

Frank Merriwell's Nobility eBook

Frank Merriwell's Nobility by Burt L. Standish

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THE TRAGEDY OF THE OCEAN TRAMP

By Burt L. Standish.

New York, April 22, 1899.

CHAPTER I.

Off for Europe.

“Off-----”

“At last!”

“Hurrah!”

The tramp steamer “Eagle” swung out from the pier and was fairly started on her journey from New York to Liverpool.

On the deck of the steamer stood a group of five persons, three of whom had given utterance to the exclamations recorded above.

On the pier swarmed a group of Yale students, waving hands, hats, handkerchiefs, bidding farewell to their five friends and acquaintances on the steamer. Over the water came the familiar Yale cheer. From the steamer it was answered.

In the midst of the group on deck was Frank Merriwell. Those around him were Bruce Browning, Jack Diamond, Harry Rattleton and Tutor Wellington Maybe.

It was Frank’s scheme to spend the summer months abroad, while studying in the attempt to catch up with his class and pass examinations on re-entering college in the fall. And he had brought along his three friends, Browning, Diamond and Rattleton. They were on their way to England.

Frank was happy. Fortune had dealt him a heavy blow when he was compelled by poverty to leave dear old Yale, but he had faced the world bravely, and he had struggled like a man. Hard work, long hours and poor pay had not daunted him.

At the very start he had shown that he possessed something more than ordinary ability, and while working on the railroad he had forced his way upward step by step till it seemed that he was in a fair way to reach the top of the ladder.

Then came disaster again. He had lost his position on the railroad, and once more he was forced to face the world and begin over.

Some lads would have been discouraged. Frank Merriwell was not. He set his teeth firmly and struck out once more. He kept his mouth shut and his eyes open. The first honorable thing that came to his hand to do he did. Thus it happened that he found himself on the stage.

Frank's success as an actor had been phenomenal. Of course, to begin with, he had natural ability, but that was not the only thing that won success for him. He had courage, push, determination, stick-to-it-iveness. When he started to do a thing he kept at it till he did it.

Frank united observation and study. He learned everything he could about the stage and about acting by talking with the members of the company and by watching to see how things were done.

He had a good head and plenty of sense. He knew better than to copy after the ordinary actors in the road company to which he belonged. He had seen good acting enough to be able to distinguish between the good and bad. Thus it came about that the bad models about him did not exert a pernicious influence upon him.

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Frank believed there were books that would aid him. He found them. He found one on “Acting and Actors,” and from it he learned that no actor ever becomes really and truly great that does not have a clear and distinct enunciation and a correct pronunciation. That is the beginning. Then comes the study of the meaning of the words to be spoken and the effect produced by the manner in which they are spoken.

He studied all this, and he went further. He read up on “Traditions of the Stage,” and he came to know all about its limitations and its opportunities.

From this it was a natural step to the study of the construction of plays. He found books of criticism on plays and playwriting, and he mastered them. He found books that told how to construct plays, and he mastered them.

Frank Merriwell was a person with a vivid imagination and great mechanical and constructive ability. Had this not been so, he might have studied forever and still never been able to write a successful play. In him there was something study could not give, but study and effort brought it out. He wrote a play.

“John Smith of Montana” was a success. Frank played the leading part, and he made a hit.

Then fate rose up and again dealt him a body blow. A scene in the play was almost exactly like a scene in another play, written previously. The author and owner of the other play called on the law to “protect” him. An injunction was served on Merry to restrain him from playing “John Smith.” He stood face to face with a lawsuit.

Frank investigated, and his investigation convinced him that it was almost certain he would be defeated if the case was carried into the courts.

He withdrew “John Smith.”

Frank had confidence in himself. He had written a play that was successful, and he believed he could write another. Already he had one skeletonized. The frame work was constructed, the plot was elaborated, the characters were ready for his use.

He wrote a play of something with which he was thoroughly familiar—college life. The author or play-maker of ability who writes of that with which he is familiar stands a good chance of making a success. Young and inexperienced writers love to write of those things with which they are unfamiliar, and they wonder why it is that they fail.

They go too far away from home for their subject.

At first Frank’s play was not a success. The moment he discovered this he set himself down to find out why it was not a success. He did not look at it as the author, but as a critical manager to whom it had been offered might have done.

He found the weak spots. One was its name. People in general did not understand the title, “For Old Eli.” There was nothing “catchy” or drawing about it.

He gave it another name. He called it, “True Blue: A Drama of College Life.”

The name proved effective.

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He rewrote much of the play. He strengthened the climax of the third act, and introduced a mechanical effect that was very ingenious. And when the piece next went on the road it met with wonderful success everywhere.

Thus Frank snatched success from defeat.

It is a strange thing that when a person fights against fate and conquers, when fortune begins to smile, when the tide fairly turns his way, then everything seems to come to him. The things which seemed so far away and so impossible of attainment suddenly appear within easy reach or come tumbling into his lap of their own accord.

It was much this way with Frank. He had dreamed of going back to college some time, but that time had seemed far, far away. Success brought it nearer.

