FRANK MERRIWELL IN THE SADDLE

OR,

THE MAN FROM MEDICINE BOW.

By BURT L. STANDISH.

CHAPTER I.
CURLY PICKS A QUARREL.

For some time trouble had been brewing between Curly, the horse-breaker, and Bill the Brute.

Curly was a short, bow-legged fellow with cold, gray eyes and faded, colorless hair. No one knew anything of his pedigree or his past, save that he had the reputation of being a good man to be left alone.

Bill the Brute had another name, of course, but scarcely any one on the T-Bar Ranch remembered ever hearing it. He had come from somewhere in the East, driven west by the necessity of finding air that would agree with his delicate lungs. He was a mild-mannered, gentle, harmless sort of person, who attended strictly to his own business when permitted to do so, and was the last one in the world to pick a quarrel.

The Brute was the sort of a man who could not bear to see a living thing abused or tortured. More yan once he had been tempted to remonstrate with Curly on account of the horse-breaker's vindictive malice and cruelty toward some particularly obstinate animal that he was supposed to be training. Discretion and good judgment, however, had prevented Bill from interfering. At last, however, he made some comment to Pickle-eye Pete, who repeated it unwisely or with malice aforethought. At any rate, it reached Curly's ears. From that day on Curly "had it in" for Bill.

Shortly after Frank Merriwell took possession of the T-Bar, he inaugurated some reforms and began upon a number of improvements and alterations. Having settled with old man Chilcotte the point of dispute over Clear Water Creek, which the owner of Rattlesnake Ranch finally acknowledged as belonging to the T-Bar down to its junction with a branch of the Platte, Merry decided on a system of irrigation, and began making plans for it. Further than that, he repaired the old irrigating ditch which ran from the springs near the ranch to the valley lying south, and talked of a reservoir for the waste of water which would prepare him for emergencies in the dryest sea-
sons. Some of the punchers had been forced to take part in this work, not a little to their distaste, and Bill was one of these. Curly found other things to keep him busy, for there was a large herd of untrained horses on the ranch, and Frank picked out a number of these animals which he wished broken to saddle.

There had also been a great cleaning up around the T-Bar. No longer could there be seen old tin cans or refuse of any kind scattered about in the vicinity of the buildings. Everything had been cleared away, hauled off and dumped into a gully two miles distant. Order and neatness took the place of carelessness and chaos. At least once a day Frank made the rounds, inspecting everything and quietly giving orders, which the men of the outfit soon learned must be obeyed to the letter.

They no longer regarded him as a tenderfoot who knew nothing of his business. On his way from the railway-station to the ranch he had demonstrated that this was altogether a mistaken notion. He had even convinced Chilcote, causing the scheming old man to abandon his long-cherished plan of harrassing the owner of the T-Bar, which plan he had carried into execution in the past, his project being to finally obtain possession of that ranch for a mere song.

Any one who could bring Seth Chilcote to give up such a long-cherished project, such a dear desire of his heart, was a person worthy of consideration and respect, and this Frank Merriwell received from every one of his men.

Nevertheless, Curly had not forgotten his original mistake with Frank, whom he had met at Cottonwood Bend, accompanied by the foreman of the ranch, Southpaw Lem Stover. Curly and Stover had expected to see a tenderfoot, but when Merriwell and Hodge stepped from the train to the station platform and Frank announced that he was the new owner of the T-Bar, both the foreman and the bronco-buster had no small difficulty in restraining their laughter. To them it seemed as if an unsophisticated youth, fresh from college, possibly the heir to a fortune accumulated by indulgent parents, had, after reading some highly colored fiction of Western life, decided to purchase a ranch and become a "cattle king." And so when Merry expressed disappointment because they had not brought saddle-horses for himself and Bart, Curly, winking wisely at Stover, gravely proffered his own cayuse, Spitfire, a savage, hard-mouthed buck, unridden, up to date, save by the horse-breaker himself and having the reputation of nearly killing one other man who attempted the feat.

Of course, Merriwell was warned of his danger. Stover was not the person to see him mount that man-killing horse without notifying him. Nevertheless, Frank persisted, and to the astonishment of the foreman and the rage of Curly himself, he rode and conquered Spitfire.

This performance nearly provoked Curly into shooting the horse right there at Cottonwood Bend, and, being a man who never forgot, he remembered with anger and resentment that he had been prevented by the other "tenderfoot," Hodge, backed up by the foreman. This thing continued to rankle in Curly's breast, although it seemed that he had quite forgotten it.

In the glorious afterglow of a splendid sunset one evening, a number of the men were gathered in front of the bunk-house. Some were idly smoking, while others busied themselves at various minor occupations. They were discussing Frank Merriwell's project of bringing lumber from the spur hills of the Buffalo Range for the purpose of erecting a building there at the ranch, which was to be used as quarters for pupils from his school of Athletic Development in the East.

"Listen to me, gents," said Twisty, a hook-backed fellow, who was lounging on the steps as he filled his black pipe. "When them there kids git to comin' out here to this yere ranch you'll see me headin' for the woods and just touchin' a few of the high spots. You who want to do so are sure welcome to linger and remain. Mbbe some of you can get jobs mussin' the babies."

Sangaree, dark, silent, quick-eyed, gave Twisty a glance, a nod, and a smile that was as unpleasant as a scowl.

"Me, too," he said.

"And as for me," put in Pickle-eye Pete complainingly, "I'm gettin' a heap tired of the way things are going, anyhow. I ain't no ditch-digger, I ain't no farmer; no agricultural life for me. Here I've been handlin' a spade and a pick like a sewer-digger for the last week or so. I sure have got my fill of it, gents."

"You fellers better not let Lem Stover hear you growlin' like that," said Bill the Brute, who was sitting on the steps and cleaning his pistol.

"Now, why not, Old Wisdom—why not?" inquired Curly, who was puffing at a cigarette. "Have you got an idea in that punkin head of yours that everybody hereabouts is afraid of South-paw? Mbbe you're some frightened of him, for you never did have no nerve, nohow. You always was a coward, Bill."
The one-time "lunger" merely shrugged his shoulders, continuing to polish his empty pistol.

Having begun, Curly seemed inclined to grasp this opportunity to rub it into the Brute good and hard.

"Yes, you always was a coward, Bill," he repeated. "I s'pose you remember the time that drunken little half-baked man called you a liar in the Palace Saloon at Keno, don't you? Why, he just shook his fist under your nose and covered you all over with dirt, which you never once resented. Bill, I've never had any respect for you since that day."

"Curly," said the Brute, putting a little machine-oil on his rag and resuming the work of rubbing the pistol; "Curly, I don't care a continental hurrah whether you have any respect for me or not. There are some persons I'd a heap rather have the disrespect of than the respect."

Curly's weather-beaten, leathery face took on a sudden frown.

"Mebbe that's so," he said; "but let me tell you one thing now, son, and it'll be right good judgment for you to listen and take heed a-plenty: Whatever you may think of me, you keep it bottled up inside, and don't you go spouting it none to nobody. You'll live a heap longer if you take heed of this friendly admonition of mine."

Saying which, Curly rose to his feet, snapping the cigarette aside, and stood, hands on his hips, looking down at Bill with an ugly light in his cold, gray eyes.

The very fact that the Brute suddenly fell silent and made no retort appeared to increase Curly's long-smoldering resentment and rage, for the horse-breaker proceeded to open up with a flow of violent vituperation and outrageous insult that made the listeners cringe.

Bill's face grew gray and his hands trembled a little. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Stop—stop right where you are, Curly! That's enough! I did say that you abused horses shamefully. Some of the things you do to horses that are hard to break are enough to make any decent man sick and disgusted. I'll tell you one thing right here: If Mr. Merriwell ever learns of it, you'll get your walking-papers in a hurry. He's a man who won't stand for any of that brutish business."

"Which means, I presume, that you think of tellin' him about it?" said Curly hissingly. "If you ever opened your head to peep to him, Bill, I'd shoot yer so full of holes that you'd look like a sieve. You or anybody else who tells tales on me is goin' to eat lead. Get that?"

"Mebbe I am a coward," returned Bill; "but as long as we're talkin' plain to each other, I'll tell you something. If I ever know of your doing anything to another horse the same as you done to that little pinto cayuse, Mr. Merriwell will hear about it instantly."

Now, Bill could not have made a greater mistake than to utter a threat like this. It made him appear like a would-be informer and gave Curly the opportunity he was maliciously seeking. Like a flash of lightning the horse-breaker whipped forth a pistol and stood holding it low at his hip with the muzzle pointing straight at the man on the steps.

"The way to settle that matter," he snarled, "is to block your mouth before it begins to leak, and I reckon I'll block it with a lead stopper."

He had not seen the man who approached him from behind, but in a twinkling that person grasped the weapon and turned the muzzle upward.

The pistol spoke, but the bullet buried itself harmlessly in the upper casing of the bunk-house door.

An instant later Frank Merriwell had that pistol.

"What's the meaning of this, Curly?" he demanded. "What made you pull a gun on Bill?"

"He's got his gun in his hand, ain't he?" demanded Curly sullenly.

"Yes, he's got it—empty. You knew it was empty. You knew he had no chance to defend himself. A man who pulls a shooting-iron on another under such circumstances is either drunk or a coward."

Curly's flush of anger died away to an ashen pallor, but there was a reddish gleam in his gray eyes.

"I've been watching you, Curly," continued Frank, "and there are a few of your practises which fail to meet my approval. That you know your business as a horse-breaker I do not deny; but I've been led to inquire concerning certain marks on one or two of the animals you have broken, and I want to tell you now that I'll have no more of that work. Also, I've seen that you had a steadily growing desire to force a quarrel on Bill. According to my judgment, Bill is generally peaceable and not at all inclined to kick up a disturbance. I'm master of the T-Bar, and while you're here you'll obey me. If you force a fight on Bill and do him any injury of any sort, I'll call you to account, and you'll regret the settlement. That's all."

And then, with amazing disregard of the man, Merriwell handed over Curly's pistol, turned his back squarely and walked away.

They saw Curly quivering in every nerve as he stood there with the loaded weapon in his hand, glaring at
Frank’s back. It seemed that he could have shot Merriwell down; but the truth of it was that both Twisty and Babe Billings had dropped their hands upon their own weapons, and either would have sent a bullet through Curly had he made the slightest move to fire on Frank.

The next morning Curly was not found on the T-Bar. He had taken his horse and outfit and departed in the night.

CHAPTER II.

BENTON, THE HORSE-BREAKER.

It was Frank Merriwell’s intention to bring on a few boys from his Bloomfield school without delay, and for this purpose he had made some arrangements at the ranch. His plan was to employ these boys themselves to erect a building near the ranch for the occupancy of themselves and those who came later.

Despite the fact that Curly had been a regular employee at the T-Bar, Merry found few trained saddle-horses beside those owned and needed for regular use by the cow-punchers. Evidently Curly had labored little at his chosen occupation unless compelled to do so.

“Whatever will we do without a horse-breaker, Mr. Merriwell?” inquired Lem Stover respectfully. “I reckon that I might break in some of them broncos myself; but I’m a-gittin’ a bit too old to take the chances. We need a few extra critters, and I heard you say you was goin’ to want some for your own use. Ef you think I’d best—”

“Don’t you worry about that, Stover. I’ve been looking the horse herd over myself, and I see that we’ve got a bunch of fine animals which need breaking and training. We can’t afford to wait until we can secure an expert man, so I’ll take that job on my hands myself.”

“You, sir?”

“Yes. I don’t suppose you’ve forgotten that Spitfire, the horse I’m riding now, belonged to Curly, who claimed no one beside himself could straddle the animal?”

“No, I ain’t forgot that any, Mr. Merriwell. You sure give both Curly and myself a big surprise the day you arrived at Cottonwood Bend and rode that hoss. I’ll never forget the wink Curly give me when he suggested that you might take Spitfire, seein’ as you sort o’ disdained the spring-wagon. I thought it was murder for you to try it, and so I give ye fair warnin’. I come mighty near layin’ hands on ye, for the purpose o’ stoppin’ ye by main force from trying to mount Spitfire. Finally I stood back, deciding that you was one of them greenhorns what thought you knowed it all, and, therefore, it was my duty to let yer learn your lesson, even if you got your neck broke doing so. I ‘low Curly had it in for you from the time he clapped his blinkers on ye and sized ye up as a college guy with a heap more money than brains. He certain did froth when he saw you gettin’ the best of Spitfire. From that day, to the time he quit the T-Bar, I was allus a-lookin’ for him to pick up trouble with Mr. Hodge, seein’ as Mr. Hodge was a whole lot sudden about grabbin’ Curly when he pulled his gun to shoot the hoss. Curly ain’t a man to forget, not any. Methinks we’ve seen the last o’ him, but it wouldn’t s’prise me any at all, sir, if he showed up in these parts some time later on and made more or less trouble. You took some chances the other day when you handed his hardware back to him and walked away so mighty indifferent like.”

Frank smiled.

“Well, you’re wrong, Stover,” he said; “I took no chances at all.”

“I’d like to know why not.”

“I’ll tell you why. I’ve studied Curly a bit, and while I learned that he was vicious, revengeful, and dangerous, I likewise discovered other things about him. I found that he nearly always calculated the consequences of his actions and regulated himself thereby. Now, Curly knew he might pick a quarrel with Bill and shoot Bill with a fair chance of getting off without having his own neck stretched. He forced Bill into making talk which could be garbled into a provocation. Bill had a pistol in his hand. True it was empty, but in defense of Curly a skilful lawyer could have made a great deal of the fact that Bill did have the weapon. When I took Curly’s pistol away from him I settled his game, for after that he could not claim that he was in danger of being shot by Bill and that, therefore, he was compelled to fire in self-defense. When I handed the gun back to him and turned away he longed to riddle me with lead, but he didn’t dare do that. There were plenty of witnesses to swear that I was walking away with my back toward Curly, and, therefore, the man knew he would be branded as a murderer, pure and simple. Still further, he understood there might be one or two in the party who would open on him the moment he began shooting at me. Even if he got me and escaped, he understood that such a cold-blooded murder would make him for
all time a fugitive from justice. No, Stover, I took no chances when I handed Curly back his gun."

South-paw Lem nodded.

"I opine you’re right now that you’ve made it so plain, Mr. Merriwell," he confessed; "but it certain did seem a heap keerless to all of us."

