bound far in the mountains, and the false Pacheco will follow. If you are captured, he may turn back. I want him to follow you—I want you to lead him into the snare. That is why I am here, and that is why I have warned you, senors. It is done, and now I will go.”

He arose to his feet, heedless of Bushnell's command to “keep still,” and strode toward the horses. They saw an extra animal was there, and, in a moment, he had flung himself on the creature's back.

“*Buenos dias, senores.*”

A clatter of hoofs, the flutter of a poncho, and a crimson serape, and Rodeo's horse was galloping up the ravine that still led deeper into the mountains. Man and horse soon vanished from view.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE AWAKENING VOLCANO.

Two days later, shortly after sunset, the party camped far in the depths of the Sierra Madre Mountains.

The words of Rodeo, the half-blood, had proved true, for they were pursued by the bandits, but, thanks to the skill of Bushnell, they had been able to give the desperadoes the slip.

“By ther end of another day we oughter be able ter clap our peepers on ther Silver Palace,” declared the West-erner.

Professor Scotch was now as eager as any of them to see the wonderful palace, all his doubts having been dispelled by Bushnell's straightforward narrative of the discovery of the place by himself and Jack Burk.

“I wonder what causes that column of smoke we saw rising amid the mountains to the westward to-day?” said Frank.

Bushnell shook his head.

“Thet thar has troubled me some,” he admitted. “It seems ter be fair an' squar' in ther direction of ther Silver Palace.”

“Maype dose pandits peen aheadt uf us

und purn der balace up,” suggested Hans, with an air of very great wisdom.

“I scarcely think they would be able to burn a building made of stone, gold, and silver,” smiled Frank.

“Wa'al, not much,” said Bushnell. “Ther palace will be thar when we arrive. You needn't worry about thet.”

They were very tired, and, feeling secure in the depths of a narrow ravine, they soon slept, with the exception of Frank, who had the first watch.

The moon came up over the mountain peaks, which stood out plainly in the clear light, every gorge and fissure being cut black as ink, and showing with wonderful distinctness.

The shadow was deep in the narrow ravine, and Frank sat with his back to a wall of rock, looking upward, when he was startled to see a figure rise in the bright moonlight.

On the brink of the ravine above stood a man who seemed to be peering down at them.

“Awaken!” cried this man, in a loud voice. “You are in great danger!”

The cry aroused every sleeper, and Bushnell started up with his Winchester clutched ready for use.

“W'at is it?” he asked.

Frank clutched his arm, gasping:

“Merciful goodness! look there—look at that man's face! Can the dead return to life?”

He pointed at the man on the brink of the ravine above them. The light of the moon fell fairly on the face of this man, which was plainly revealed to every one of the startled and thunderstruck party.

“Move lively, down there!” cried the man, with a warning gesture.

“There have been spies upon you, and Pacheco knows where you have stopped for the night.”

Bushnell dropped his rifle, clutching at the neck of his shirt, and gasping for breath.

“By ther livin' gods!” he shouted, “it's my pard, Jack Burk, or it's his spook!”

“Id vos a sbook!” gurgled Hans Dunderwust, quivering with fear. “Id vos der sbook uf der man vot we seen deat as a toor nail!”

In truth, the man on the brink of the ravine looked like Jack Burk, who had

been declared dead in the adobe hut near Mendoza.

"It is a resemblance—it must be a resemblance!" muttered Frank.

Once more the man above uttered a warning:

"You were trailed by a spy," he declared. "The spy saw you camp here, and he has gone to bring Pacheco and the bandits. They will be here soon. If you escape, you must move without further delay."

"It not only looks like my pard," said Bushnell, hoarsely, "but it has ther voice of my pard! Ef Jack Burk is dead, thet shore is his spook!"

And then, as suddenly as he had appeared, the man above vanished from view.

"Gone!" gasped Professor Scotch, wiping the cold perspiration from his face. "I never took stock in ghosts before, but now——"

"Remember his warning," cut in Frank. "We had better heed it."

"Dot vos right," nodded Hans.

"Yes, thet's right," agreed Bushnell. "We'll git out of hyar in a howlin' hurry. Ef Jack Burk is dead, then thet wuz his spook come to warn his old pard."

There was saddling and packing in hot haste, and the little party was soon moving along the ravine.