But then it came tumbling into his lap. No one had been found to claim the fortune he discovered in the Utah Desert. Investigation had shown that there were no living relatives of the man who had guarded the treasure till his death. That treasure had been turned over to Frank.

Frank had brought his play to New Haven, and his old college friends had given him a rousing welcome. And now he had made plans to return to college in the fall, while his play was to be carried on the road by a well-known and experienced theatrical manager.

The friends who had been with Frank when he discovered the treasure, with the exception of Toots, the colored boy, had refused to accept shares of the fortune. Then Merry had insisted on taking them abroad with him, and here they were on the steamer "Eagle," bound for Liverpool.

Toots, dressed like a "swell," was on the pier. He shouted with the others, waving his silk hat.

The crowd was cheering now:

"Beka Co ax Co ax Co ax!
Breka Co ax Co ax Co ax!
O-----up! O-----up!
Parabolou!
Yale! Yale! Yale!
'Rah! 'rah! 'rah!
Yale!"

CHAPTER II.

Surprising the Frenchman.

“Bah! Ze American boy, he make me—what you call eet?—vera tired!”

Frank turned quickly and saw the speaker standing near the rail not far away. He was a man between thirty-five and forty years of age, dressed in a traveling suit, and having a pointed black beard. He was smoking.

An instant feeling of aversion swept over Merry. He saw the person was a supercilious Frenchman, critical, sneering, insolent, a man intolerant with everything not of France and the French.

This man was speaking to another person, who seemed to be a servant or valet, and who was very polite and fawning in all his retorts.

“Ah! look at ze collectshung on ze pier,” continued the sneering speaker. “Someone say zey belong to ze great American college. Zey act like zey belong to ze—ze—what you call eet?—ze menageray. Zey yell, shout, jump—act like ze lunatic.”

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"It is possible, monsieur," said Frank, with a grim smile, "that they are copying their manners after Frenchmen at a Dreyfus demonstration."

The foreigner turned haughtily and stared at Frank. Then he shrugged his shoulders, turned away and observed to his companion:

"Jes' like all ze Americans—ah!—what eez ze word?—fresh."

The other man bowed and rubbed his hands together.

"Haw!" grunted Browning, lazily. "How do you like that, Frank?"

"Oh, I don't mind it," murmured Merry. "I consider the source from which it came, and regard it as of no consequence."

Diamond was glaring at the Frenchman, for it made his hot Southern blood boil to hear a foreigner criticize anything American. Like all youthful Americans, his great admiration and love for his own country made him intolerant of criticism.

Frank had a cooler head, and he was not so easily ruffled.

Rattleton was unable to express his feelings.

Tutor Maybe looked somewhat perturbed, for he was an exceedingly mild and peaceable man, and the slightest suggestion of trouble was enough to agitate him.

But the Frenchman did not deign to look toward Frank again, and it seemed that all danger of trouble was past.

The "Eagle" sailed slowly down the harbor, signaling now and then to other boats.

Frank, Jack, Bruce and Harry formed a fine quartette, and they sang:

"Soon we'll be in London town;
Sing, my lads, yo! heave, my lads, ho!
And see the queen, with her golden crown;
Heave, my lads, yo-ho!"

The Frenchman made an impatient gesture, and showed annoyance, which caused Frank to laugh.

Behind them Brooklyn Bridge spanned the river, looking slender and graceful, like a thing hung in the air by delicate threads.

Close at hand were Governor's Island and the Statue of Liberty. The Frenchman was pointing it out.

"Ze greatest work of art in all America," he declared, enthusiastically; "an' France give zat to America. Ze Americans nevere think to put eet zere themselves. France do more for America zan any ozare nation, but ze Americans forget. Zey forget Lafayette. Zey forget France make it possibul for zem to conquire Engalande an' get ze freedom zey ware aftaire. An' now zey—zey—what you call eet?—toady to Engalande. Zey pretende to love ze Engaleesh. Bah! Uncale Sam an' John Bull both need to have some of ze conaceit taken out away from zem."

"It would take more than France, Spain, Italy and all the rest of the dago nations to do the job!" spluttered Harry Rattleton, who could not keep still longer.

"Maurel," said the Frenchman, speaking to his companion, "t'row ze insolent dog ovareboard!"

"Oui, monsieur!"

Quick as thought the man sprang toward Harry, as if determined to execute the command of his master.

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He did not put his hands on Rattleton, for Frank was equally swift in his movements, and blocked the fellows' way, coolly saying:

"I wouldn't try it if I were you."

"Out of ze way!" snarled the man, who was an athlete in build. "If you don't, I put you ovare, too!"

"I don't think you will."

"Put him ovare, Maurel," ordered the Frenchman, with deadly coolness.

The athletic servant clutched Frank, but, with a twist and a turn, Merry broke the hold instantly, kicked the fellow's feet from beneath him, and dropped him heavily to the deck.

Bruce Browning stooped and picked the man up as if he were an infant. Every year seemed to add something to the big collegian's wonderful strength, and now the astounded Frenchman found himself unable to wiggle.

Browning held the man over the rail turning to Frank to ask:

"Shall I give him a bath, Merriwell?"