"If Curly ever got me alone and had me foul, my life wouldn’t be worth a pinch of snuff," said Frank. "If he could catch me away from the T-Bar and provoke a quarrel with me under conditions that would give him the drop on me first, he’d shoot me down joyously. But Curly is gone, Stover, and I hope we shall not see more of him, although I’m sorry that he left without collecting his last month’s wages. Had he come to me like a man and said that he was going, I should have paid him right up to the minute. Now, as we’re without a horse-breaker, I’m going to take a turn at the bronchis myself."

That very afternoon Frank did take a turn at the untrained horses. A few of the cowboys watched him with the keenest interest as, assisted by Stover and Pickle-eye Pete, he captured one of the fiercest and wildest of the herd. Frank roped the chosen horse himself, and his two assistants gave him a hand while he got a saddle and bridle onto the beast. Then he gave the spectators an exhibition of rough-riding that filled one and all with admiration for their new employer. The fight between horse and man lasted for fully two hours, but in the end Frank conquered.

While the struggle was going on, two men who did not belong to the T-Bar rode up and joined the cowboys who were looking on. One of them was Tiiker, a small, nervous, squint-eyed fellow from Rattlesnake Ranch. His companion was a sneaky, scrappy, bow-legged individual, who silently and critically watched to an end the battle between Merry and the unbroken cayuse.

"That’s pretty well done, sir," said this stranger when Frank finally relinquished the task: "but you’ll have to it over to-morrow. It takes about a week to cure one o’ his kind."

Tinker stepped forward at once and spoke to Frank.

"Mr. Merriwell," he said, "I opine you may not remember me any at all, but I’m one of Chilcotte’s men."

"I remember you," said Frank. "You were with the drive at the time of the stampede."

"Yes, sir, I was there, sure. Me and the Dwarf has been lookin’ for wolves down Twin Buttes way. The critters are raisin’ blazes with the D-Bar-A cattle. Mebbe you’ve lost some cows yerself?"

"Yes," nodded Frank, "the boys report some trouble with wolves."

"Yesterday," went on Tinker, "this yere friend of mine come driftin’ up over the Long Loop Trail. He run across us east of Twin Buttes. As soon as I seen him, sir, I thought of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why was that?"

"We hears over at the D-Bar-A that you’ve lost your bronco buster. We hears that Curly has left you."

"That’s right."

"Well, my friend Benton here is just as good a man as Curly, and I judge some better. That’s his business."

"Horse-breaking and training?"

"Yes, sir. I can vouch for Benton, of Medicine Bow. If you’ll ask some of your men, I call’te they’ll tell you they’ve heard of him, too."

During this, Benton had been waiting with perfect indifference. Frank turned to him now and asked:

"Are you looking for a job?"

"Waal, if there’s anything good comes my way I sha’n’t turn it down," was the answer.

"Where were you employed last?"

"On the One Hundred and One Ranch down in the Medicine Bow country."

"Who owns the One Hundred and One?"

"Bob Plummer."

"Why did you leave?"

"Got all through. He ain’t got a boss left that a ten-year-old kid can’t ride."

Now Merry knew that it was more or less unusual for any one ranch to keep constantly in employment an expert bronco buster and horse-trainer, for these men demanded and received high wages. It is customary for a rancher to employ a bronco buster for a week, a month, or two months, as the case may be, keeping the man until the wild horses are sufficiently broken and trained for the cowboys to ride. Therefore, it was not at all strange that Benton should be out of employment and looking for another position.

Frank made inquiry in regard to wages and one or two other things, after which he told Benton he would see him at the ranch before supper.

"Stover," said Merry, calling his foreman aside, "do you know anything about this man Tinker has brought here?"

"Never put eyes on him before," acknowledged the veteran; "but I’ve heard o’ him."
"What have you heard?"

"Well, he don't stick nowhar a great while. He's one of them yere rovers. I don't believe you could keep him more'n a month if you wanted him."

"I'm not likely to want him longer than that. What's his reputation as a buster?"

"Fur as I know he's all right that way."

"Then what's wrong about him, for I fancy there must be something wrong by the way you speak?"

"I'm not sayin' that's anything wrong, only he runs with a tough bunch whenever he strikes the towns, and he's been in trouble once or twice—once for shootin' up a man some, which he done under provocation of drink."

"Well, he won't find anything stronger than water to drink on the T-Bar. For the next week or two it will keep a man busy all the time to break in the new horses. I've got other matters demanding my attention. Of course, I could get along, if necessary, and do the work myself; but I'd rather turn it over to a capable man. If this fellow is thoroughly capable, I'm inclined to engage him."

"You might give him a trial to-morrow, sir, though I don't reckon that's any question but he knows his business in hand. I'm sore out of that, you don't keep much b'out him so long as you're not goin' to keep him regular."

"Then you think I'd better engage him if he proves efficient to-morrow?"

"A month ago," answered Lem, "ef a man from the D-Bar-A had brung this yere Benton here and recommended him, I'd been suspicious. Now, how-ever, the war-hatchet has been planted a heap deep, and I don't see no reason whatever why Chilcot or his men should hand you a lemon. I judge it's all right."

The following day Benton, the man from Medicine Bow, was given a trial and clearly demonstrated that he knew his business thoroughly. Then Frank engaged him to fill Curly's place.

CHAPTER III.

THE HORSEMAN AND THE MIRAGE.

A week later Frank went East for the purpose of visiting the summer camp of the boys who remained at his school in Bloomfield and bringing back three or four whom he believed would be benefited by the Western air and the open life of the plains.

One day Bart Hodge and Babe Billings set out from the T-Bar with several saddle-horses and the old spring-wagon, drawn by a harness pair, bound for Cottonwood Bend, where Frank would arrive the following morning.

They were on hand when the train from the East came booming into the station about 9 a.m. Merry stepped off, followed by four eager, interested-looking youngsters, all dressed in rough, loose, woolen clothing.

Billings waited at the corner of the little prairie station while Hodge hastened forward and shook Merry's hand and spoke to each of the boys.

"Didn't know for sure that you would get my message in time to be here, Bart," said Frank. "I told the boys we might have to hang up here and wait for you."

"Got it just in time, Merry," said Hodge. "If it had arrived two hours later I'd not been at the T-Bar."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I was on the point of starting with Stover and a bunch of the men to join a bunch of Chilcotte's men for the purpose of running down some horse-thieves."

"Horse-thieves?"

"Yes. We've been touched up a bit since you left, Frank. We've lost a dozen of our best horses, lately broken by Benton."

"Well, that's serious business."

"Serious? You bet it is. The boys are red-hot. Every man who went with Stover was armed to the teeth, and they'll make short work of the thieves if they catch them. Chilcotte's men are just as ugly about it."

"When were these horses stolen?"

"Three days ago. About the same time the D-Bar-A lost eight of their best horses. We got touched up the harder, Merry. Say, but I did want to go with those fellows! It was mighty tough seeing them getting ready and starting off while Billings and I had to hook up and come on here to meet you. Billings almost shed tears over it."

"I suppose it's superfluous to ask what they will do to the thieves if they catch them?"

"They took along some good stout ropes, Merry."

The train had already pulled out of the station and was fast dwindling and diminishing to a mere speck, above which hung a streak of smoke far away across the level desert that spread to the west.

The sad-faced station-agent was poking around amid the baggage of the party, which had been dumped upon the platform.
Merry approached the agent and handed over a number of checks. Billings came forward, donning his Stetson.

“Howdy, Mr. Merriwell,” he said. “Shall I chuck this luggage into the wagon?”

“The boys will attend to that, Billings,” said Frank. “Get busy, my lads.”

Cheerfully the four youngsters seized the baggage and carried it to the waiting wagon.

Frank smiled as he observed that there were several saddle-horses stamping and pawing the ground restlessly not far from the wagon.

“I see you brought along enough horses for us this time, Bart,” he said.

“Well, I took all the horses of any account that were left behind and could be spared. You see Stover and his bunch carried a change of mounts, for they reckoned that would be the only way to stand any show of running the thieves down."

“Did Stover have an idea that there was a fair prospect of running them down?”

“Of course he wasn’t sure, Merry, but he had hopes.”

“Which way were the thieves heading?”

“The last report seemed to indicate that they were making for the Windstorm Mountains up near the Shoshone country.”

“A wild and desolate region, according to reports,” muttered Merry. “If they get into the Windstorm Mountains they’ll stand a good show of shaking pursuit. It’s likely they’ll get away.”

“Unless they get mixed up with the Injuns,” put in Babe Billings. “Yer know the Injuns resent it a heap when whites come intruding on their reservation. Experience has taught them whenever the white man finds land he regards as valuable he proceeds to take it. If some prospector should happen to find gold over on the Shoshone reservation and he ever came out with samples and told his story, you couldn’t keep the miners and adventurers out of that country with the whole United States Army.”

“The Shoshones haven’t forgotten about the Black Hills. That country belonged to the Sioux. White men found gold in the hills. They got in and out, some of them, without being killed by the Indians. They showed their gold-dust and nuggets and told their stories. Then there was a perfect stampede for the Black Hills. The Injuns lay in wait everywhere, fighting to keep the white men out. The government sent troops to turn the miners and prospectors back. What did it amount to? Custer and his men were massacred by the Indians, but you couldn’t keep white men out of the Black Hills.”

“It’ll be precisely the same in regard to any Indian land that the whites may covet. Look at the opening up of Oklahoma. Look at a dozen similar instances. The Shoshones fear the day when their reservation will be taken from them.” I’ve heard stories of prospectors who ventured into that country and never returned. Beyond doubt they were murdered by the Indians. If those horse-thieves are forced over into the Shoshone country, it’s ten to one the Indians will get the horses and the boys who are following the thieves will never find them, nor will any one else ever hear of them again.”

“In which case,” said Hodge, “the boys will be saved the unpleasant duty of lynching the thieves.”

“Onpleasant?” chuckled Billings. “Why, lynching a hoss-thief is one of the pleasantest jamborees an honest cow-puncher can take a hand in. A hoss-thief is just about the meanest, lowest, onarrest criter on the face of this green earth.”

“Green?” smiled Frank, as he glanced toward the broad stretch of alkali desert that lay shimmering in the heat of the fierce, unclouded sun. “It’s green in spots, perhaps, but such spots are few and far between hereabouts. It seems like plunging into the desert of Sahara to turn from the cottonwoods and the river yonder and strike out across that expanse of sand and sage-brush.”

Suddenly he leaned forward a bit, his eyes searching an expanse before him. Far, far across that level stretch, he detected what seemed to be a tiny, moving speck.

“Look,” he said, stretching out his hand. “What’s that, away yonder? I think it’s a horseman.”

Hodge and Billings peered across the surface of the earth, which seemed to quiver and wave and tremble and throb beneath the heat like the heaving bosom of the sea. The boys also stared in the same direction, but, one and all, they acknowledged they could see nothing.

And then a most astounding thing transpired. Away in the distance, far across the white alkali plains which shimmered in the sun, a gigantic horseman suddenly seemed to rise against the sky. A horseman who, as he sat upon his canting animal, seemed taller than a five-story building.

The boys uttered exclamations of amazement and fear, huddling together and staring wide-eyed at this astounding apparition.

The three men, however, knew in a moment that it
was the work of the miraculous mirage. The heat, the condition of the atmosphere, these things had combined to magnify that mounted horseman who was galloping straight toward the little desert railway-station.

"It's Lem Stover!" breathed Frank, recognizing something familiar in that huge, tall figure uplifting above the sky-line.

"Sure!" exclaimed Billings. "It's Stover, and he's coming here! There's something wrong, sure as shootin'!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAGEDY.

Almost as suddenly as it had leaped up against the sky, that miraculous vision sank and was gone. It is likely the approaching horseman had crossed the strata of air which produced that weird and marvelous illusion.

Now, however, both Hodge and Billings could faintly perceive the moving, grayish speck which was the approaching horse and rider.

"It's Stover, sure," nodded Billings, "and he's ridin' hard to git here before we hit the trail for the ranch."

"And that means that there's something happened," muttered Hodge. "I wonder if they've caught the thieves?"

"I sure doubt it," said Billings.
"Why?"

"If they'd done that they'd dispose of the varmints all proper and businesslike and return to the ranch. No, it's something else that's happened."

Their curiosity increased with each passing moment. Finally it could be restrained only with the greatest difficulty. Then Frank and Hodge left Billings to look after the boys while they mounted two of the horses and rode forth to meet Stover.

The foreman of the T-Bar and his horse were covered with a coating of alkali-dust, and the animal showed every sign of having been ridden to the limit. South-paw Lem, however, seemed like a man of iron, for he was full of life and he uttered a sharp, high-keyed cowboy yell as he rode to meet Frank and Bart.

"What's the matter, Stover—what's happened?" cried Merry.

Lem lifted one gauntleted hand with a gesture that meant a great deal, but not until he had drawn rein and saluted the owner of the T-Bar did he answer in words.

"Thar's been bloody work, Mr. Merriwell," he said soberly.

"You overtook the thieves?"

"No, sir, not quite."

"I fancied you'd had a clash with them."

"Not that. We was hard on their heels by the time they'd cut clear o' the Buffaler Range and headed for the Windstorm Mountains. We spread out so they couldn't double back of us. Last night we had run 'em into Drybone Valley. Part o' us went around to the east, thinkin' to head 'em off when they come out of the valley. We was a little too late. They'd got through all right, and, as it was dark, we soon had to hold up, not being able to follow the trail. We camped near some springs, from which we had to lug water a distance of a hundred yards, perhaps. By that time we was all pretty well in, sir, and a heap hungry. It was long past supper-time when we built a fire and made coffee. Bill the Brute was sent up to the springs for water. He didn't come back as soon as he'd oughter, and so I went to look for him. I found him—dead!"

"Dead?" exclaimed Merriwell.

"Carved up," nodded Stover grimly. "Somebody had jumped on him and stuck a knife in his back while he was kneelin' to dip water from the spring."

"Heavens!" breathed Hodge, his eyes flashing, even while his face paled. "That was a dastardly murder!"

"Just so," agreed Stover. "It was one of the meanest sort of killings I ever knowed of. It made every one of us boiling, howling, hanging mad, gents."

"Who did it?"

"Who could it be kept one of them that hoss-thieves we was a-follerin' and which we had pushed a whole lot hard? In the dark one of them critters sneaked back to look our outfit over, and he caught Bill dead to rights there at the spring. Poor Bill cashed in without even havin' a show for his white alley."

Frank's face took on a grim and stern expression, which, however, was not unmingled with sadness.

"Poor Bill!" he muttered. "He seemed like a good boy."