For at least thirty minutes they hastened onward, and then the Westerner found a place where the horses could climb the sloping wall of the ravine and get out of the gorge. It was no easy task to make the animals struggle to the top, but Bushnell succeeded in forcing them all up. When the party was out of the ravine every one breathed with greater freedom.

"There," said Frank, "I do not feel as if we might be caught like rats in a trap."

Frank was the last to move from the ravine, and, just as he was about to do so, he seemed to catch a glimpse of something moving silently in the darkness.

"Hist!" came the warning from his lips. "Come here, Bushnell—professor. Hans, stay with the horses. Be cautious, and come lively."

He flung himself on his face in the shadow of a great boulder, and peered down into the darkness below.

The Westerner and the professor came creeping to his side.

"What is it?" asked Bushnell.

"Look," directed Frank. "What do you make of it?"

Peering down into the dark depths of the gorge, they saw black figures flitting silently past, men and horses, as they were able to make out.

"Horsemen!" breathed the professor.

"They must be the bandits!"

"But look!" came cautiously from Frank's lips; "they are riding swiftly, yet the feet of their horses make no sound!"

"That's right!" gasped Scotch. "Great Jupiter! can they be more ghosts?"

"Mysteries are crowding each other," said Frank.

Bushnell was silent, but he was watching and listening.

Like a band of black phantoms, the silent horsemen rode along the ravine and disappeared. Frank could hear the professor's teeth chattering as if the man had a chill.

"This bub-bub-beats my tut-tut-tut-time!" confessed Scotch. "I rather think we'd better turn back and let the Silver Palace alone."

"Rot!" growled Bushnell. "Them varmint's wuz Pacheco's gang, an' they hed the feet of their critters muffled, thet's all. Don't git leery fer thet. All ther same, ef Jack Burk or his spook hedn't warned us, them onery skunks w'u'd hed us in a consarned bad trap."

This was the truth, as they all knew, and they were decidedly thankful to the mysterious individual who had warned them.

Bushnell now resorted to the trick of "covering the trail," in order to do which it was necessary to muffle the feet of their horses and lead them over rocky ground, where their bandaged hoofs could make no mark. At length he came to a stream, and he led the way into the water, following the course of the stream, and having the others trail along in single file directly behind him.

When they halted again Bushnell assured them that there was little danger that the bandits would be able to follow them closely, and they rested without molestation till morning.

At daybreak the Westerner was astir,



being alive with eagerness and impatience, as he repeatedly declared they would behold the wonderful Silver Palace before another sunset.

Eating a hasty breakfast, they pushed forward, with the Westerner in the lead.

Once more the tower of smoke, which they had noted the day before, was before them, but now it seemed blacker and more ominous than on the previous day.

It was not far from midday when, away to the westward, they heard rumbling sounds, like distant thunder.

"Vot id vas, ain'd id?" asked Hans, in alarm. "I don'd seen no dunder shower coming up somevere, do I?"

"It did not seem like thunder," said Frank, soberly. "It was more like a rumbling beneath the ground, and I fancied the earth quivered a bit."

"Perhaps it is an earthquake," put in the professor, apprehensively. "I believe they have such convulsions of nature in this part of the world."

Bushnell said nothing, but there was a troubled look on his face, and he urged them all forward at a still swifter pace.

The smoke tower was now looming near at hand, and they could see it shift and sway, grow thin, and roll up in a dense, black mass. It cast a gloom over their spirits, and made them all feel as if some frightful disaster was impending.

Again and again, at irregular intervals, they heard the sullen-rumbling, and once all were positive the earth shook.

It was noticed that directly after each rumbling the smoke rolled up in a thick black mass that shut out the light of the sun and overcast the heavens.

The professor was for turning back, but Bushnell was determined to go forward, and Frank was equally resolute. Hans had very little to say, but his nerves were badly shaken.

"In less than an hour we shall be able to see the Silver Palace," assured Bushnell. "We would be fools to turn back now."

So they went on, and, at last, they climbed to the top of a rise, from which point the Westerner assured them that the palace could be seen.

An awe-inspiring spectacle met their gaze. They looked across a great gulf, from which the smoke was rolling up-

ward in clouds, and out of which came the sullen mutterings they had heard.

"Merciful goodness!" cried Professor Scotch. "It must be the crater of a volcano!"