"I think you hadn't better," laughed Frank. "Perhaps he can't swim, and—"

"He can swim or sink," drawled Bruce. "It won't make any difference if he sinks. Only another insolent Frenchman out of the way."

The master was astounded. Up to that moment he had regarded the young Americans as scarcely more than boys and he had fancied his athletic servant could easily frighten them. Instead of that, something quite unexpected by him had happened.

The astounded servant showed signs of terror, but in vain he struggled. He was helpless in the clutch of the giant collegian.

The master seemed about to interfere, but Frank Merriwell confronted him in a manner that spoke as plainly as words.

"Out of ze way!" snarled the man.

"Speaking to me?" inquired Merry, lifting his eyebrows.

"Oui! oui!"

"I am sorry, but I can't accommodate you till my friend gets through with your servant, who was extremely fresh, like most Frenchmen."

"Zis to me!"

"Yes."

"Sare, I am M. Rouen Montfort, an' I—"

"It makes no difference to me if you are the high mogul of France. You are on the deck of an English vessel, and you are dealing with Americans."

The Frenchman flung his cigar aside and seemed to feel for a weapon.

Frank stood there quietly, his eyes watching every movement.

"If you have what you are seeking about your person," he said, with perfect calmness, "I advise you not to draw it. If you do, as sure as you are sailing down New York harbor, I'll fling you over the rail, weapon and all!"

That was business, and it was not boasting. Frank actually meant to throw the man into the water if he drew a weapon.

M. Rouen Montfort paused and stared at Frank Merriwell, beginning to understand that he was not dealing with an ordinary youth.

"Fool!" he panted. "You geeve me ze eensult I will haf your life!"

"You have already insulted me, my friends and everything American. It's your turn to take a little of the medicine."



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"Eef we were een France—"

"Which we are not. We are still in America, the land of the free. But I don't care to have a quarrel with you. Bruce put the fellow down. If he minds his business in the future, don't throw him overboard."

"All right," grunted the big fellow; "but I was just going to drop him in the wet."

He put the man down, and the fellow seemed undecided what to do.

Harry Rattleton laughed.

"Now wake a talk—no, I mean take a walk," he cried. "It will be a good thing for your health."

"Come, Maurel," said the master, with an attempt at dignity; "come away from ze fellows!"

Maurel was glad enough to do so. He had thought to frighten the youths without the least trouble, but had been handled with such ease that even after it was all over he wondered how it could have happened.

M. Montfort walked away with great dignity, and Maurel followed, talking savagely and swiftly in French.

"Well, it wasn't very hard to settle them," grinned Browning.

"But we have not settled them," declared Frank. "There will be further trouble with M. Rouen Montfort and his man Maurel."

CHAPTER III.

A fresh young man.

Frank and his three friends had a stateroom together. The tutor was given a room with other parties.

The weather for the first two days was fine, and the young collegians enjoyed every minute, not one of them having a touch of sea-sickness till the third day.

Then Rattleton was seized, and he lay in his bunk, groaning and dismal, even though he tried to be cheerful at times.

Browning enjoyed everything, even Rattleton's misery, for he could be lazy to his heart's content.

They had enlivened the times by singing songs, those of a nautical flavor, such as "Larboard Watch" and "A Life on the Ocean Wave," having the preference.

Now it happened that the Frenchman occupied a room adjoining, and he was very much annoyed by their singing. He pounded on the partition, and expressed his feelings in very lurid language, but that amused them, and they sang the louder.

"M. Montfort seems to get very agitated," said Frank, laughing.

"But I hardly think there is any danger that he will do more than hammer on the partition," grunted Bruce. "He's kept away from us since he found he could not frighten anybody."

"He's a bluffer," was Diamond's opinion.

"He's a great fellow to play cards," said Merry. "But he seems to ply for something more than amusement."

"How's that?" asked Jack, interested.

"I've noticed that he never cares for whist or any game where there are no stakes. He gets into a game only when there's something to be won."

"Well, it seems to me that he's struck a poor crowd on this boat if he's looking for suckers. He should have shipped on an ocean liner. What does he play?"

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"He seems to have taken a great fancy to draw poker. 'Pocaire' is what he calls it. He pretended at first that he didn't know much of anything about the game, but, if I am not mistaken, he's an old stager at it. I watched the party playing in the smoking-room last night."

"Who played?" asked Bruce.

"The Frenchman, a rather sporty young fellow named Bloodgood, a small, bespectacled man, well fitted with the name of Slush, and an Englishman by the name of Hazleton."

"That's the crowd that played in the Frenchman's stateroom to-day," groaned Rattleton from his berth.

"Played in the stateroom?" exclaimed Frank. "I wonder why they didn't play in the smoking-room?"

"Don't know," said Harry; "but I fancy there was a rather big game on, and you know the Frenchman has the biggest stateroom on the boat, so there was plenty of room for them. They could play there without interruption."

"There seems to be something mysterious about that Frenchman," said Frank.

"I think there's something mysterious about several passengers on this boat," grunted Browning. "I haven't seen much of this young fellow Bloodgood, but he strikes me as a mystery."

"Why?"

"Well he seems to have money to burn, and I don't understand why such a fellow did not take passage on a regular liner."