"He was," nodded South-paw Lem. "He come out here a tenderfoot and a lunger. At first he had to take the chaffing and insults flung at him without never making any sign of resentment, for he wasn't in condition to fight. That sort o' won him the reputation of being a coward. But Bill wasn't no coward. When we circled that valley to head them thieves off, we sure
expected a fight. We 'lowed we had 'em ketched, for we didn't think they'd had time to get through. Bill was as eager as any man in the bunch for that scrap. He would 'a' rid ahead of me if I'd let him. The way he talked to Curly the last day Curly was at the T-Bar satisfied me that Bill had nerve. He didn't quail any whatever when Curly pulled that gun on him, but he looked him plumb straight in the eye. I opine the boys planted Bill over yonder some time this morning. After we found him last night we held a consultation and decided that you ought to know 'bout what had happened. I come to tell you, Mr. Merrivial. I want you to understand that whatever happens to them hoss-thieves there's a good cause fur it. If we can follow their trail we'll chase 'em clean to Alaska, and when we get 'em——"

He paused, finishing the sentence with a pantomime that was horribly expressive.

"Bart," said Frank, turning to Hodge, "I'm going with Stover. Lem, we've got some horses back here at the station. Your animal is pretty well done up. We'll take other horses, for we've got to overtake the boys who are pursuing those thieves."

"Merry!"

It was Bart who spoke, and his voice thrilled with excitement.

"What is it, Bart?"

"I'm going with you."

"Some one must take the boys back to the ranch."

"Leave that to Billings. I'm going with you, Frank."

When Hodge spoke like that, there was no denying him.

"All right," said Merrivial quietly. "Come on, Stover; I presume you're hungry. There must be a cold snack in the wagon."

"Plenty of it," said Hodge.

They rode back to the station, where Billings was told what had happened, whereupon he first swore and then shed tears. When he learned that both Merrivial and Hodge were going to leave him and join the pursuers of the horse-thieves, he seemed heart-broken.

"And it's me for the T-Bar," he moaned; "me for the T-Bar, with a bunch of babies on my hands. Oh, say! ain't there no way I can get into this game? I'd give a year of my life to be in at the finish, and I'd give another year to pull on the rope that hangs the scoundrel which knifed poor Bill in the back."

"Somebody must take these boys to the ranch," said Frank. "It's up to you, Billings."

"I don't know what I've done that I can't never have no fun in my life," groaned Babe.

Merrivial and Hodge had taken breakfast on the train. Stover ate a "cold snack" there in the sheltering shade of the desert railway-station. His tired horse Stover left for Billings, removing the saddle and throwing it over the back of a fresh animal.

Hodge had come to Cottonwood Bend fully armed, but Frank was compelled to borrow one of Billings' pistols.

Finally three horsemen rode out from the station, headed for the west, while Billings and the boys started toward the ranch, Babe having bidden the trio so-long and begged them to hang at least one horse-thief to average Bill the Brute.

CHAPTER V.

ACROSS THE DESERT.

In truth, Lem Stover seemed a man of iron. Athlete though he was, with muscles trained and body prepared for feats of strength and endurance, Frank Merrivial wondered at the hardihood of the grizzled old veteran of the range. When a horse grew weary beneath him, Stover snapped off his saddle and whipped it on the back of another, advising Frank and Bart to do the same, which advice they followed, and the trio were away again with very little delay.

The sun of high noon scorched them, the dust of the alkali plains rose smotheringly about them, the mirage of the desert shimmered enticingly in the distance. They swept on, their teeth set, their eyes blood-shot, their throats parched. It was a land of desolation and death, where at intervals they beheld the bleaching bones of defunct cattle, with red lizards flitting amid those bones.

A score of times Hodge opened his lips to question Lem Stover, but each time he closed his teeth hard and held the words back, for was not Frank following the foreman of the T-Bar without inquiry or doubt? Surely, old South-paw knew his business. There was but one thing to do, and that was to trust him and follow wherever he led.

Time after time the mocking, maddening mirage rose before them in all its magic enticement. It showed them wooded hills, blue lakes, rippling streams and splendid trees, beneath which the shadows were cool and restful. They saw these things through a faint, veil-like haze, which made them appear all the more real. But as they advanced, the haze grew...
thicker and seemed to obscure the enticing vision until at length it faded and vanished and all they could perceive was the heat shimmering and pulsating above the arid plains.

The line of blue mole-hill mountains sank in the southwest. Other mountains thrust their crests above the horizon line to the northwest. They were the Windstorm Range, toward which the horse-thieves had fled. Beyond them to the west lay the land of the Shoshones.

So many times had Bart been deceived, that finally he shut his eyes to the mocking mirage. He would not look toward the hills and winding line of cottonwoods which seemed to mark the course of a stream. Not until he felt his horse quivering with excitement and realized that the animal, together with the others, was racing forward madly, did he hasten his gaze on that picture. Even then he fully expected it would melt and fade before him. Instead of that, it grew more and more distinct as they drew nearer, and at last Bart saw that they were actually approaching real hills, real water and real trees.

It was necessary to somewhat restrain the eager horses. Otherwise, the thirsty beasts would have plunged into the stream and drank their fill at once, to permit which must prove a fatal blunder.

How sweet that water tasted! How cool seemed the scanty shade of the cottonwoods! How green appeared the grass along the banks! They knelt and thrust their hands into the water, deep to the very elbows. They splashed it over their faces. They drank, but yet they heeded the cautioning words of old Lem Stover.

The horses were swiftly picketed where they could graze, and then they opened the little pack of provisions taken from the spring-wagon supply. Hardtack and jerked beef, washed down by pure water, seemed almost a feast for the gods.

"You said those were the Windstorm Mountains we saw yonder to the northwest, Stover?" questioned Merry as they lay there.

"Yes, sir," grunted old Lem, who had finished eating and drinking and was now filling his black pipe.

"And the horse-thieves were headed for those mountains the last you knew?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why did you take this direction? Why did you strike across to the south of the Windstorms?"

"Don't you reckon we'd traveled just about as far as we could in this yere cursed country without teching water, Mr. Merriwell?" inquired the foreman.

"Just about," nodded Frank.

"Well, this yere is the best place what we could find water—the only dead sure place atween Cottonwood Bend and the foot-hills of the Windstorms, onless we'd made straight for the springs whar Bill was killed. It would 'a' been past middle afternoon before we could 'a' reached them springs had we kept straight on. By that time we'd been pretty dry and our hossejs would 'a' been plumb done up. We couldn't 'a' made it in this heat, gents. I struck squar across to the Bend under kivir of the night and early part of the day, tharby savin' a right smart distance. In this case, the longest way 'round was the shortest road across. Savvy?"

Frank nodded.

"I knew you had a good reason for it, Stover," he said. "Yes, we'd gone about as far as we could without reaching water. It was wise to bring us here."

"Atween this yere place and Black Rock Springs, whar Bill was killed," said Stover, puffing at his pipe, "we'll work around Drybone Valley, through which them yere varmints took the hossejs. It's a shorter way through the valley, but down that the heat would broil us to-day. Down thar we couldn't git a breath into our lungs, and I certain reckon we'd better steer clear."

"We'll leave it to you, Stover," said Frank.

CHAPTER VI.

AT BLACK ROCK SPRINGS.

And so, after they had rested a time and the horses had eaten and drank once more, they resumed the journey. Once on their way they reached a position where they could look down into the barren, sunken waste of country known as Drybone Valley. They saw a low, arid, alkali desert shimmering beneath a boiling sea of heat.

It was Hodge who cried:

"Why, look yonder—look away there!" His hand was outflung and his finger pointing into the distance. "I thought you said there wasn't any water in this valley?"

They all saw it, a beautiful blue lake set like a gem amid the green verdure that surrounded it.

"They're certain some plentiful to-day," said Stover, as he turned away. "They're sure a heap thicker than I ever saw 'em before. There ain't a drop of water
in Drybone Valley from end to end, nor any livin’ green thing nowhar down thar.”

“The mirage again!” muttered Bart in disgust. “It fooled me that time, all right.”

That was the last time they looked into Drybone Valley until they had reached the far extremity, and were approaching the point where the horse-thieves had left it. Again they came to a spot where they could look down into that desolate region. But now, with the sun touching the west, the valley was filled with mysterious purple shadows hovering around the sand-hills and seeming to crowd the distance with vague shapes like turreted castles, minarets, arches and pergolas. It was a land of fantasy and magic, a land of illusions and dreams. Beneath the blazing sun of midday it had tempted with its beautiful mirages; seen at sunset, it lured with its shadowy delusions.

“Here we are,” said South-paw, pointing downward, “and that’s the trail. We’ll follow it to Black Rock Springs. By that time it’ll be dark. There won’t be no moon afore midnight. We’d ought to get nigh three hours o’ sleep.”

The country grew broken and rough. The trail was simple enough to follow until darkness obliterated it. With the coming of night, old Lem rode on in silence, until at last they halted at the base of a ridge that lay black and ragged against the starry sky. There was grass beneath the feet of the horses, and somewhere in the night water seemed tinkling like soft music.

“This is whar we camp,” announced the foreman of the T-Bar. “Beyond here I’ll have to follow the trail. I opine we’d ought to be able to do that when the moon comes up.”

So they camped, picketing their horses where they could feed, after having led them to a spot where some water seeped through the rocks and made a small pool which the creatures soon drank dry. In their outfit they had brought along a collapsible bucket taken from the spring-wagon, and Stover clambered up over the rocks with this bucket, soon returning with it two-thirds full of clear, sweet water.

“They thar springs is some difficult to get at,” he observed. “Every Injun and every human critter that knows anything about this yere country knows whar them springs be.”

They were weary. In silence they ate down there at the base of the rugged ridge. Near by their horses grazed, stamping restlessly and whisking their tails as if annoyed by insects. No camp-fire was built, for this was thought unnecessary.

As usual, after eating Stover smoked a pipe. He was knocking the ashes from the bowl as he suddenly said:

“It was up yonder at the big spring that poor Bill was killed. I opine the boys planted him somewhere around here.”

There was another period of silence. Stover spoke again:

“Hoss-thieves ain’t human,” he declared. “They ain’t got no rights that humans is bound to respect.”

“The law——” began Frank.

But Stover interrupted him with a laugh.

“Beg pardon, Mr. Merriwell,” he said, “there ain’t no law that fits their case. Don’t I know? Ain’t I had experience enough, gents, to know what I’m talkin’ about? Wasn’t I all through the rustlers war from seventy-six on? Gents, there was a time when an honest, faithful foreman couldn’t live in Wyoming. No, sir. In them days rustlers and hoss-thieves outnumbered honest men a heap sight hereabouts. There was just as much law at that time as there is to-day. What did it amount to? Ef it hadn’t been for the vigilantes, the rustlers would have held this whole country, and honest men would have been driv out.”

“I presume that’s right, Lem,” nodded Frank; “but conditions have changed.”

“Huh!” grunted Stover. “Mebbe so. But ef you go to dealin’ out law to hoss-thieves it won’t be long before we’ll be back in pretty nigh the same state of affairs. You hear me. There’s more or less brand-blotting done nowadays. It’s mighty dangerous, you bet, but it’s done just the same. When you ketch a man carryin’ a piece of hay-wire coiled in his pocket, will ye turn him over to the law or will ye take him out and lynch him? What can the law do? Everybody has got a right to carry hay-wire around on his person if he wants to so fur as the law is concerned. But every galoot who does so knows what will happen to him if he’s ketched by honest men in the cow business.”

“Hay-wire?” said Hodge. “What could a man do with hay-wire?”

“What could he do? Why, if he knowed his business he could bend it into any sort of a brand he wanted to, and with it he could put that brand over another brand so mighty slick that nobody could ever tell it had been done. At first the rustlers used to do their branding with a hard iron through a wet blanket. Doing it that way they could blot another brand
mighty quick, but it was simpler to carry hay-wire. There was a time when nobody but a fool or a man
tired of life would ever be ketched with hay-wire on
his person. 'Sposin' we'd left it to the law to take keer
of those yere gents who was a luggin' around that sort
of stuff? Rustling would be just as popular in this
country to-day as it ever was."

"But what could you do if you did catch a man
carrying wire?" inquired Bart.

"What could we do? Why, we'd take him out and
present him with a hemp necktie."

"Lynch him?"

"That was what some folks called it."

"But didn't you ever make mistakes?"

"Well, mebbe so," confessed Stover. "Sometimes
the boys have strung an innocent man, but them
was busy days, and there was so much to do in a
short time that we couldn't afford to investigate too
extensively."

"I presume," said Frank, "that they intend to lynch
the men who stole those horses from the T-Bar and
the Rattlesnake? What if I should object? What if
I was to insist that the thieves be given a fair trial
in case they are captured?"

Stover stared at Merry through the darkness.

"We mistook you for a tenderfoot at first," he
said, "but ef you was to do this you'd show the only
real token o' the greenhorn that I've ever noted on
ye outside of yer years. It wouldn't do no good, sir.
They'd hang the varmints just the same."

"I don't suppose there will be any question of their
guilt in case they're captured?" muttered Hodge.

"None whatsoever," growled Stover. "Didn't
they kill poor Bill? I hope ye won't forget that.
They're murderers, as well as hoss-thieves. Now, I
opine we'd better snooze a bit. Ef you boys want to
get a wink of sleep, just be after it while I sort of
keeps guard."

"Hold on," objected Frank. "We can't have that.
You haven't slept for a long while, while Hodge and
I have had our fill. You must sleep, Stover. We'll
take turns at guarding until midnight. Roll in, Hodge.
I'll stand watch the first part of the night."

Although South-paw Lem was inclined to remon-
strate, Frank was firm and determined, and finally the
foreman yielded. In less than a minute he was sound
asleep.

Bart imitated Stover's example, while Merry, his
holstered pistol ready for use, stood guard in the
shadow of the rocks.

Merry listened to the horses cropping at the short,
sweet grass. Far away in the starry night he heard a
coyote barking.

"I presume there's no danger," he mused to him-
self. "The land of the Shoshones is still far distant,
and the cow-punchers are between us and the horse-
thieves. Still, Bill the Brute was murdered here. Who
killed him?"

As if some one had spoken the word in his ear, he
seemed distinctly to hear the name——

"Curly!"

It sent a shivering shrill over him from his head
to his feet.

"Curly!"

This time Frank's lips uttered that name.

Curly had quarreled with Bill. He had tried to
force the mild-mannered cowboy into some sort of of-
fensive demonstration, plainly in order that he might
have an excuse to shoot him down. Failing in this,
he seized the opportunity when Bill was cleaning a
pistol, so that it might not be said he had killed the
fellow unarmed and empty-handed. Only for Frank's
interference, the vindictive horse-breaker might have
accomplished his dastardly purpose.