"Yah!" gasped Hans; "und der volcano vos doin' pusiness at der oldt standt alretty yet."

"The volcano may have been dormant for centuries," said the professor, "but it is coming to life now!"

"Where is the Silver Palace?" demanded Frank.

Bushnell clutched the boy's arm with a grip of iron, pointing straight through the smoke clouds that rose before them.

"Look!" he shouted, hoarsely; "it is thar! See—the smoke grows thinner, an' thar she am! See her glitter! In thet thar palace is stored enough treasure ter make us richer then ther richest men in ther world, an' ten thousand volcanoes ain't goin' ter keep me from it, you bet yer boots!"

True enough, through the parted smoke clouds gleamed the towers and turrets of the wonderful palace that had remained hidden in the heart of the mountains hundreds of years, jealously guarded by the fierce natives, who believed it sacred, and who had kept the secret well from the outside world.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE DOOM OF THE SILVER PALACE.

Bushnell leaped from his horse and began tearing the packs from the backs of the led animals. He worked with mad haste, and there was an awesome, insane glare in his eyes.

"The man is crazy!" roared Professor Scotch. "The volcano is certain to break forth before long—it must be on the verge of breaking forth now. If we remain here we are doomed!"

"Oxcuse me!" fluttered Hans. "I vos retty to gone righd avay queek."

The professor turned to Frank with his appeal:

"Come, boy, let's get away before destruction comes upon us. We must not remain here."

Frank sprang down from his snorting horse, flung the rein to Hans, and leaped to Bushnell's side.

"You are mad to think of remaining

here!" he said, swiftly. "Come away, and we will return when the volcano is at peace."

"No!" thundered the treasure-seeker, "I will not go! The Silver Palace is there, and I mean to have my share of the treasure. Go if you are afraid, but here I stay till the balloon is inflated, and I can cross the chasm. The wind is right for it, and nothing shall stop me!"

He picketed the horses, and began ripping open the packs.

Frank turned to Professor Scotch, saying, quietly:

"Bushnell will not go, and I shall stay with him. At the same time, I advise you to go. Take Hans with you, and get away from here. Leave a plain trail, and Bushnell will be able to follow it, if we succeed in reaching the palace and returning alive."

The professor entreated Frank to change his mind, but the lad was determined, and nothing could alter that determination.

At last Scotch gave up in despair, groaning:

"If you stay, I stay. I am your guardian, but you seem to have things your own way. If this volcano cooks us all, you will be to blame for it."

Frank said no word, but went about the task of assisting Bushnell in the work of inflating the balloon.

The Westerner had a "gas generator," which he was getting in order. As soon as this was ready, the balloon was unrolled, spread out, drawn up by means of poles and lines, and then secured to the ground by one stout rope, which was hitched about the base of a great boulder.

Then Bushnell built a fire and set the "gas generator" at work.

In the meantime the volcano had continued to mutter. At intervals the clouds of smoke parted, and they saw the wonderful Silver Palace standing on a plateau beyond the chasm.

The palace seemed to cast a spell over them all, and they felt the fever of the gold-hunter beginning to burn in their throbbing veins.

It was more than an hour after their arrival that the balloon began to fill with gas, and Frank uttered a cheer as he saw

the silk bulging like a bladder that is inflated with wind.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Bushnell, wildly. "In a few minutes we'll go sailin' over ther gulf, right through ther smoke, ter ther Silver Palace. Ha, ha, ha!"

The man's face was flushed till it was nearly purple, and his eyes were blood-shot. The fever had fastened itself firmly upon him.

More and more did the balloon expand. Bushnell had brought out a folding car, which he securely attached.

"In ten minutes more we'll be ready for the trip!" he shouted.

At that instant a series of wild cries reached their ears, and, turning swiftly, they saw a band of dark-faced men pouring through a fissure in the rocks to the north of them.

"Shimminy Gristmas!" cried Hans Dunnerwust, in terror. "Dot saddles us!"

"Who is it? Who are they?" fluttered the professor.

"They look like bandits," acknowledged Frank.

"It is Pacheco's band!" cried Bushnell, hastily securing his rifle. "Ther pizen varmint's hev come ten minutes too soon! Ther balloon would take us all over in another ten minutes, but now it won't carry more than two. We must hold ther skunks off till she fills!"