"As far as that goes," smiled Merry, "I presume some people might think it rather singular that we did not cross the pond in a regular liner; but then they might suppose it was a case of economy with us."

While they were talking there came a rap on their door which Frank threw open.

Just outside stood a young man with a flushed face and distressed appearance. He was dressed in a plaid suit, and wore a red four-in-hand necktie, in which blazed a huge diamond. There were two large solitaire rings on his left hand, and he wore a heavy gold chain strung across his vest.

"Beg your pardon, dear boys," he drawled. "Hope I'm not intruding."

Then he walked in and closed the door.

“My name’s Bloodgood,” he said—“Raymond Bloodgood. I’ve seen you fellows together, and you seem like a jolly lot. Heard you singing, you know. Great voices—good singing.”

Then he stopped speaking, and they stared at him, wondering what he was driving at. For a moment there was an awkward pause, and then Bloodgood went on:

“I was up pretty late last night, you know. Had a little game in the smoking-room. Plenty of booze, and all that, and I’m awfully rocky to-day. Got a splitting headache. Didn’t know but some of you had a bromo seltzer, or something of the sort. You look like a crowd that finds such things handy occasionally.”

At this Frank laughed quietly, but Diamond looked angry and indignant.

“What do you take us for?” exclaimed the Virginian, warmly. “Do you think we are a lot of boozers?”

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Bloodgood turned on Jack, lifting his eyebrows.

"My dear fellow—" he began.

But Frank put in:

"We have no use for bromo seltzer, as none of us are drinkers."

"Oh, of course not," said the intruder, with something like a sneer. "None of us are drinkers, but then we're all liable to get a little too much sometimes, especially when we sit up late and play poker."

Frank saw that Diamond had taken an instant dislike to the youth with the diamonds and the red necktie, and he felt like averting a storm, even though he did not fancy the manner of the intruder.

"We do not sit up late and play poker," he said.

"Eh? Oh, come off! You're a jolly lot of fellows, and you must have a fling sometimes."

"We can be jolly without drinking or gambling."

"Why, I'm hanged if you don't talk as if you considered it a crime to take a drink or have a little social game!"

Frank felt his blood warm up a bit, but he held himself in hand, as he quietly retorted:

"Intemperance is a crime. I presume there are men who take a drink, as you call it, without being intemperate; but I prefer to let the stuff alone entirely, and then there is no danger of going over the limit."

"And I took you for a sport! That shows how a fellow can be fooled. But you do play poker occasionally. I know that."

"How do you know it, Mr. Bloodgood?"

"By your language. You just spoke of going over the limit. That is a poker term."

"And one used by many people who never played a game of cards in their lives."

"But you have played cards? You have played poker? Can you deny it?"

"If I could, I wouldn't take the trouble, Mr. Bloodgood. I think you have made a mistake in sizing up this crowd."

"Guess I have," sneered the fellow. "You must be members of the Y.M.C.A."

“Say, Frank!” panted Jack; “open the door and let me——”

But Frank checked the hot-headed youth again.

“Steady, Jack! It is not necessary. He will go directly. Mr. Bloodgood, you speak as if it were a disgrace to belong to the Y.M.C.A. That shows your ignorance and narrowness. The Y.M.C.A. is a splendid organization, and it has proved the anchor that has kept many a young man from dashing onto the rocks of destruction. Those who sneer at it should be ashamed of themselves, but, as a rule, they are too bigoted, prejudiced, or narrow-minded to recognize the fact that some of the most manly young men to be found belong to the Y.M.C.A.”

Bloodgood laughed.

“And I took you for a sport!” he cried. “By Jove! Never made such a blunder before in all my life! Studying for the ministry, I’ll wager! Ha! ha! ha!”

Frank saw that Diamond could not be held in check much longer.

“One last word to you, Mr. Bloodgood,” he spoke. “I am not studying for the ministry, and I do not even belong to the Y.M.C.A. If I were doing the one or belonged to the other, I should not be ashamed of it. I don’t like you. I can stand a little freshness; in fact, it rather pleases me; but you are altogether too fresh. You are offensive.”

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Merry flung open the door.

“Good-day, sir.”

Bloodgood stepped out, turned round, laughed, and then walked away.

“Hang it, Merriwell!” grated Diamond, as Frank closed the door; “why didn’t you let me kick him out onto his neck!”

CHAPTER IV.

Who is Bloodgood?

Diamond was thoroughly angry. So was Rattleton. In his excitement, Harry said something that caused Frank to turn quickly, and observe:

“Don’t use that kind of language, old man, no matter what the provocation. Vulgarity is even lower than profanity.”

Harry’s face flushed, and he looked intensely ashamed of himself.

“I peg your bardon—I mean I beg your pardon!” he spluttered. “It slipped out. You know I don’t say anything like that often.”

“I know it,” nodded Frank, “and that’s why it sounded all the worse. I don’t know that I ever heard you use such a word before.”

Harry did not resent Frank’s reproof, for he knew Frank was right, and he was ashamed.