Not for a moment did Merry believe Curly had sub-
duced his desire to shoot up Bill the Brute. It was
much more likely his humiliation over being checked
and shown up as he was in the presence of the as-
sembled cow-punchers, had made him all the more
bloodthirsty and determined. Yet he had not lingered
at the T-Bar. In the night he had packed up his be-
longings, saddled his horse and ridden away without
a word of adieu to any man.

This action had not led Merry into believing that
he had seen the last of Curly. His estimation of the
man caused him to think Curly would some day re-
turn and seek to carry out the evil, vengeful designs
of his heart.

If the man were indeed as bad as that, then there
must be others toward whom he entertained feelings
of hatred and whom he desired to destroy. On their
first meeting at Cottonwood Bend Bart Hodge had
disarmed the horse-breaker as the latter was about to
shoot his own horse down beneath Frank Merriwell,
who was riding the animal. Only for the grim au-
thority of South-paw Lem, Curly would have gone
at Hodge then and there with the long, keen, glitter-
ing knife he had so promptly whipped forth.
For some time thereafter the bronco-buster was surly and silent. Although he had invited Frank to ride his horse, he felt that he had been bitterly injured when Merry succeeded in doing so. His effort to shake Frank's nerve during the journey to the T-Bar had proved amusingly fruitless. That he had learned to respect Merry after the D-Bar-A stampede, and the accomplishment of Frank and Bart in holding together two hundred head of frightened cattle that fled wildly through the tempest-torn night, there could be no question whatever. Respect, however, might not diminish in the least the hatred and revengeful plotting of a fellow like Curly.

Plainly, the time to get away with the finest horses of the T-Bar herd had been well chosen while Frank Merriwell was absent from the ranch. Curly knew every horse on the T-Bar. It was also probable that he was well posted in regard to the horses of the Rattlesnake Ranch, having been singularly friendly with Hosea Montero, Chilcote's Mexican horse-trainer.

Since taking charge of the T-Bar, Frank had learned that in the reign of his predecessor, Butters, during which hostilities existed between the T-Bar men and Chilcote's bunch, the Rattlesnake crowd had always been well posted concerning what was going on in the enemy's camp. This fact had caused Lem Stover a great deal of annoyance and uneasiness. Stover was satisfied that there must be a traitor at the T-Bar, but his efforts to spot the man and obtain proof of his perfidy were unavailing.

After Curly's sudden departure, however, Stover one day confessed to the new owner of the T-Bar that he was more than half inclined to believe the horse-breaker had been the traitor. With peace established, old man Chilcote had nothing to say on this point save a gruff, firm denial that he knew anything about such work. When Seth Chilcote said a thing that way, it was not only bad manners, but decidedly dangerous to express or betray even the shadow of a doubt concerning his truthfulness.

Stover had said that Chilcote might be speaking the truth, as it was possible the T-Bar traitor had worked in conjunction with some D-Bar-A man who never explained to the owner of the Rattlesnake Ranch how he came into possession of so much valuable information.

Standing there in the darkness near the black rocks Frank meditated on these things, and somehow he seemed to feel that everything bearing on the murder appeared to point accusingly at Curly. Besides that man, no one seemed to know of another person who held a grudge against Bill. The killing of the unsuspecting cow-puncher at the spring was plainly of the most cowardly and dastardly nature. If one of the horse-thieves had fallen back for the purpose of watching the pursuers and had been hidden near the spring, there still remained no reason why he should have attacked Bill in such a cowardly manner.

It was evident to every one that the cow-puncher had not perceived the assassin nor dreamed of his presence until struck with the knife. The murdered man was on his knees, seemingly in the act of dipping water from the spring, when the black deed was done. The assassin had stolen from his place of concealment and crept pantherlike toward the kneeling man until able to leap forward and strike with the knife. That blow had been so swift, so sure, so accurate, that Bill's comrades, only a short distance below him, had heard no sound and had remained unaware of the tragedy until, searching for their fellow, they found him cold and dead with blood tingeing the tiny rill that dripped and tinkled down over the rocks.

"Curly did it!"

Once more Frank Merriwell muttered the thought that had become a conviction in his mind. If this were true, then there could be no question about Curly being one of the horse-thieves.

Now Frank knew a great deal more about the old-time reign of the rustlers in Wyoming than he had led South-paw Lem to suppose. He knew that at the outset rustling mavericks had been regarded as an honorable business. At one time the word "rustler" had not carried the odium of outlawry. Away back in the early days of the cattle industry, vast herds had roamed the range, unrestrained save at times during the round-ups and branding periods and the drives. In those days it was customary for the cattle-raisers to go forth in spring for the purpose of rounding-up the cattle and branding the calves. It was not at all difficult for the practical cow-man to tell who owned the calves, for, while a calf might not know its mother, no mother ever failed to recognize her offspring. And so, as the mother was marked, the calf was branded.

Nevertheless, in those days many strays escaped branding and grew up to roam the range without the mark of the iron on their hides. These mavericks became so numerous that the cattle-raisers finally agreed to pay their cowboys so much a head for all the unbranded creatures they could "rustle" in, and for a period the industrious punchers succeeded in
adding materially to their month's pay-roll by such an occupation.

Eventually, many of the cowboys concluded that if unbranded cattle were worth so much a head to their employers, they must be worth equally as much or more to themselves. As a result, here and there, the cowboys gave up their regular jobs and began collecting herds for themselves. In many instances these herds, started with only a few head, grew to large proportions.

Now capital and power is never so uneasy as when it sees labor and weakness encroaching on what it arrogantly claims as its particular domain. The big cattle-barons regarded with jealous and unkind eyes the independent efforts of the cow-punchers who were collecting mavericks and forming herds. Eventually they got together and made an agreement, following which they announced that in the future such business would be unlawful. The mavericks, they said, were and must remain the property of the original cattle-raisers of the country. In future no cowboy was to receive a commission for collecting these unmarked creatures. The object of this agreement was to drive out the little fellows, to stop them from “rustling” cattle.

Instead of producing the desired effect, the result was almost absolutely to the contrary. The rustlers felt themselves injured. They felt that their rights were being encroached upon. They believed they had the right to capture, to brand and to hold all unmarked cattle they could find straying upon the range. The arrogant cattle-barons proceeded to make war upon the rustlers. The rustlers retaliated after their own fashion. It cannot be claimed that all of them were honest, even at first; but the most of them were. With the opening of hostilities, the rascals and adventurers took sides with the little fellows, and it was not long before the rustlers as a body were mainly composed of men who had no hesitation whatever in pursuing any method to increase their holdings of cattle. Brand-blotting and altering became common. Horse-stealing thrived.

At first the sympathy of the salaried cowboys was wholly with the rustlers. On every ranch there were from one to a dozen men in secret communication or combine with these free-lances of the range. Even the foreman of many a ranch held secret dealings with rustlers. The thoroughly honest and loyal foreman was generally regarded with disdain, contempt and aversion, and more than one such paid for his loyalty with his life.

No longer was the rustler content to gather up and brand such cattle as roamed the great feeding-grounds unmarked. It was now his business to collect from the big owners of cattle and to alter the brands to suit his convenience and desire. He captured calves by the dozen and kept them hidden until they could be weaned from their mothers, so that they would not betray him when they were set at liberty bearing his brand. He resorted to scores of different methods of carrying on his “business.”

The railroad came, and in the camps of contractors were hundreds of men who had to be fed, and right there, close at hand, the rustlers found their ready market. This spurred them on and induced hundreds of fellows to join in the occupation. At one time it seemed as if honest cattle-raising would be wiped out in Wyoming and Montana.

Then the cattlemen got together and formed their association. The vigilantes were organized and went forth upon their deadly duty. Scarcely a morning sun looked over those plains that it did not behold from one to a dozen human beings dangling by the neck, lynched in the night by these “secret workers of justice,” and left as a warning for their fellows. It was war to the knife, war to the bitter end, and in the end the association conquered and the rustlers were practically extinguished. Some of them fled from the country; some reformed and turned honest.

Among the latter, it was whispered, was old Seth Chilcote. During his days of rustling Chilcote had founded the fortune he afterward built up as an honest man. Nevertheless, it is said to be impossible for the leopard to change his spots. Once after taking possession of the T-Bar, Frank Merriwell had overheard two of his men speaking of Chilcote, and their words had astonished and electrified him, for they were suggesting the possibility that the T-Bar brand might easily be blotted and changed to the D-Bar-A, and they mentioned the fact that at one time the T-Bar cattle had not only failed to increase, but had actually decreased in numbers.

With his usual wisdom, Merry resolved to keep his mouth shut and his eyes and ears open. He thought of the day old man Chilcote had shaken hands with him and announced that henceforth war between Rattlesnake Ranch and the T-Bar was at an end. Was it possible that the former rustler would forget this compact? Was it possible he had meant it as a deception and a blind? Was it possible that all through his scheming to drive out the tenderfoot owner of the T-Bar and get possession of those broad acres he had maintained a spy in the employ of Butters?
But now Chilcote himself had lost eight valuable horses, and he seemed both infuriated and determined to hunt the thieves down and inflict upon them the punishment he had so narrowly escaped tasting in former days.

If Chilcote was sincere in this purpose, and Curly was one of the horse-thieves, Frank thought he would become satisfied that the owner of the Rattlesnake Ranch had spoken the truth when he denied having dealings with a spy on the T-Bar.

"Time will tell," muttered Merry.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KNIFE.

Frank had spent a long time in this sort of meditation, and when it was ended he felt as positive Curly was one of the horse-thieves as he would had he seen the man in the very act of getting away with the animals. Not only that, but he was equally positive that Curly's knife had ended the life of Bill the Brute.

For once in his life Frank Merriwell, broad-minded, generous and forgiving to a degree that made him a marvel to men of smaller caliber, grew cold and hard and vengeful. No longer was he inclined to think of stepping between the hot-blooded pursuers and the men they were after. Justice often miscarried. Doubtless no human eye had seen Curly strike that deadly blow, and yet Frank was satisfied beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was the work of Curly's dastardly hand.

To turn the man over to the courts if he was captured might mean that he would be sent up for a term of years as a horse-thief. He would swear that he was innocent of Bill's murder, and what evidence could they gather to convict him?

Somewhere in the starry night a wild creature wailed, and Frank shivered, for it seemed like the voice of the murdered man appealing for retaliation upon his slayer. Merry's vivid imagination pictured Bill's ghost as lingering there at Black Rock Springs, seen occasionally at night and on the hour of his death by campers in the vicinity, until the place should take on a new name and become known as the "Haunted Springs." So vivid was his fancy that he seemed to conjure up before him a figure of flimsy, vapory white which was Bill in spirit, Bill with his eyes cold and glassy and his hands extended appealingly. It almost seemed that Merry beheld that figure appearing to float just above the earth no more than a rod distant, an outline, a shape, a form through which material objects beyond it could plainly be seen.

In another moment it was gone.

Frank brushed his hand across his eyes.

"What's the matter with me?" he muttered. "I'm beginning to see things. That's rather peculiar for a man of my temperament. It was purely a fantasy of my brain. My mind was so fixed and concentrated upon Bill that I actually seemed to see his ghost there before me. It's thus that many a so-called spook is seen. They exist only in the overwrought imagination of the beholder."

He took to pacing backward and forward in a little level space.

Hodge was sleeping as quietly as a baby, but Southpaw Lem snored most indistinctly. The night wind came down cold and piercing from the mountains near at hand. Merry shivered a little and moved somewhat more briskly upon his beat.

Now and then he paused to listen and to peer into the darkness. The stars overhead were clear-cut and bright as burnished steel. One and all the millions upon millions of them seemed to stand out with amazing distinctness in that clear, pure, rarified atmosphere.

In the silence of the night the tiny dripping rill of water sent down a tinkling sound from the springs above. It reminded Frank that he was thirsty, and with each passing moment that thirst grew apace until it became something like torment. He thought of the baking heat of the desert, the smothering clouds of alkali dust, the receding, fading, vanishing, mocking mirage.

"I've got to have a drink of that water," he whispered. "There's not one chance in ten thousand that any other human being will visit this spot to-night. As for the thieves, they're cut off from it, for the pursuers are between them and us."

It was not long before he decided to climb up over those rocks to the springs for the purpose of satisfying his thirst. Amid those tumbling boulders the shadows were wondrous thick and deep. The sound of the tinkling water seemed uncertain and evasive. At times he thought it directly ahead, then to the right, and anon to the left. In the end it was an echo that misled him, a soft, pattering echo of the dripping, falling water. It brought him to a spot where he stumbled over a mound of rocks. He did not fall, but gathered himself catlike and paused to rub his bruised shins.

"What the dickens is it?" he whispered to himself.
“Where is that water? It sounded right here, and now it’s yonder and farther on. It’s higher up. Somehow, I fancy I’m not following the path. Perhaps I’d better go back.”

A feeling of apprehension, of dread, of danger, came over him, and he turned to retrace his steps.

He halted:

With that feeling of apprehension was mingled yet another sensation. It was as if some power, some magnet, some unknown force had grasped him and sought to clog his retreating feet. Something seemed calling him, and he listened like one harking to a voice that commands.

Stooping in the darkness of that place, he placed his hand on the mound of stones. It appeared as if a magnetic thrill shot up his fingers to his shoulders. He jerked his hand away and stood there wondering.

His wonderment led him to feel for his water-tight match-safe. A match was produced and he struck it, holding the blaze cupped in his hands until it was strong and steady. Then he opened his hands until they formed a reflector and cast the light upon that mound.

Ordinarily there had been a crevice ten feet long amid the rocks. It was filled and stones were heaped upon it until they formed a long, low pile.

The match-light showed at one end of this heap of stones a smooth, flat slab that stood on end.

The match cracked and broke in two. Half of it dropped, a charred coal, at Frank’s feet, and the other half was too short for him to hold without burning his fingers.

The peculiar sensation that had thrilled him was intensified as he struck the second match. With the blazing bit of wood in his fingers he stepped forward and bent over, throwing the light upon that up-ended stone.

It was the headstone of a grave! With another stone some one had scribbled some writing upon it. The marks were faint, but they were plain enough for Frank to read them without difficulty:

“Here lies William Borden,
Murdered
By a dastardly assassin,
Aug. 10, 19——
Good-by, Bill!”

They had buried him there in that cleft amid the rocks, near the spot where he had died. They had heaped those rocks above his body that no wild beasts might come and dig up the remains.