"Right!" shouted Frank Merriwell. "And we must be ready to go the instant she does fill. We can't hold 'em back long, for we have no shelter here. Professor, Hans, into that car! Get in, I say, and be ready! We'll try to stand the whelps off till the balloon is inflated, but we must be ready to start at any instant."

Professor Scotch and Hans were hastily bundled into the car.

The bandits hesitated long enough to gather and prepare for the charge, with their chief in the lead. It was plain they saw the treasure-seekers had no shelter, and they meant to close in without delay.

"Reddy for 'em, Frank!" called Bushnell, dropping on one knee, his Winchester in his hands. "They're comin' right soon!"

This was true. With mad cries and a fusillade of shots, the bandits charged.

Bushnell opened fire, and Frank followed his example. Several of the bandits

were seen to fall, but still the others came on.

"Lead won't stop 'em!" snarled the Westerner. "It'll be hand ter hand in a jiffy."

"And that means——"

"We'll git wiped out."

"The balloon——"

"Won't carry more'n two—possibly three. In with ye, boy! You may escape! It don't make any diffrunce 'bout an old coon like me."

"Not much will I get in and leave you!" cried Frank Merriwell. "We are partners in this expedition, and partners we'll stay to the end!"

"But ther others—ther professor an' ther Dutch boy! They might escape if ——"

"They shall escape!"

Out flashed a knife in Frank Merriwell's hand, and, with one sweeping slash, he severed the strong rope that held the tugging, tossing balloon to the earth.

Away shot the balloon, a cry of amazement and horror breaking from the lips of the professor and Hans.

"Mein gootness!" gasped the Dutch boy. "Vot vos happened?"

"I'll tell you," groaned the professor. "The balloon could not carry all four of us, and Frank Merriwell, like the noble, generous, hot-headed, foolish boy he is, refused to leave Bushnell. At the same time he would not doom us, and he cut the rope, setting the balloon free. He has remained behind to die at Bushnell's side."

"Led me git outd!" sobbed Hans. "I vant to go pack und die mit him!"

"It is too late now. Look—see there! We are directly over the Silver Palace! What a beautiful——"

The professor's words were interrupted by a frightful rumbling roar that came up from the gulf surrounding the plateau on which the palace stood. All the way around that gulf a sheet of flame seemed to leap upward through the smoke, and then, paralyzed, helpless, hypnotized by the spectacle, they saw the plateau and the palace sink and disappear into the blackness of a great void. Then, like a black funeral pall, the smoke rolled up about them and shut off their view.

But they knew that never again would

the eyes of any human being behold the marvelous Silver Palace of the Sierra Madre Mountains.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the balloon has ascended higher another current of air was encountered, and the course changed. Away they floated over the mountain peaks and out beyond the great range.

At last they came down, made a safe landing, and, to their satisfaction, found themselves within a mile of Huejugilla el Alto.

They had escaped the most frightful perils, but Professor Scotch's heart lay like lead in his bosom, and Hans Dunnerwust was not to be comforted, for they had left Frank Merriwell to his doom.

In Huejugilla el Alto they remained four days, neither of them seeming to have energy enough to do anything.

And, on the fourth day, Frank Merriwell, Al Bushnell, and two others rode into town and stopped at the hotel.

Picture the meeting between Frank and his friends! Hans shed nearly a bucketful of joyful tears, and Professor Scotch actually swooned from sheer amazement and delight. When the professor recovered, he clung to Frank's hands, saying:

"This is the happiest moment of my life—if I am not dreaming! Frank, my dear boy, I never expected to see you again. How did you escape?"

"The eruption of the volcano broke the bandits up," explained Frank; "and, by the time they had recovered and were ready to come at us again, a band of natives, headed by Rodeo, Pacheco's brother, came down on them. A terrible battle ensued. The bandits were defeated, many of them slain, among the latter being the false Pacheco. And whom do you fancy the impostor proved to be, professor?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"He was my villainous cousin, Carlos Merriwell."

"And he is dead?"

"Yes."

"That is a good thing. He will not trouble you any more."

"No, I shall never be troubled by him again. With Rodeo and the natives was Jack Burk——"

"Jack Burk! The man is dead!"

"Not quite, professor," declared a familiar voice, and Burk himself stepped forward. "I am still quite lively for a dead man."