Every young man who stoops to vulgarity should be ashamed. Profanity is coarse and degrading; vulgarity is positively low and filthy. The youth who is careful to keep his clothes and his body clean should be careful to keep his mouth clean. Let nothing go into it or come out of it that is in any way lowering.

Did you ever hear a loafer on a corner using profane and obscene language? I’ll warrant most of you have, and I’ll warrant that you were thoroughly disgusted. You looked on the fellow as low, coarse, cheap, unfit to associate with respectable persons. The next time you use a word that you should be ashamed to have your mother or sister hear just think that you are following the example of that loafer. You are lowering yourself in the eyes of somebody, even though you may not think so at the time. Perhaps one of your companions may be a person who uses such language freely, and yet he has never before heard it from you. He laughs, he calls you a jolly good fellow to your face; but he thinks to himself that you are no better than anybody else, and behind your back he tells somebody what he thinks. He is glad of the opportunity to show that

you are no better than he is. Never tell a vulgar story. Better never listen to one, unless your position is such that you cannot escape without making yourself appear a positive cad. If you have to listen to such a story, forget it as soon as possible. Above all things, do not try to remember it.

Some young men boast of the stories they know. And all their stories are of the “shady” sort. It is better to know no stories than to know that kind. It is better not to be called a good fellow than to win a reputation by always having a new story of the low sort ready on your tongue.

There are other and better ways of winning a reputation as a good fellow. There are stories which are genuinely humorous and funny which are also clean. No matter how much of a laugh he may raise, any self-respecting person feels that he has lowered himself by telling a vulgar story. It is not so if he has told a clean story. He is satisfied with the laughter he has caused and with himself.

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Frank Merriwell was called a good fellow. It was not often that he told a story, but when he did, it was a good one, and it was clean. He had an inimitable way of telling anything, and his stories were all the more effective because they came at rare intervals. He did not cheapen them by making them common.

And never had anybody heard him tell a story that could prove offensive to the ears of a lady.

Not that he had not been tempted to do so. Not that he had not heard such stories. He had been placed in positions where he could not help hearing them without making himself appear like a thorough cad.

Frank's first attempt to tell a vulgar story had been the lesson that he needed. He was with a rather gay crowd of boys at the time, and several had told "shady" yarns, and then they had called for one from Frank. He started to tell one, working up to the point with all the skill of which he was capable. He had them breathless, ready to shout with laughter when the point was reached. He drew them on and on with all the skill of which he was capable. And then, just as the climax was reached, he suddenly realized just what he was about to say. A thought came to him that made his heart give a great jump.

"What if my mother were listening?"

That was the thought. His mother was dead, but her influence was over him. A second thought followed. Many times he had seemed to feel her hovering near. Perhaps she was listening! Perhaps she was hearing all that he was saying!

Frank Merriwell stopped and stood quite still. At first he was very pale, and then came a rush of blood to his face. He turned crimson with shame and hung his head.

His companions looked at him in astonishment. They could not understand what had happened. Some of them cried, "Go on! go on!"

After some seconds he tried to speak. At first he choked and could say nothing articulate. After a little, he muttered:

"I can't go on—I can't finish the story! You'll have to excuse me, fellows! I'm not feeling well!"

And he withdrew from the jolly party as soon as possible.

From that day Frank Merriwell never attempted to tell a story that was in the slightest degree vulgar. He had learned his lesson, and he never forgot it.

Some boys swagger, chew tobacco, talk vulgar, and swear because they do not wish to be called “sissies.” They fancy such actions and language make them manly, but nothing could be a greater mistake.

Frank did nothing of the sort, and all who knew him regarded him as thoroughly manly. Better to be called a “sissy” than to win reputed manliness at the cost of self-respect.

Frank had forced those who would have regarded him with scorn to respect him. He could play baseball or football with the best of them; he could run, jump, swim, ride, and he excelled by sheer determination in almost everything he undertook. He would not be beaten. If defeated once, he did not rest, but prepared himself for another trial and went in to win or die. In this way he showed himself manly, and he commanded the respect of enemies as well as friends.

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Rattleton was ashamed of the language he had used after the departure of Bloodgood, and he did not attempt to excuse himself further. He lay back in his berth, looking sicker than ever.

"I'd give ten dollars for the privilege of helping Mr. Bloodgood out with my foot!" hissed Jack Diamond. "Never saw anybody so fresh!"

"Oh, I've seen lots of people just like him," grunted Browning, getting out a pipe and lighting it.

"Don't smoke, Bruce!" groaned Rattleton, as the steamer gave an unusually heavy roll. "I'm sick enough now. That will make me worse."

"Oh, we'll open the port."

"Open the port!" laughed Frank. "And we just told Bloodgood we did not drink."

"Port-hole, not port wine," said the big fellow, with a yawn. "We'll let in some fresh air."

"We can't let in anything fresher than just went out," declared the Virginian, as he flung open the round window that served to admit light and air.

"There's something mighty queer about that fellow," said Frank. "Did you notice the diamonds he was wearing, fellows?"

"Yes," said Bruce, beginning to puff away at his new briarwood. "Regular eye-hitters they were."

"Who knows they were genuine?" asked Jack.