Frank pictured them, those rough men, standing around that grave with heads uncovered and eyes dimmed by tears. Perhaps some one of them had spoken a prayer. Perhaps some one of them had enumerated the virtues of William Borden, known among his comrades as Bill the Brute. They had put him to rest there in his rude grave, their hearts wrung with sorrow, their souls fired with a desire for vengeance. There had been no man among them to chisel a name on that rough headstone, but one had found a piece of rock with which he had scratched the record which the elements must soon obliterate.

“Heavens!” whispered Frank as the second match fell, a tiny gleaming coal, at his feet and winked out into darkness. “Is this the end? Has Bill no relatives, no friends, no one who would care to know where his body rests—no one save the boys of the T-Bar? He shall be buried here with all decency and honor. At any expense I’ll cut him a sepulcher amid these rocks, and on the face of some great boulder I’ll carve his name, that it may be read by all who pass this way for a hundred years to come.”

Ere leaving he struck a third match and bent forward with it in his hand that he might once more read those faintly scrawled words upon the headstone.

Something kissed his ear with a cold breath. Something flashed bright before his eyes. Something rang clear as a bell and dropped upon the mound of stones before him.

It was a long, keen knife of burnished steel!

In a twinkling Frank snapped the burning match aside. With a pantherish leap he crouched behind the headstone of the grave, and in his hand he grasped his pistol.

Every nerve was athrob and aquiver, and yet he was as steady as the rock that sheltered him. What deadly thing haunted this place? Here Bill Borden had perished, and here Frank Merriwell had escaped death by a hair’s breadth. Somewhere within throwing distance was hidden the man who had cast that knife.

Merry was satisfied that the would-be assassin was higher up amid the rocks near the spot where the spring tinkled forth its soft music. It seemed that the dastard was lingering there to duplicate his fearful deed of another night.

“If I’d found the spring!” thought Frank. “If I’d knelt to drink from it——!”

No one ever doubted Frank’s courage, yet now for a little he was cold to his very marrow. This feeling,
however, was followed by a flash of burning heat and consuming rage.

Up amid the rocks he seemed to see something moving.

Crack!

Fire spurted from the muzzle of his pistol, and a bullet flattened and rebounded from the rocks.

He half expected an answer to that shot, but it did not come. There was a rustling, and a pebble came rolling and bounding down into the hollow.

"Crack!"

Again Frank fired although he had nothing save the falling pebble by which to direct his aim.

Voices called him from below. South-paw Lem, with Bart at his elbow, came clambering and bounding up over the rocks.

"Frank! Frank!" shouted Hodge. "Where are you? What's the matter?"

"Here!" answered Merry, as he reached around the stone and secured the knife which he slipped into his belt.

"What were you shooting at?"

"A prowling wolf—perhaps," was his answer.

Lem Stover swore.

"You don't want to waste lead on them critters, Mr. Merriwell," said the old cattleman. "We 'lowed mebbe you'd be set on by Shoshones, or mebbe you'd got up against the hoss-thieves, a-doublin' back on their trail, havin' fooled the boys somehow."

Frank joined them, and they retraced their steps to the camping-ground.

"Stover," said Merry, "I think we'd better move from here."

The foreman of the T-Bar was crowding some tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. He struck a match and lighted it.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Move from here? Why? Just because there's a stray wolf or some other critter a-proalin' around here?"

"I'll show you the teeth of that wolf," said Merry, as he held up the knife in the light of Stover's match.

When Stover heard Frank's story he swore once more, but he agreed that it was mighty dangerous for them to linger longer near Black Rock Springs.

CHAPTER IX.
AFTER THE MOON ROSE.

The big, round silvery moon had swung clear of the eastern horizon and was flooding a stretch of low-lying hilltops when the trio reached the crest of a ridge they had been steadily climbing for nearly an hour.

"That are the Butterball Hills," said Lem. "Straight ahead yonder lay the Barren Buttes, with the wildest section of the Windstorms to the west. On less the boys have pressed them infernal hoss-thieves a heap hard, the critters will stand an even show of shaking us all if they get well into the Windstorms."

"What's to the east of Barren Buttes?" questioned Merry.

"Bad lands. Bad Basin is that way yonder."

"Bad Basin? Seems to me I've heard that name before."

"Mebbe you has, sir. It was there the McCandlas gang made their last stand in eighty-eight."

"The McCandlas gang? Oh, yes. They were famous rustlers."

"Just about the worst this country ever saw. They was fighters, one and all, from old man McCandlas down to little Jim Beazon, and they died with their boots on. For three years they held out there in Bad Basin, raiding at times into the surrounding country and raisin' blazes with the cattle business generally. Whenever they was hard pressed they would retreat into the Basin and give battle. It was a mighty costly piece of business wipin' 'em out, but it had to be done. When the cattle-raisers arrived at that conclusion and got together for business, there was something doing. Oh, the McCandlases knew what they was up against—they knew there was a little army comin' after them. Did they run away? Not a bit of it! They simply fortified themselves down there in Bad Basin and prepared to fight it out to a finish. It was one of the bloodiest old battles that ever happened between cattlemen and rustlers. In the end them o' the McCandlas gang who wasn't shot up was hung. Only one man o' the bunch got out of the Basin alive, and he somehow found the way to climb out of the hole, leavin' his hoss behind him. That was Jake McCandlas, one o' the toughest nits of the three McCandlas boys. We hunted him clean to Sheyenne, but somehow he gave us the slip."

"You?" exclaimed Hodge. "Then you was in it, Lem?"

"Did I say I was in it? Well, never mind. You see, back in them days the most of us who took part in affairs of that sort went thereafter about our business and kept our faces closed a heap tight. Ef you saw a man lynched to-night—and you might see one
or a dozen—you forgot all about it to-morrow. It was better to have a short memory for such affairs."

"Then one of the McCandlas boys got away?" said Frank.

"He did for the time bein'; but it was said afterwards that he was killed over in the Black Hills about six months or a year later. I ain't never met no man that saw Jake McCandlas planted, and there have been stories goin' at times ever since then that he was still on terry-firmly. I've even heard that he was livin' right here in this territory, but I reckon that ain't so."

"You're confident the horse-thieves kept to the west of Barren Buttes, are you, Stover?" asked Merry.

"Onless they was plumb foolish they done so. The country to the west would favor them a heap in case they knew it thorough. To the east there ain't no place they could strike for besides Bad Basin, and in these yere times you won't find men of their stamp standing by to put up a fight in a place like that. There's only one way into the Basin, and that's the only way out. Two or three men could hold it agin a regiment as fur as gettin' out is concerned."

"Then I should think it was a poor place of refuge in the days of the McCandlas gang."

"On the contrary, it was a right good place. You see the Basin is a right sizable bit of country, having plenty of water and feed. The rustlers could retreat there, and, with provisions and supplies enough, they felt that they could bid defiance to pursuers. It took three hundred men, armed to the teeth, to wipe out that gang o' nineteen."

They rode down a rather steep descent from the barren ridge. The bald peaks below seemed rising slowly to meet them. Those treecless, verdureless hills seemed set in a maze of rambling shadows.

"You seem to feel absolutely certain of your course, Stover," said Frank. "How do you know the horse-thieves came this way?"

"There has been signs left all along the course," was the answer. "The boys reckoned we'd come, and they made the trail plain for our following. Out of this yere section there's but one decent trail and that leads to Barren Buttes."

In time the shadows enfolded them. When the moon had swung still higher those shadows would melt and fade; but until that time they lay there heavy and mysterious. The silence was almost awesome, for even the breeze that crept amid those hills moved without rustle or sound of any sort. The feet of the horses gave back a dull, muffled thud. Something lonely, oppressive, dreadful, seemed to hover amid those hills. One longed to shout, to scream, to do something to break the spell of it.

"Halt!"

Like a pistol-shot the word sounded echoless and dull upon the ears of the trio.

Lem Stover reined in his horse instantly, slapping his hand sharply against the butt of his holstered pistol, loosening the weapon with that blow. Even swifter was Frank Merriwell, for he had a pistol out and ready for use ere the foreman could jerk his gun free.

"Stiddy, gents!" commanded that same voice. "We've got you covered, and you can't see us. If yer begin shootin' it's your own funeral."

"Who in blazes are you?" fiercely demanded Stover.

"That's the question we're axin' o' you, gents. Who are you? Ef you're from the T-Bar it's all right."

"Then show yourselves," said Stover. "I'm the foreman of the T-Bar, and Mr. Merriwell and Mr. Hodge are with me."

Something moved in the shadows a short distance ahead of them, and a moment later they saw that it was a man—two men.

"You're the gents we're lookin' fur. The boys sent us back to pick ye up, 'lowin' you might miscalculate some regardin' the course pursued by them thar hoss-thieves. I'm Benton, the buster. Montero, from the D-Bar-A, is with me."

"Montero?" muttered South-paw Lem. "I never did have much use for that greaser."

Then he spoke up:

"All right, Benton. Where be yer hoses?"

"Right near here. We seen you comin' down the slope, but we only got just a glimpse of ye and couldn't be sure who you was. So we pickets our critters and waits for ye here."

Frank had put up his revolver. Stover's hardware was again resting in its holster. They joined Benton and Montero, and a few moments later the horses were found where they had been picketed.

"The boys must have reckoned they could spare ye, all right," said the foreman of the T-Bar, as Benton and the Mexican sprang into their saddles. "Otherwise, they would have taken chances on our findin' 'em and kept you with them."

"There wa'n't no particular need for us to stand by at present," retorted Benton. "We reckoned on pickin' ye up at Black Rock Springs. But Montero's cayuse went lame, and so we only made it this far. Did ye stop at the springs at all?"
“Yes, we stopped there, and we might have stopped longer for only one thing.”

Briefly Lem told of Frank’s experience at the springs. Smoking a cigarette, Montero heard the story with apparent indifference. But Benton showed a great deal of interest.

“Well, what do you think of it?” he cried as the foreman of the T-Bar concluded. “It must have been the same onery varmint that done up Bill the Brute. It’s a heap singular, too. We judged some one of the bunch we was fellerin’ had sneaked back and located us and got at Bill. Now it couldn’t be that way in yere case. None of them hoss-thieves could ‘a’ got by the whole of us, anyhow. Throwed a knife, eh? Say, Stover, I’m expressin’ my opinion that it was a Shoshone. I’m sayin’ that I judge Bill the Brute was killed by an Injun.”

“And he wasn’t scalped.”

“Just about now the Shoshones know better than to lift any hair, for that sure declares who done the job. They might be a heap tempted to take a scalp, but it’s likely they’d resist the inclination.”

“Perhaps so,” muttered Stover; “but somehow I don’t figger that it was Injuns. I don’t figger it that the Shoshones would be throwin’ a knife round so keerless like.”

“Mebbe not, mebbe not,” muttered the man from Medicine Bow; but still, it seemed that he was disinclined to think otherwise.

“Señor Benton,” said Montero, “you’ve not yet told them which way it is that the thieves have gone.”

“That’s right,” said Benton. “Do yer know them critters turned east instead of west when they reached Barren Buttes?”

“Turned east?” cried Stover in astonishment. “Then the boys ought to have ’em rounded up and holed by this time.”

“They has.”

“Where?”

“In Bad Basin.”

CHAPTER X.

INTO BAD BASIN.

Dawn was blushing in the east when they came to the bivouac of the pursuers at the mouth of Bad Basin. There the horses were picketed and the men asleep on the ground, with the exception of the sentries and one or two others who were building fires and making ready to get breakfast. At sight of the approaching horseman, however, one of the men astir uttered a shrill yell that quickly awoke the entire camp.

Old man Chilcotte shook himself free of slicker and blankets, dug his knuckles into his eyes, yawned, and then strode forward to meet the approaching party.

“Well, I’m right glad you’re here, Mr. Merriwell,” he said hoarsely. “We held up on your account, wishin’ to give you a fair and square chance to get into the finish of this yere business. We’ve got the skunks down thar in Bad Basin. They can’t git out, and we kin git in. Mebbe we ought to have two or three times as many men as we has in order to round ’em up in one bunch arter we do git in, but we can’t waste time pickin’ up an army. There’s now nineteen o’ us, not counting Chin Chin, the cook. There are only three of them hoss-thieves.”

“Nineteen to three is fairly good odds,” laughed Frank.

“I don’t know why the poor fools ever went in that,” said Chilcotte, shaking his head. “They must ’a’ reckoned they could do better agin’ us than the McCandlas boys done. We’d ought to eat ’em up in short order. I judge mebbe you’re some hungry. Our supplies wouldn’t last any too long, but havin’ cornered the critters we’re arter, I’m advisin’ everybody to have a squar feed this mornin’ before we go in to clean ’em out. We brought water enough for coffee, and we’ll have plenty more for the horses or other purposes arter we git into the Basin.”

Merriwell’s men seemed highly pleased to see him once more. One and all, they spoke to him respectfully, and he gave them the greeting of a man who treats his men right yet permits no freshness or familiarity.

Breakfast was a mighty simple affair of hard bread and tinned meats, washed down with rank, black coffee. Nevertheless, it put those men into condition for anything that the early day might bring forth.

After breakfast, while Chilcotte, Merriwell, Harper and Stover conferred, the punchers looked to their weapons and made sure that they were prepared for use.

Sangaree stood around uneasily on first one foot and then the other, watching the ranch-owners and their foremen, until at last he plucked up nerve to speak.

“Mr. Merriwell, sir,” he said, “if you don’t mind, just a word.”

“What is it, Sangaree?” asked Frank.

“We’ve been reckoning on goin’ up against three
men down yere in Bad Basin, but somehow I've got an idea that we may find we've undercalculated. I judge we'd better be ready for two or three times as many. Long last year some time, I hears that there are some tough gents had built a shack and taken up quarters on the old McCandlas place. I even heard—which I don't take no stock in whatever—that Jake McCandlas hisself was one of 'em. Now I know fur a fact that Jake wasn't killed when he was s'posed to be, but he went north into Alaska with the rush for Dawson, and that's the last anybody ever knew about him. Mebbe he's dead; mebbe he's alive up there now. That he's here in Bad Basin I don't believe."

"You say you know Jake McCandlas wasn't killed as reported, Sangaree?"

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know?"

"Well, sir, I saw him with my own eyes up in Spokane two year arter they said he was planted."

"Then you know Jake McCandlas?"