"But—but I saw you dead!" declared the astounded professor.

"You saw me nearly dead, but not quite. You remember I told you of a native who had found me in the hut, and how he had said it was not a fever that ailed me, but was a trouble brought on by drinking the water of the spring near the hut?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I told you the native hastily left me—left me to die alone, as I supposed."

"I remember that."

"He did not leave me to die, but went for an antidote. While you were away he returned and administered some of the antidote for the poison, bringing me around, although but a feeble spark of life fluttered in my bosom. Then he took me on his shoulders, and carried me from the hut to another place of shelter, where he brought me back to my full strength in a remarkably brief space of time."

"I understand why we did not find you," said the professor.

"We followed the bandits," Jack Burk continued. "This native was Rodeo, the brother of the true Pacheco, and he is here."

Rodeo stepped forward, bowing with the politeness of a Spanish don.

"Rodeo made me swear to aid him in hunting down the murderer of his brother. That was the pay he asked for saving my life. I gave the oath, and it was his whim that I should not reveal myself to you till the right time came. But when I saw the spy tracking you, saw him locate you, and saw him hasten to tell the bandits, I was forced to appear and give a warning."

"We took you for a ghost."

"I thought it possible you might, and I fancied that might cause you to give all the more heed to the warning."

"Well, of all remarkable things that ever happened in my life, these events of the past few days take the lead," declared Scotch. "However, I have come through all dangers in safety, and I am happy, for Frank is alive and well."

"But the Silver Palace is gone, with all its marvelous treasure," said Frank.

"That's right, boy," nodded Bushnell, gloomily. "The palace has sunk into the earth, and no man ever gets the benefit of all the treasure it contained."

"Don't take it so hard, partner," said Jack Burk. "Mexico is the land of treasures, and we may strike something else before we cross the Death Divide."

"Vell," sighed Hans Dummerwust, "you beoples can hunt for treasure all you don'd want to; but I haf enough of dis business alretty soon. I nefer vos puilt for so much excitement, und I vos goin' to took der next drain for home as soon as I can get to him. Uf I don'd done dot I vos afraid mein mutter will nefer seen her leedle Hansie some more."

"I fancy I have had quite enough of Mexico for the present," smiled Frank. "The United States will do me a while longer, and so, if you are going home, Hans, Professor Scotch and myself will accompany you till we strike Uncle Sam's domain, at least."

(THE END.)

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156. Frank Merriwell's Reception; or, A Hot Time in New Haven.
157. Frank Merriwell's Scheme; or, Getting Ready for the Great Trip.
158. Frank Merriwell's Nobility; or, The Tragedy of the Ocean Tramp.
159. Frank Merriwell's Backer; or, Among London Sports.
160. Frank Merriwell's Black Beauty; or, Winning the Derby.
161. Frank Merriwell's Sand; or, London Slums at Night.
162. Frank Merriwell at Henley; or, Life on a House Boat.
163. Frank Merriwell's Caddie; or, On the St. Andrews Golf Links.
164. Frank Merriwell's Farewell; or, Last Days in Merrie England.
165. Frank Merriwell in Paris; or, The Man Without a Name.
166. Frank Merriwell Suspected; or, For the Honor of France.
167. Frank Merriwell Doomed; or, The Anti-Dreyfus League.
168. Frank Merriwell's Friendship; or, The Hot Blood of Youth.
169. Frank Merriwell's Return; or, The Unmasking of the Mystery.
170. Frank Merriwell's Ball Team; or, Winning the First Game.
171. Frank Merriwell's Secret; or, Trying to Steal the Double Shoot.
172. Frank Merriwell's Determination; or, Getting the Best of His Foes.
173. Frank Merriwell's Injury; or, Hard Luck and Crooked Work.
174. Frank Merriwell's Ruse; or, Paid in Their Own Coin.
175. Frank Merriwell's Fall; or, Tom, the Tramp Twirler.
176. Frank Merriwell's Turn; or, Working the Winning Streak.
177. Frank Merriwell's Freak; or, The One-Armed Wonder.
178. Frank Merriwell's Bat; or, Saved by an Alibi.
179. Frank Merriwell's Skill; or, Fighting for the Lead.
180. Frank Merriwell's Confidence; or, Pulling Against the Tide.