"Nobody here," admitted Frank. "It is impossible to distinguish some fake stones from real diamonds, unless you examine them closely. But, somehow, I have a fancy that those were genuine diamonds."

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't know just why I think so, but I do. Something tells me that for all of his swagger Bloodgood is a fellow who would scorn to wear paste diamonds."

"What do you make out of the fellow, anyway?" asked Bruce.

"I'm not able to size him up yet," admitted Frank. "I'm not certain whether he came of a good family or a bad one, but I'm inclined to fancy it was the former."

"I'd like to know why you think so?" from Jack. "He did not show very good breeding."



"But there is a certain something about his face that makes me believe he comes from a high-grade family. I think he has become lowered by associating with bad companions."

"Well, I don't care who or what he is," declared Jack; "if he gets fresh around me again, I'll crack him one for luck. I can't stand him for a cent!"

"Better turn him over to me," murmured Bruce, dozily. "I'll sit on him."

"And he'll think he's under an elephant," laughed Merry. "Bruce cooked M. Montfort, and I reckon he'd have less trouble to cook Mr. Bloodgood."

At this moment there was a hesitating, uncertain knock on the door.

"Another visitor, I wonder?" muttered Frank.

CHAPTER V.

The superstitious man.

A little man hesitated outside the door when it was opened. He had a sad, uncertain, mournful drab face, puckered into a peculiar expression about the mouth. He was dressed in black, but his clothes were not a very good fit or in the latest style. He fingered his hat nervously. His voice was faltering when he spoke.

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"I—I beg your pardon, gentlemen. I—I hope I am not—intruding?"

He had not crossed the threshold. He seemed in doubt about the advisability of venturing in.

There was something amusing in the appearance of the little man. Frank recognized a "character" in him, and Merry was interested immediately. He invited the little man in, and closed the door when that person had entered.

"I—I know it's rather—rather—er—bold of me," said the stranger, apologetically. "But you know people on shipboard—er—take many—liberties."

"Oh, yes, we know it!" muttered Diamond.

Browning grunted and looked the little man over. He was a curiosity to Bruce.

"What can we do for you, sir?" asked Frank.

The little man hesitated and looked around. He sidled over and put his hand on the partition.

"The—ah—next room is occupied by the—er—the French gentleman, is it not?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I—I presume—presume, you know—that you are able to hear any—ah—conversation that may take place in that room, unless—er—the conversation is—guarded."

"Not unless we take particular pains to listen," said Merry. "Even then, it is doubtful if we can hear anything plainly."

"And we are not eavesdroppers," cut in Diamond. "We do not take pains to listen."

"Oh, no—er—no, of course not!" exclaimed the singular stranger. "I—I didn't insinuate such a thing! Ha! ha! ha! The idea! But you know—sometimes—occasionally—persons hear things when they—er—do not try to hear."

"Well, what in the world are you driving at?" asked Frank, not a little puzzled by the man's singular manner.

"Well, you see, it's—this way: I—I don't care to be—overheard. I don't want anybody to—to think I'm prying into their—private business. You understand?"

"I can't say that I do."



"Perhaps I can make myself—er—clearer."

"Perhaps you can."

"My name is—er—Slush—Peddington Slush."

"Holy cats! what a name!" muttered Browning, while Rattleton grinned despite his sickness.

"I—I'm taking a sea voyage—for—for my health," explained Mr. Slush. "That's why I didn't go over on a—a regular liner. This way I shall be longer at—at sea. See?"

"And you are keeping us at sea by your lingering way in coming to a point," smiled Merry.

"Eh?" said the little man. Then he seemed to comprehend, and he broke into a sudden cackle of laughter, which he shut off with startling suddenness, looking frightened.

"Beg your pardon!" he exclaimed. "Quite—ah—rude of me. I don't do it—often."

"You look as if it wouldn't hurt you to do it oftener," said Merry, frankly. "Laughter never hurt anyone."

"I—I can't quite agree with—you, sir. I beg your pardon! No offense! I—I don't wish to be offensive—you understand. I once knew a man who died from—er—laughing. It is a fact, sir. He laughed so long—and so hard—that he—he lost his breath—entirely. Never got it back again. Since then I've been very—cautious. It's a bad sign to laugh—too hard."

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Merry felt like shouting, but Jack was looking puzzled and dazed. Diamond could not comprehend the little man, and he failed to catch the humor of the character.

“Now,” said Mr. Slush, “I will come directly to the—point.”

“Do,” nodded Frank.

“I just saw a—er—person leave this room. I wish to know if—Good gracious, sir! Do you know that is a bad sign!”

He pointed a wavering finger at Frank.

“What is a bad sign?” asked Merry, surprised.

“To wear a—a dagger pin thrust through a—a tie in which there is the least bit of—red. It is a sign of—of bloodshed. I—I beg you to remove that—that pin from that scarf!”

The little man seemed greatly agitated.

After a moment of hesitation, Frank laughed lightly and took the pin from the scarf.

Immediately the visitor seemed to breathe more freely.

“Ah—er—thank you!” he said. “I—I’ve seen omens enough. Everything seems to point to—to a—tragedy. I regret exceedingly that I ever sailed—on this steamer. I—I shall be thankful when I put my feet on dry land—if I ever do again.”