"Yes, sir, I knowed him. I knowed him when he was an honest cow-puncher—him and his two brothers, Jeff and Bill. The McCandlas boys went wrong, sir, but they had a reason. The syndicate men was to blame. They'd picked up a mighty nice little bunch o' cattle, the McCandlas had, when the big guns got together and made an agreement that maverick gathering was unlawful. The very first thing they done was to git arter the McCandlas and make it a-plenty hot for 'em. They claimed all sorts of things against them boys, sayin' they was calf-stealers and brand-blowers and hoss-thieves, and all that, not a single word of which was true at that time. They just went in on them boys and claimed their cattle right and left, practically cleaning out the whole herd. One man says, 'That thar's my brand burnt over,' and another says, 'This here is my brand burnt over.' And when the McCandlas told 'em they was all liars there was something doing. Jeff was shot through the left lung. Bill lugged off a couple of bullets in his shoulder, and Jake got one in the right ankle that made him limp forever arter. That they wasn't wiped out wa'n't the fault of the gents who started the trouble. It was because Jake and Bill managed to git to their horses and away. The gents what done the shootin' reckoned Jeff would die anyhow, but he didn't.

"Arter them three boys got patched up and on their feet ag'in they swore vengeance ag'in the big cattlemen, and from that day on they made things howl some, you bet! They had the reputation of being outlaws, and they decided to live up to it. That they done so, history certain tells. They got together the hardest bunch o' rustlers in the whole territory, and for a right long time they held the fort in Bad Basin. Course there couldn't be but one termination to the affair arter the big guns got the upper hand. They brought an overpowering force into Bad Basin and wiped out the McCandlas gang all 'cept Jake, who got away.

"Now, sir, it's my opinion that some poor fools has sort o' started a new gang hereabouts and took the Basin as their headquarters. It was only a part o' them who went out arter some good hosss, which they probably needed a heap. Therefore, says I, we'd better not figger on findin' three men to buck up against down thar in that Basin, for there may be three times as many—yes, even more. That's all I has to say, Mr. Merriwell, and I hope you'll excuse me."

With a short bow, Sangaree retired.

"Mr. Merriwell," said Chilcote, with a grim smile, "I allus reckoned one or two o' your men knewed more about the McCandlas gang and old-time rustlers than they had any license to know. This yere Sangaree never has talked a great deal afore this, and I low thot that he just stated was about straight and squar. What have you got to say about it, Southpaw?"

"Sangaree attends strictly to his business from payday to pay-day," said Stover, "and that's about all I can tell ye concernin' him. I don't reckon he give us that game of talk to frighten us any, for he knows he'd be wasting his chin-music. I think we'd better go slow and cautious. I've been into Bad Basin, and I know the lay of the land. Two men posted behind the rocks at the dead pine can keep a hundred men from coming out as long as they can see to shoot."

"Then we'd better post two men there," said Merry.

"We want all the fighting-men we can take along with us," grunted Chilcote. "I certain hate to spare any o' my men. Howsoever, I 'low Shadder would be the best man we could drop at the dead pine."

"Not wishin' to pear too farward, Mr. Merriwell," said Stover, "I suggest that we leave Benton thar with Shadder."

Frank nodded.

"Suggestion accepted, Stover."

"Arter we git into the Basin," said the foreman of the T-Bar, "we'll find two trails, one leading straight ahead, while t'other branches off to the left. Both of them trails bring up at the same place, which is whar
the old McCandlas Ranch used to be on an elevation. It was situated mighty handy for defense, and ef it hadn't been set afire by accident the time they wiped out the McCandlas boys, I reckon that job would 'a' been a heap sight harder than it was. The trail to the left leads through a deep gully and brings up at what was the rear of the old McCandlas Ranch. Half o' us can ride straight ahead while the rest come 'round the back way, and we ought to catch the critters we're lookin' fur right atween two fires."

This plan was finally decided upon. They rode forward into Bad Basin ready for anything that might happen. An extra supply of firearms had been brought along, and from these supplies both Frank and Bart secured rifles.

The trail was rough and difficult. For a little time it ascended, but at last it began to wind downward, coming finally through a break amid the rocks where ahead of them could be seen an old dead pine. Beyond that pine there was a steep and difficult descent and a wild, rugged outlook.

They paused at the narrowest point of the break through the rocks, leaving Shadder and Benton, with instructions to hold that pass against the horse-thieves, should any of them attempt to escape from the Basin. Right there those two men could conceal themselves behind boulders, over which they might rain a shower of lead down the slope. Their horses were left still farther back, hidden and protected by a spur of the rocky wall.

Benton seemed very much disappointed over being left behind, and growled because he could not go down with the others "and have a hand in the sport," as he expressed it. Shadder had nothing to say, and no one noted the fact that into Shadder's ear Sangaree whispered a few swift words of warning.

As they were on the point of proceeding, something startling occurred. From far below them in the Basin came a sullen, jarring, rumbling explosion.

They looked at one another inquiringly.

"It sure sounded like a blast, gents," said Red Harper. "It wasn't shooting, that's certain."

"Mebbe them gents down thar is gittin' ready to give us a warm reception," observed Stover.

"Then let's not give them time to make their preparations too elaborately," said Frank. "Come on, boys."

Down the steep trail they rode.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHOT AND WHAT FOLLOWED.

Where the trail branched Chilette and one-half of the men turned to the left. At Stover's suggestion, Frank's party moved forward slowly, giving the others time to cover the longer distance around through the ravine, so that both parties might approach the locality of the old McCandlas Ranch at nearly the same minute.

At one point Frank and his men obtained a view of some lowlands below them and beheld cattle and horses feeding down there.

"Stolen critters to the last one o' them, I'll bet my boots!" muttered Stover.

Sangaree said nothing.

Finally they beheld a bit of smoke arising ahead of them. There was some timber through which they passed and came in full view of a small, hip-roofed shack standing on a slight eminence amid a mass of boulders. Near the shanty was a hill which seemed to be of solid stone. There were evidences of activities of some sort on this hill. The rock had been broken and scattered. They could see a large opening, along the edge of which this broken rock was heaped.

Involuntarily the entire party drew rein.

"What do you make of it, Hodge?" asked Merry.

"What are they doing there?"

"Building fortifications, I should say, Frank," answered Bart at once.

A man, bent, gray-bearded, aged in appearance, came out of the shanty. Apparently he did not perceive them. He limped slightly as he walked toward a pile of cut wood near at hand.

Sangaree leaned forward and fixed his piercing eyes on the man. His lips parted and he whispered hissingly:

"Mr. Merriwell, Mr. Merriwell, look at that man! That's Jake McCandlas, or I'm daft! He looks twenty year older'n he did when I saw him last, but it sure is Jake!"

One of the horses whickered. In an instant the old man stopped and threw up his head. He saw them,
and even at that distance they fancied he was frightened by the spectacle.

"I'll speak to him," said Frank. "Let me do so."

He rode forward a short distance and hailed the man, who was backing slowly toward the shanty.

"What do yer want? What're yer doing here?" demanded the old man.

"We're looking for stolen horses," answered Frank, without an attempt at palaver or deception.

"Stolen bosses? stolen bosses? Well, yer needn't come here lookin' for 'em. Can't yer let a man be peaceable without disturbing him this yere way? I ain't no hoss-thief."

"Perhaps not," said Merry; "but there are horse-thieves in this Basin, and we——"

From the distance came the report of a rifle, followed immediately by a scattering sound of shots.

Behind Merry, Stover exclaimed:

"That's Chilcotte's boys! They've bucked up against something thar', sure. Look out, Mr. Merriwell, or——"

From a crevice in the wall of the hip-roofed shanty leaped a sprut of smoke. The report of a rifle rang clear and distinct.

Almost beneath the feet of Frank's horse a rattler had suddenly sounded its shrill warning. The animal reared like a flash—reared just in time to save Frank's life and receive a bullet in its own brain.

Down went the horse.

Frank dropped flat to the ground behind the death-stricken animal.

"Back—back, everybody!" he shouted. "Get to cover!"

They obeyed him, for some one within the shanty was working a repeating rifle as fast as he could handle the lever, and bullets were cutting the air on every hand.

The bent old man had ducked behind a boulder. From the huge stone to another he darted, and then he dashed through the open doorway. As he vanished, Bart Hodge sent three bullets sipping through the doorway behind him. The door was closed with a bang.

"Merry! Merry!" cried Hodge, "are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," answered Frank, as he shifted his position a little and brought his rifle around ready for use. "Keep back; Hodge! Keep back, everybody! Don't expose yourselves. There's no need to let two or three men inside that shack kill half a dozen outside of it. We've got them cornered."

"I dunno 'bout that," answered Stover from the shelter of the thicket. "Just listen to the racket goin' on over yonder. I sure opine Chilcotte met up with a hot reception. I judge they ambushed him in the ravine. If that's so, mebbe not one of Chilcotte's bunch will get out alive."

Evidently the old shanty was provided with loopholes for the purpose of defense, for now and then some one within fired through one of those holes. The shots were directed toward the thicket which concealed the men from the T-Bar Ranch, but the very fact that more of such shooting was not done led the cowboys to fancy that the defenders of the shack were none too well supplied with ammunition.

Pickle-eye Pete was snarling and eager. Again and again he urged them to charge on the shanty.

"Remember poor Bill!" he rasped. "Here's where we've got to avenge him."

"There may be two or possibly three men in that shack," said Stover; "but the shooting we heard yonder is proof that there are many more to deal with before we leave Bad Basin. We can't afford to let these men here wipe out half or two-thirds of our party while we're getting them. They can't get away. Let's go—some slow and wait till we hear from Chilcotte."

Peering over the dead horse, Frank perceived something which looked like a peaked brown hat lying on a shelf that was situated just inside the small window of the shanty. Whether it was a hat or not Merry could not tell. He knew it might be one placed there for the purpose of drawing the fire of the men in the thicket so that the defenders of the shanty could answer by shooting at the puffs of smoke.

Silence had fallen over the Basin. In the distance the shooting had ceased. A black-winged buzzard circled high overhead, a tiny moving speck against the blue sky. The morning sun was looking down into
the wild region, and the chill of the night had given place to a dry, baking heat, unrelieved by a single breeze.

Merry took careful aim at the peaked brown thing in front of the shanty window. His finger pressed the trigger.

In another instant a most amazing thing happened. There was a burst of flame and smoke and dust and a belching roar that shook the very earth. Rocks and wood rose into the air. A rush of dust-laden atmosphere swept over Frank, blinding and smothering him. The thicket was torn by the blast, trees and branches bending low and then recovering to wave furiously. The blue sky and the bright sun were shut out for the time being by a smothering brown cloud.

"I sure reckon," observed Lem Stover after a time, "that somebody inside that shebang must have stepped on a torpedo."

"It was dynamite," said Bart Hodge.

"Yes, it must have been dynamite," agreed Frank. "Those men were using it to blast that hole in the rock yonder. In some manner a lot of it was discharged simultaneously, and we see the result."

"Gents," said Sangaree dryly, "there won't be no further question 'bout whether Jake McCandlas is dead or livin'. He's gone. There won't no human critter ever set blinkers on him again."

They advanced and inspected the scene of the explosion. There was little for them to see except that ragged hole torn deep into the crust of the earth. Not a trace of a human being could they find, not even a thread of clothing. It was as if that explosion had wiped out and annihilated every vestige of the poor wretches within the hut.

And while they continued to linger, Seth Chilcote, followed by some wounded, perspiring, cursing men, arrived. Chilcote was boiling with wrath. He was too angry to tell his story, but from Red Harper the curious ones learned that the D-Bar-A men had been ambushed in a narrow ravine, where they would have been wiped out to the last one only for the fact that Howling Harry Ross had an unusually keen pair of eyes and caught a glimpse of a human head suddenly jerked back from the brink of the gorge. When they realized the danger and turned to retreat the ambushers opened fire on them. José Montero, they said, was killed. Three other men were wounded slightly. One of the horses had fallen, but his rider seized Montero's horse and got away.

Chilcote tore off red-hot language by the yard. He expressed himself in words which fairly scorched the air. At last he grew calm enough to ask the cause of the terrific explosion they had heard.

"You only saw one of them varmints here," he cried, after he had listened to the story. "There were at least six or eight lyn' fur us yander."

"There must have been two here," said Merry, "for one killed my horse by shooting from the shanty while the old man whom Sangaree called Jake McCandlas
was still in plain view. I've a conviction that there were at least three men here. Sangaree warned us not to fancy we'd go up against a smaller number than nine or ten, and it's plain his warning contained wisdom. Now, where are we going to look for the others?"

Red Harper suggested that they should retire to the forks of the trail and hold a consultation there. This suggestion was accepted.

But as they were retracing their steps a horseman came galloping madly down upon them, and they found themselves face to face with Benton, the fingers of whose left hand were dripping blood.

"What does this mean?" cried Frank, as he confronted the horse-breaker. "Why are you here?"

"I've got a bullet through my shoulder, sir," answered Benton, "and I'm leaking a-plenty. I reckoned it would be healthy for me to have that hole plugged afore I bled too much."

"How did you get it?"

"The other gent you left that with me, he sort of took a notion to fit me for a funeral."

"You mean Shadder?"

"That's the varmint. I happened to turn just in time to see him pull his gun on me. He got me in the shoulder, but I salted him fur keeps."

"You've killed Shadder?"

"I sure judge I have. He was a traitor, gents. He certainly was standing in with the horse-thieves."

"Blazes!" snarled Chilcotte. "Then the pass is left open, unguarded! Why, gents, if them varmints ever knewed it and got thar ahead of us, they could hold us in here till the end o' time! They'd have us dead to rights!"

"Look after Benton's wound, Twisty," cried Frank. "The rest of you come on. We've got to make sure that the enemy doesn't get to the pass ahead of us."

They covered the back trail in a hurry. But hurry as they did, they were barely in time to see seven horsemen got in ahead of them from the west and go scrambling and climbing up toward that narrow pass near which stood the lone dead pine.

"They have beat us to it!" cried Red Harper in despair. "They've cooked our goose, gents." South-paw Lem rode clear out of the bunch, stopped short and swung his rifle to his shoulder. The weapon began to spit and bark, but the bullets fell short.

Mounted on a tough little bronco, the leader of the horsemen who were making for the notch turned in the saddle and waved his hat, uttering a shrill, contemptuous yell of defiance.

"By blazes, it's Curly!" cried Lem Stover, lowering his empty rifle.

Yes, it was Curly. They all recognized the former horse-breaker of the T-Bar. Evidently he was the leader of those desperadoes. Evidently he was rejoicing in the thought that his day for retaliation upon the men he bitterly hated had come at last. Not that he had any particular grudge against his former cowpuncher associates, but he had never forgotten the fact that both Hodge and Merry had humiliated him by taking his pistol from his grasp as he was about to use it.

"Look! look!" snarled Sangaree, pointing toward another of the horsemen. "By the everlasting big horn, that's your greaser bronco-buster, Chilcotte! That's Montero alive!"

Chilcotte was amazed. The Mexican could be seen with the horse-thieves, and it was either Montero or his double.

"It surely is Montero, Chilcotte," said Frank. "Now I understand some things that puzzled me. Montero and Curly were friendly. They've both been in this horse-lifting business for some time, although this is the first occasion they've permitted it to become known. Only for the fact that they feel sure they have us foul, they wouldn't be so careless now."

"And they've got us—they've got us for fair!" rasped Chilcotte. "If they want to, they can keep us here—"

Amid the rocks up near the blasted pine there was a sudden spurt of smoke. It was followed by another and another, and the sound of rifle-shots came floating down to the ears of the amazed spectators.

With the very first shot Curly was seen to fling up his arms and pitch heavily upon the back of his horse. There he clung, while the animal turned, unguided,
"Yes," he answered, "he was my brother that I ain't seen before in ten years."

"Mebbe not," said Sangaree, as he held his rifle so that the muzzle covered Benton's breast. "Mebbe it's been ten year sence you has seen him, but I has my doubts."

A look of fear leaped into Benton's eyes. It was the look of a hunted animal, realizing it was being forced into a corner. He lay Curly back upon the hard ground and rose hastily to his feet.

"What do you mean, Sangaree?" he demanded. "I sure reckon you don't doubt my word any? I don't opine you're lookin' for a quarrel with me here and now? Ef so be you are——"

"Keep your hands away from your gun, Benton!" rang out the clear voice of Frank Merriwell. "If you try to pull a shooting-iron you're a dead man!"

Twisty produced a plug of tobacco and tore off a piece with his scrappy teeth.

"A couple o' the boys are bringin' a gent down from the notch," he said. "Seems to me he looks sort o' familiar, and I opine by the way he's hangin' on them what's helpin' him that he's some hurt. So help me, I believe it's Shadder!"

Benton caught his breath with a hissing sound and turned his eyes up the slope. In a moment he grew deathly pale, and his bent legs seemed to tremble a bit beneath him.

Supporting the thin man of the D-Bar-A, who was known as Shadder, two of the cowboys approached. One was the Dwarf, and he alone could have carried Shadder like a baby in his arms. The latter, however, insisted on walking.

Five strides away they paused and Shadder weakly drew his right arm from across the broad shoulders of the Dwarf. He extended his hand and pointed an accusing finger straight at Benton.

"You certain came near finishing me, you varmint!" he said in a low voice, which, however, was filled with deadly hatred. "You tried to murder me, but I got one shot at you before you left me for buzzard-bait, as you supposed. Oh, my skin's got three bullet-holes in it, and you done the trick. You're a traitor, and I judge you'll get your medicine long with the rest if
these yere boys know their business. Excuse me, gents, but I'm done up and I've got to lay down. I can't stand no longer. Don't let the whelp get away. Don't shoot him unless you have to. Hang him!"

A miracle had saved Shadder from death. One of the bullets would have finished him had it not struck a rib and been deflected. Up there in the notch he had lain unconscious after Benton left him, until he heard the approaching horsemen and was aroused by the shooting of South-paw Lem. Then he dragged himself to his knees, found his rifle, and, although there was a mist before his eyes, he poured lead into the approaching horse-thieves until they scattered in consternation, unable to face the music.

Benton forced a laugh.

"It's my word agin' his, gents," he cried, "and I give it to you straight that he tried to shoot me in the back. I had to salt him, I had to defend myself. He's one o' the hoss-thieves."

"Mebbe so," muttered Twisty, as he rolled his quid of tobacco into his cheek; "but ef he is he certain made an awful error in what he done to your brother Curly. Hadn't you better put up your hands, Bent? I'm afraid some bearless person will shoot holes in ye ef you get them paws of your'n a-wanderin' 'round in the vicinity of your hardware."

Benton cursed beneath his breath, but he knew it was folly for him to try to pull a pistol. He was compelled to put up his hands and surrender. They disarmed him and tied his elbows behind his back, paying no heed to his protests.

In the meantime, Frank Merriwell, having a little knowledge of surgery, was examining Shadder's injuries. The unfortunate fellow called faintly for water, and Merry urged them to carry him down out of the burning sun. They placed him in the shade down there, while Frank dressed his wounds and checked the bleeding and some one else brought water to moisten his parched lips.

"What sort o' a chance has I, Mr. Merriwell?" asked the wounded man weakly. "Has I got to go for it?"

"I hope not," answered Frank. "I think you have a show to pull through. Keep up your courage."

"Just one request I want to make of you, Mr. Merriwell. When the boys got ready to decorate the dead pine, don't interfere with what they do to that critter Benton. It was him or Montero that tried to kill you at Black Rock Springs—sure, it was one of them varmints what threwed that knife. I heard you tellin' 'bout it, sir. This yere Benton, he got a job on the T-Bar in order that he might be thar and help his brother Curly git even with you. Curly's cashed in his chips. I sent him over the range myself. Now ef the boys sort o' hurry his brother along to join him, I hope you won't object too much."

Lem Stover came riding down the trail and paused, hearing Shadder's final words.

"Don't you worry none 'bout that, pard," he said. "Mr. Merriwell won't interfere. They've taken keer of Montero and the rest of the gang. Three o' them is hangin' in the dead pine yonder, and Benton is one o' the three."

"It is justice," muttered Shadder.

THE END.

The Next Number (650) Will Contain
Frank Merriwell's Brand;
OR,

THE ANGEL OF THE T-BAR.


SPECIAL NOTICE REGARDING EARLY NUMBERS.

By a fortunate chance, we have secured a great many copies of the early numbers of Tip Top. This places us in a position to supply orders for nearly all back numbers from No. 25 to date. Some of these have been handled, but the reading matter is all there. While they last, we will send them postpaid at five cents per copy. They are worth much more.

Send in a list of what you want at once, boys!

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STREET & SMITH.
TIP TOP WEEKLY

NEW YORK, September 19, 1908.

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TIP TOP ROLL OF HONOR.

Following the suggestion of Mr. Burt L. Standish, that appeared in his letter to Tip Top readers in No. 480, the following loyal Tip Toppers have won for themselves a place on our Honor Roll for their efforts to increase the circulation of the King of Weeklies. Get in line, boys and girls, and strive to have your name at the head of the list.

Miss Violet Whitney, Washington.
Albert Roberts, Illinois.
Bruce Carr, Indiana.
John Bremmer, Illinois.
E. E. Warley, Texas.
Clarence Sawyers, W. Va.
Benjamin Leventhal, Mo.
David B. Elliot, Texas.
Carleton M. Allen, Boston.

The names of other enthusiastic Tip Toppers will be added from time to time. Send in the result of your efforts to push the circulation of your favorite weekly and win a place on the Roll of Honor.

APPLAUSE.

Owing to the large number of letters received, the editor of Tip Top cannot undertake to secure their publication under six weeks. Those who contribute to this department must not expect to see them before that time.

FREE POST CARDS—Any boy who writes us, telling why he loves Tip Top, and what the magazine has done for him, as well as what he is doing on his part to increase its circulation, will, upon request, receive a set of six fine post cards of the principal characters in Tip Top free by mail. Be sure and address your letters "Editor Tip Top Weekly Post Card Offer."

U. S. S. Maine, Mare Island Navy-yard, California.

I have been reading your king of weeklies for eight years, and you can take my word for it that it is the surest cure for blues there ever was, is, or will be. It is also the best shipmate any one could have. I have always found it the most interesting of weeklies, and I read six different publications. The characters are so likable and seem so real that, while I am one of them I think I see about the whole thing. I am trying my best to increase the circulation of "Tip Top," and every time I get one as soon as I finish it I give it to one of my shipmates with instructions to pass it along. I have already got between ten and fifteen of them buying "Tip Top," with prospect of many more having to do the same. After the first fifteen days and turned to the ship there was a flood of "Tip Tops" aboard. And all of them say: "They are the best ever." We have them as far back as we possibly could get in Frisco.

I have all the characters that have been introduced, and Burt L. certainly takes the cake. I must say that without the slightest doubt Frank, Dick, Burt L., Street & Smith are O. K. from truck to tail end and that's no pipe-dream. These people you hear telling their weeklies for such folks as Chez Al and Dance Hall, to sell better pipe down; they don't know what they want—see? If we don't have any fellows like them, where is the best part of the story coming in at? Of course there are only a few of these that ain't wise and want everybody to be good. All Tip Toppers are friends of mine. Of course it is too bad that Ditson had to leave college. And then we have Chez A.; he couldn't not start at Yale, but it may be the best thing ever happened. June did stick up for him, but that is natural, she being his sister. Mabel Ditson certainly is there with the goods. How about Felicia, whom Burt L. must have forgotten, for we have not heard from her in a long time. I hope she will come back again. Inez and Elsie and Frank Jr., too, are a few whom I would like to read about soon.

If only to me as well as to you. I am taking too much space, so I will close, with a heap of luck to Street & Smith and also Burt L., and long life to Frank and Frank Jr., and Dick and all his friends. Yours,

R. H. (A Bluejacket).

Thank you, friend Jack Tar, and if we had your name we would be proud to place it at the head of the Honor Roll. When this is printed you will be at the other side of the world, but we hope you may still find "Tip Top." (A letter from Canada.)

I enclose money to pay my subscription for six months. "Tip Top" is undoubtedly the premier of all the weeklies and is a great spur in pointing out the way for the American story to live an upright and clean life. I have been a reader for the past five years, and during that time I have, at every opportunity, spoken a good word for the "king of weeklies." I think that the suggestion by one of the correspondents that you remodel the magazine on the lines similar to that of the Saturday Evening Post is a good one, and with a good circulation manager I think you could boost the circulation to a million. As an author of boy's stories Mr. Standish is undoubtedly without an equal, and is particularly at his best when delineating characters like John Smith, the leading character of the story entitled "The Rockspire Time," and Dave Flint, with whom many readers of "Tip Top" are familiar. Wishing "Tip Top" long life, I am, very truly yours,

R. H. FAUER.

The temptation of a round million circulation is very alluring, but for the present we fear "Tip Top" will have to keep to its familiar form. What you have to say of Burt L. Standish's ability as a character-builder among boys, strikes the keynote of his wonderful and unequaled success as a writer of juvenile fiction. His characters are so natural we seem to know them personally, and cannot help entering into the spirit of their struggles, temptations, sports, and victories as if they were actually living in the same town with us.

Having been a constant reader of "Tip Top" from No. 1 to date, I am taking the liberty of writing to express my opinion of the publication. I wish to compliment the author, Mr. B. L. Standish, on the originality he has shown in the construction of his stories. Notwithstanding that he has now been writing for over twelve years, his stories are just as interesting and his plots as original as in the earlier stages of his career. His stories of baseball are among the best that I have ever had the pleasure of reading. One can almost see the game going on while reading a copy of "Tip Top." Some day, perhaps, I cannot tell when, but as long as I do live, I shall continue to be a reader of "Tip Top." Possibly this is because I have been reading about Frank for a longer time. What has become of Jack Diamond, Harry Reynolds, Danny Green, and all the rest, I ask myself:

There are a great number of people who class "Tip Top" in with the other five-cent weeklies. It is in a class by itself. To those who object to "Tip Top" I would like to make a few common-sense statements. They ask what substantial good
does "Tip Top" do its readers? This question is answered by answers from readers in the Applause column, which builds the moral, physical, and mental being. It instills into their system a praiseworthy desire to take part in all kinds of athletic sports. It is written in such a way as to cause the reader to try to equal the heroes, Frank Merrick! Dick himself is largely of Frank's making, for was not Frank his model? Bart Hodge, Urie Scudder, Dave Flint, Hal Darrell, Egbrain Gallou and numerous other heroes have been witness to the late influence of the Merrills. But doesn't it make you want that grade of reading exclusively? Yes, it does, and so much the better for the reader. If one desires to read a wholesome piece of literature let him read "Frank Merrick's Game;" or, "Snaring a Sharper," of the Frank Merrick at Yale series. It appears to me that Mr. Standish is imbued with a sincere desire to benefit his fellow creatures, both young and old, as well as to produce probable results. If by his efforts he can elevate the morals of the youth in the slightest manner, then he has done much for the present, and more still for the future, generation. The steady fight he has made against the tobacco, cigarette, and whisky habit has done wonders. Mr. Standish's work is something long wanted and long sought for by many eminent divines, but never found. He has made a hit because of his great experience with the world, his knowledge of men and boys and their natural habits. He has a personal kind of right and wrong, and has a happy way of saying it that does not offend, but convinces.

The question is doing a tremendous amount of good, and has made a hit with both young and old is demonstrated by its long life.

Truth sometimes will not reach the waste-basket, and closing with three cheers for "Tip Top." I am yours, very truly, an admirer of "the old fock" and B. L. S., R. D. Jones.

Philadelphia.

Please let me know—for the benefit of some friends of mine—whether any numbers of Tip Top Quarterly are now to be had, and if so, what ones.

Your splendid letter must awaken a cordial echo in tens of thousands of boyish hearts among those who are ready to admit that the day they took up the "Tip Top" habit was the happiest and most profitable day in all their lives. The "quarters" are all gone, but if you desire any particular story among the issues of "Tip Top," and will write us stating the title, we can tell you in what Medal book that particular story has been incorporated, together with three or four others.

(A letter from Florida.)

Although I have never written to the Applause column, I have been a reader of the "Tip Top" for several years. I read my first copy ten years ago, and although I have missed several numbers, I have read nearly all of them and also a great many of the Medals. I can only say that "Tip Top" is the greatest thing that has ever been done in the world. I would like to see more of your friends who live in your city to get my friends to read "Tip Top," and I am succeeding right all right. We all love "Tip Top" in this part of "good old Florida." Trusting I will see this in print, wishing success to the "best weekly on earth," I am, a loyal Tip Topper.

E. T. MILLER.

Who could expect more? You do well in saying "good old Florida," for many a happy day have we spent with golf and gun among the pines, cypress, and palmettos of your State. Write us again, friend, and tell how the good work goes on.

(A letter from California.)

The "Tip Tops" are fine these days. I loan "Tip Tops" to my friends and the most sincere and several others who are thinking of taking it. I hope Dick doesn't go back on June for Miss Clayton. My favorites are Dick, Frank, Brad, Tommy, Chester, Bob, Henderson, Bar, Gorder, and Bill of the boys, and June, Irma, Mabel, Claudia of the girls. I hope Earl and Barren go to Yale. Well, I will close, with three cheers for Hurd L. Standish and Street & Smith. I remain, a loyal Tip Topper.