“You must be rather superstitious,” suggested Frank.

“Not at all—that is, not to any extent,” Mr. Slush hastened to aver. “There are a few signs—and omens—which I know—will come true.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, sir!” asserted the little man, with surprising positiveness. “I know something will happen—to this boat. I—I am positive of it.”

“Why are you so positive?”

“Everything foretells it. At the very start it was—foretold. I was foolish then that I did not demand—demand, sir—to be set ashore, even after the steamer had left—her pier.”

“How was that?”

“There was a cat, sir—a poor, stray cat—that came aboard this steamer. They did not let her stay—understand me? They—they drove her off!”



“And that was a bad omen?”

“Bad! It was—ah—er—frightful! Old sailors will tell you that. Always—er—let a cat remain on board a vessel—if—she—comes on board. If you—if you do not—you will regret it.”

“And you think something must happen to this steamer?”

“I’m afraid so—I feel it. There is—something mysterious about the vessel, gentlemen. I don’t know—just what it is—but it’s something. The—the captain looks worried. I—I’ve noticed it. I’ve talked with him. Couldn’t get any satisfaction—out of him. But I—I know!”

“I’m afraid you are a croaker,” said Diamond, unable to keep still longer.

“You may think so—now; but wait and see—wait. Keep your eyes—open. I—I think you will see something. I think you will find there are—mysterious things going on.”

“Well, you have not told us what you want of us, Mr. Slush,” said Frank.

“That’s so—forgot it.” Then, of a sudden, to Bruce: “Don’t twirl your thumbs—that way. Do it backward—backward! It—it’s a sure sign of—disaster to twirl your thumbs—forward.”

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"All right," grunted the big fellow; "backward it is." And he reversed the motion.

"Thank you," breathed Mr. Slush, with a show of relief. "Now, I'll tell you—why I called. I—er—saw a young man—leaving this room—a few minutes ago."

"Yes."

"Mr. Bloodgood."

"Yes."

"I—I have taken an interest in—Mr. Bloodgood. I—I think he is—a rather nice young man."

"I don't admire your taste," came from Jack.

"Eh? I don't know him—very well. You understand. Met him—in the smoking-room. Sometimes I—er—play cards—for amusement. Met him that way."

"Does he play for amusement?" asked Frank.

"Oh, yes—ah—of course. That is—he—he likes—a little stake."

"I thought so."

"I—I don't mind that."

"Great Scott!" thought Merry. "I don't see how he ever gets round to play cards for money. I shouldn't think he'd know what to do. It would take him so long to make up his mind."

"But I—I don't care to make a—a companion of anybody about whom I know—nothing. That's why I—came to you. I—I thought it might be you could give me—some information—about Mr. Bloodgood."

"You've come to the wrong place."

"Really? Don't you know—anything about him? You are—er—well acquainted with him?"

"On the contrary, to-day is the first time we have ever spoken to him."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Slush, in evident disappointment. "You are—er—young men about—about his age, and—and—"

"Not in his class," put in Diamond.

“No?” said Mr. Slush, looking at Jack queerly. “I didn’t know—I thought—”

There the queer little man stopped, seeming quite unable to proceed. Then, in his hesitating, uncertain way, he tried to make it clear that he did not care to play cards for money with anybody about whom he knew nothing. He was not very effective in his explanation, and seemed himself rather uncertain concerning his real reason for wishing to make inquiries concerning Bloodgood.

Frank studied Mr. Slush closely, but could not take the measure of the man. Somehow, Merry seemed to feel that there was more to the queer little fellow than appeared on the surface.

“Well, you have come to the wrong parties to get information about Mr. Bloodgood,” said Frank. “But, if you are so particular about your company, it might be well to learn something concerning the other members of your party.”

“Oh—er—I know all about them,” asserted Mr. Slush.

“Indeed?”

“Yes. Hugh Hazleton is the younger son of an English nobleman, and he is—is all—right.”

“Who told you this?”

“He did.”

“Then it must be true,” grunted Browning, with a grin on his broad face.

“Yes,” nodded the little man, innocently, “that is—ah—settled. M. Rouen Montfort is a—a great French journalist and—er—writer of books.”

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"Is that so?" smiled Merry. "Queer, I never heard of him. I suppose he told you this?"

"Oh, yes. He is a very fine—gentleman. Ah—did Mr. Bloodgood invite—er—any of you to come into the—ah—game?"

Frank fancied he saw a sudden light. Was it possible Mr. Slush was looking for "suckers?"

Was it possible he had been sent there to inveigle them into the party, so that some sharp might "skin" them? It did not seem improbable.

Harry seemed to catch onto the same idea, for he popped up in his bunk suddenly, but a sudden roll of the steamer caused him to sink down again with a groan.

Diamond's eyes began to glitter. He, too, fancied he saw the little game.

"No," said Merry, slowly, "he did not invite any of us to come in."

The little man seemed relieved.

"I—I didn't know," he faltered. "If he had—I—I was going to say something. Perhaps it is not—necessary."