You are doing a good work, Roderick, and we feel that you would resent having labored among your friends to increase the circulation of a clear magazine, so thoroughly devoted to the interests of our American boys.

(A letter from Pennsylvania.)

PROF. FOURMEN: Having been a reader of "Tip Top" for years, I would be pleased if you would answer a few questions for me. I am always curious on my measurements: Age, 17 years; height, 5 feet 7¼ inches; weight, 140 pounds; chest, normal, 34½ inches; expanded, 36 inches; waist, 28½ inches; thighs, 20 inches; calves, 14½ inches; ankles, 9 inches; biceps, normal, 10 inches; flexed, 14½ inches; forearms, 10 inches; wrists, 7⅝ inches. What are my weak points, and how can I develop them? What causes dark circles under eyes, and how can you cure them? I can chin the bar 200 times and lift 450 pounds on lifting-machine. I like all kinds of sports, baseball best of all. I am pitcher on my team. Last summer, as I was pitching, using the shoulder motion, I felt something crack under my right shoulder-blade. The next time I went to pitch, it felt as if somebody had stuck a knife into my back. I had to quit playing, it hurt so. I thought it would be all right in a few days, but it bothered me some now. Is there any way to cure it? Please let me know through "Tip Top." Thanking you in advance, I remain, a loyal Tip Topper.

B. L. T.

Measurements good save that you need to gain a couple of inches about your chest. You should not attempt pitching again until the feeling is entirely gone. Massage treatment with some strengthening lotion is all you need, and gentle exercise. The dark spots may come from your having deep-set eyes, over-working the eyes, or some minor trouble. Apparently, from the state of your physique, you have no chronic ailment.

PROF. FOURMEN: Having been a Tip Topper for a good many years, I take the liberty of asking you a few questions. I am 16 years 4 months old; height, 5 feet 6½ inches; weight, 130 pounds; chest, normal, 35 inches; expanded, 38 inches; waist, 36 inches; flexed, 14½ inches; thighs, 20 inches; calves, 13 inches. I don't drink any kind of intoxicating liquor and don't use tobacco in any form. Have given up coffee and drink milk two times a day instead. Do you think that is any good, or, if not, what do you think is best for me to drink instead of milk or coffee? What are my weak points? What are my good ones? Thanking you in advance, I remain,

PARCEL MONACO,

New York City, N. Y.

You are in pretty good shape, son; chest just up to the proper measurement and weight eight pounds above. The only trouble is your waist is some 4 inches too large around. Suppose you try and drop this somewhat. Better drink something that will not add to your weight.

PROF. FOURMEN: As I am a reader of the "Tip Top," I take great pleasure in all kinds of sport. I will send you my measurements and see what you think about it. I am 19 years 6 months old; height, 5 feet 6 inches; weight, stripped, 150 pounds; neck, 15½ inches; shoulders, 17½ inches; biceps, 17 inches; expanded, 12 inches; forarms, 12 inches; wrist, 2⅞ inches; chest, contracted, 36½ inches; normal, 34½ inches; expanded, 42 inches; waist, 28 inches; hips, 42 inches; thigh, 20½ inches; calf, 15 inches; knees, 9½ inches; length of legs, 21 inches. How is my build? There is not a particle of subcutaneous flesh on me. I have muscles in every part of my body.
How would I do for an all-round athlete? I like wrestling very much. Do you think it is too late for me to go in wrestling? Tell me where my weak points are. Hoping to see this in print soon, I remain, yours truly,

J. A. M.

Why, you are a wonder, J. A. M., and built on the pattern of the famous Japanese wrestlers. You are 30 pounds over the average weight for your size, and your chest is more than 4 inches in excess. Still more remarkable is the fact that your waist is only an inch above the average. Go in for wrestling; you are at a fine age for it.

PROP. FOURMEN: I have been a reader of "Tip Top" for a long time. I therefore take the privilege of writing and asking a few questions. How good an athlete would I make? I am 11 years of age; stand 5 feet high; right forearm, 10 inches; left, 10 inches; upper arm, right, 13 inches; left, 13 inches; chest, 30 inches; expanded, 34 inches; weight, 108 pounds; call, 14 inches; across shoulders, 17 inches. I will be pleased to see this answered in the next number. "Tip Top" forever,

New York City, N. Y.

AUSTIN L. JONES

You weigh 18 pounds over the average, and your chest is an inch above what is required, so I should judge you are in pretty fine fettle to tackle almost any line of athletics.

PROP. FOURMEN: Being a reader of old "Tip Top," I take the liberty of sending my measurements for inspection. Age, 15 years; weight, 117 pounds; chest, normal, 30 inches; expanded, 32 inches; height, 5 feet 3 inches; biceps, 10 inches; neck, 13½ inches; waist, 28 inches. Are my measurements good? How can I develop my chest and biceps? What weight dumb-bells do you advise me to use? Thanking you in advance, I remain,

Chicago, Ill.

"A SOX FAN."

12 pounds over in weight; 2 inches short in chest; measurements fair. You can find all the information you seek and much more in one of our various manuals, which are worth many times their weight in gold to boys who aspire to improve their physical condition.

PROP. FOURMEN: I have been reading your famous "Tip Top Weekly" for over two years, so I take the liberty to ask you a few questions. My measurements are: Age, 18 years; weight, 152 pounds; without overcoat; height, 5 feet 70 inches; shoes, chest, normal, 24 inches; expanded, 36 inches; calves, 14 inches; neck, 14½ inches; wrist, 6½ inches; ankle, 10 inches; forearm, 11 inches. How are my measurements, and how do they compare with the average young man of my age? Do you think I could become an athlete? How can I increase my calves and wrists and forearms? Thanking you in advance, and wishing you all luck and happiness, I remain, a true "Tip Top" admirer,

New York, N. Y.

WILLIAM COY

Your weight is about right, but you are 5 inches short around the chest. Build up the latter, and you should be able to aspire to any athletic field. You can only increase the size of the muscles mentioned by constant exercise.

PROP. FOURMEN: Being a constant reader of the "best weekly published," "Tip Top," I would like to ask you a few questions. How are my measurements? Age, 16 years; height, 6 feet 11½ inches; weight, 179 pounds; chest, normal, 38 inches; expanded, 42 inches; right forearm, 11½ inches; right biceps, 10½ inches; expanded, 12½ inches; neck, 15 inches; wrists, 7½ inches; waist, 30 inches; calves, 14½ inches; shoulders, 10 inches; thighs, 24 inches. Hoping to see this in the next "Tip Top," or soon as you can put it in print,

Little Rock, Ark.

LILY ENGLE

Measurements very good, indeed; and it is a pleasure to have such a fine record from one of our boys.

PROP. FOURMEN: I have been greatly interested in your department of "Tip Top" and I would be pleased to have you tell me how my own measurements are. They are as follows: Age, 16 years; height, 6 feet 6 inches; weight, 155 pounds; neck, 14 inches; biceps, 11½ inches; calves, 13 inches; thighs, 14 inches; waist, 30 inches; chest, 34 inches; expanded, 37½ inches; ankle, 9 inches; forearm, to inches. I can run a hundred yards in 11 seconds; 65 yards in 8 seconds. Running broad jump is my best accomplishment. I have done 15 feet 11 inches. I can jump 5 feet high and vault 8 feet 7 inches. Running at a good pace under five miles does not tire me greatly, as I have constant practice, and as I do not smoke, my wind is good. I hope to see this in print, with your permission, very soon, and I will watch each week until its appearance.

JAMES GORDON

You seem to be in very good trim, but it would be well for you to expand your chest a little more. An athlete of your height should weigh over 170 pounds and have a chest measuring, normally, over 40 inches.

PROP. FOURMEN: As I am a constant "Tip Top" reader, I take the liberty to ask a few questions. Age, 13½ years; height, 5 feet 6½ inches; weight, 90 pounds; chest, normal, 29 inches; expanded, 32 inches; neck, 14½ inches; waist, 29 inches; hips, 31 inches; wrists, 6½ inches; forearm, 9 inches; biceps, normal, 9 inches; expanded, 10 inches; thighs, 17½ inches; calves, 13 inches; ankles, 11 inches; neck, 14 inches. My record in sports. How are my measurements? Do you think I am built for an athlete? Is there an athletic school in Bloomfield run by Mr. Merrivewell? Yours truly,

Frank Swain

New York, N. Y.

All good but the waist, which should only measure a little over 24 inches. You should make a good athlete. Read your "Tip Top" more closely to learn about the School for Athletic Development.

(A letter from New York.)

PROP. FOURMEN: As I am an old reader of "Tip Top Weekly" and have read all the Medal books, I thought I would write to you for your opinion on my measurements. I am very anxious to become an athlete. Age, 14 years; height, 5 feet, weight, 106 pounds; chest, normal, 29 inches; expanded, 31 inches; waist, 26 inches; calves, 12 inches; biceps, expanded, 10 inches; forearm, 8½ inches; wrist, 6 inches; thighs, 17 inches; neck, 14 inches. How are my measurements? Is my chest all right? Could I become a good athlete? I use no tobacco or drink, due to "Tip Top." 2. What can I do for laziness? 3. Could you name a good food diet? 4. When should I bathe and exercise? 5. Have you ever, in late issues, given instructions in boxing, wrestling, or other athletics, like you did in the early numbers? Hoping to see this in print, as I am very anxious to become strong, I remain, a loyal Merrivewellite.

W. C. Beahan

1. Fine.
2. Easily.
3. Wake up and do things, my boy.
4. It would occupy too much space here.
5. Morning; when you arise, is the best time.
6. No.

PROP. FOURMEN: Being a constant reader of the "Tip Top Weekly," I will ask you for some advice. My measurements are as follows: Age, 12½ years; height, 6 feet 2 inches; chest, normal, 30 inches; expanded, 32 inches; waist, 26½ inches; neck, 12½ inches; wrist, 6 inches; thigh, 18½ inches; calf, left, 11 inches; right, 11 inches; shoulders, across, 14½ inches; biceps, normal, 9 inches; expanded, 10 inches; forearm, 9 inches; weight, 101 pounds; daily record of sports. How are my measurements? Is my chest all right? How am I a good athlete? I use no tobacco or drink, due to "Tip Top." 2. What can I do for lazy days? 3. Could you name a good food diet? 4. When should I bathe and exercise? 5. Have you ever in late issues given instructions in boxing, wrestling, or other athletics, like you did in the early numbers? Hoping to see this in print, as I am very anxious to become strong, I remain, a loyal Merrivewellite.

Bart Hodge

Buffalo, N. Y.

A bit scant in the chest, but well built, and I imagine you would be able to hold up your end in almost anything pertaining to athletics.

PROP. FOURMEN: Being a steady and admirable reader of "Tip Top," I will take the liberty to ask your advice. My measurements are as follows: Neck, 11½ inches; chest, contracted, 26½ inches; expanded, 30½ inches; biceps, tense, right, 9 inches; left,
9 inches: forearms, tense, right, 8½ inches; left, 8¼ inches; wrists, tense, right, 5¾ inches; left, 5¾ inches; waist, 25 inches; hips, 28½ inches; thighs, tense, right, 16½ inches; left, 16½ inches; calves, tense, right, 12 inches; left, 12 inches; height, 5 feet 3¼ inches; age, 15 years. How are my measurements? Please criticize without regard. Which of your publications, if any, would best serve to build up my weak points? What college would you advise me to attend to learn engineering? Has Yale a good branch of this? Yours truly, Norman Locke.

Washington, D. C.

Your chest lacks 5 inches of being the average athlete’s size. You can find directions as to how you may build it up, as well as a multitude of other valuable hints in any of the manuals we publish. Yes.

Prof. Fourmen: We are readers of the “Tip Top,” and would like to give our measurements. One of us (A.) is 15 years old; 5 feet 7 inches high, stocky feet; weight, 132 pounds; chest, normal, 31½ inches; expanded, 35½ inches; stomach, 30 inches; neck, 14 inches; thigh, 19 inches; calf, 13½ inches; biceps, 9 inches; expanded, 10 inches; forearm, 9½ inches; ankle, 8½ inches; wrist, 7 inches; across shoulders, 15¾ inches; around shoulders, 33 inches; reach, 69½ inches; leg, 33½ inches; hips, 33 inches. I ride, play baseball, basketball, football, and all outdoor sports, also take six high-school studies. Are they too much for me?

Sergeant L. C. H.

The other’s (B.) measurements are: 16 years old; height, 5 feet 7½ inches, in stocking feet; weight, 142 pounds; chest, 34¼ inches; expanded, 37 inches; stomach, 31½ inches; neck, 14 inches; thigh, 20½ inches; calf, 13½ inches; biceps, 9½ inches; expanded, 11½ inches; forearm, 10 inches; ankle, 9½ inches; wrist, 7 inches; across shoulders, 17 inches; around shoulders, 39 inches; reach, 71 inches; leg, 33¾ inches; hips, 33 inches. I play baseball, football, basketball, and ride horseback a great deal, and take five high-school studies. Is that too much for me?

Captain G. L. H.

Glen Ulin, N. D.

P. S.—Please tell us our weak points and how to help them.

Captain.

Sergeant.

A’s weight is good; chest 4 inches short, waist 2 inches too large. Exercises are all good, but pay more attention to those calculated to enlarge the lungs. B’s weight also fine, but his chest expanded is just what it should be normal. Same thing applies as in the other case, waist being much more than 28 inches, which is the average. Keep on with your games and studies.

Prof. Fourmen: For years I have been an enthusiastic reader of “Tip Top,” without thinking of the athletic department until recently, having joined a gymnasium. I thought I would send you my measurements to be criticized. Kindly tell me my weak points, and how to overcome them, also my good ones. Age, 18 years; height, 5 feet 9 inches; weight, 145 pounds; reach, 5 feet 8½ inches; chest, normal, 31 inches; inflated, 35¾ inches; waist, 20 inches; biceps, 12½ inches; thigh, 21¾ inches; calf, 13¼ inches; shoulders, 17½ inches; neck, 15½ inches; wrist, 6½ inches; forearm, 12 inches; ankle, 8½ inches. Records: standing broad jump, 9 feet 7½ inch. Hoping to receive an early reply, I am, yours respectfully,

B. W. D.

New York City, N. Y.

What you need above all things is greatly increased lung capacity, my lad. Why, normally, you should measure 38 inches. It is a far cry from 31 up to that, but go to work vigorously to change all this, and in three months you can add as many inches to your chest circumference.

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