"Perhaps not," said Frank; "but it may not do any hurt to say it."

"And it may do some hurt—to you," muttered Diamond under his breath. "I will kick this fellow!"

But, to the surprise of all, the superstitious man cackled out a short, broken laugh, and said:

"Oh, I was going to—to warn you—that's all. It—it's liable to be a pretty—stiff game. I thought it would be a—good thing for you to—keep out of it. It started—light, but it's working—up—right along. Almost any time somebody is liable to—to propose throwing off the—the limit, and then somebody is going to get—hurt. If you are—not in it, why you won't be in any—danger."

There was a silence. The four youths looked at the visitor and then at each other.

What did it mean?

If he was playing them for "suckers," surely he was doing it in a queer manner.

"Thank you," said Frank, stiffly. "You are kind!"

"More than kind!" muttered Diamond.



“Don’t mention it,” said the little man, trying to look pleasant, but making a dismal failure. “I—I don’t like to see respectable young men caught in a—trap. That’s all. Thought I’d tell you. Didn’t know that you would—thank me. Took my chances on that. Well, I think I’ll—be going.”

He turned, falteringly, seemed about to say something more, opened the door part way, hesitated, then said “good-day,” and went out.

CHAPTER VI.

The cargo of the “Eagle.”

“Well?”

“Well!”

“Well!”

The same word, but from three different persons, and spoken in three different inflections.

“Will somebody please hit me with something hard!” murmured Jack.

“What does it mean, Merry?” asked Rattleton.

“You may search me!” exclaimed Frank, in rather expressive slang, something in which he seldom indulged, unless under great provocation.

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Browning had said nothing. He was pulling steadily at his pipe, quite unaware that it had gone out.

"What do you make of Mr. Peddington Slush?" asked Jack.

"I don't know what to make of him," confessed Frank. "About the only thing of which I am sure is that he has a corker for a name. That name is enough to make any man look sad and dejected."

"What did he come here for, anyhow?" asked Rattleton.

"To find out about Raymond Bloodgood—he said."

"I know he said so, but I don't stake any talk—I mean take any stock in that. What difference does it make to him who Bloodgood is?"

"That was something he did not make clear."

"He didn't seem to make anything clear," declared Jack. "I thought for sure that he was going to throw out some hooks to drag us into that game of poker. If he had, I should have known he was sent here, and I'd kicked him out, whether you had been willing or not, Merry!"

"I'd opened the door and held it wide for you," smiled Frank.

"What do you think of him, Browning?" asked Harry.

"His way of talking made me very tired," yawned the big fellow. "He seemed to work so hard to get anything out."

"I'll allow that we have had two rather queer visitors," said the Virginian.

"And I shall take an interest in them both after this," declared Frank.

"Talk about superstitious persons, I believe he heads the list," from Jack.

"He said he was not superstitious," laughed Merry.

"But the cat worried him."

"And my twiddling my thumbs," put in Bruce.

"And this dagger pin in my scarf," said Frank.

"It's a wonder he didn't prophecy shipwreck, or something of that sort," groaned Rattleton, who had settled at full length in his berth. "If this rolling motion keeps up, I shall get so I won't care if we are wrecked."

"He must be a dandy in a good swift game of poker!" laughed Frank. "I shouldn't think he'd be able to make up his mind how to discard. He'd be a drawback to the game, or I'm much mistaken."

"It strikes me that he'd be easy fruit," said Rattleton.

"He looks like a 'sucker' himself, but sometimes it is impossible to tell about a man till after you see him play. Anyhow, these two visits were something to break the monotony of the voyage. It promised to be pretty lively at the start, but it has settled down to be rather quiet."

Bloodgood and Slush proved good food for conversation, but the boys tired of that after a while.

Diamond went out by himself, and Frank went to Tutor Maybe's room, where he spent the time till the gong sounded for supper.

"Come, Harry," said Frank, appearing in the stateroom, "aren't you ready for supper?"

Rattleton gave a groan.

"Don't talk to me about eating!" he exclaimed. "It makes me sick to think about it. Leave me—let me die in peace!"

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Jack was not there, so Frank and Bruce washed up and went out together. They were nearly through eating when the Virginian came in and took his place near them at the table.

Usually the captain sat at the head of that table, but he was not there now.

"Where have you been?" asked Frank.

"Getting onto a few things," said Jack, in a peculiar way.

"Why, what's the matter with you?" asked Bruce, pausing to stare at the Southerner.
"You are pale as a ghost!"

"Am I?" said Diamond, his voice sounding rather strained and unnatural.

"Sure thing. I wouldn't advise you to eat any more, and perhaps you hadn't better look at the chandeliers while they are swinging. You'll be keeping Rattleton company."

"Oh, I'm not sick—at least, not seasick," averred Jack.

"Then what ails you? I was going to prescribe ginger ale if it was the first stage of seasickness. Sometimes that will brace a person up and straighten out his stomach."

"Oh, don't talk remedies to me. I took medicine three days before I started on this voyage, and everybody I saw told me something to do to keep from being sick. I'm wearing a sheet of writing paper across my chest now."

When supper was over Jack motioned for his friends to follow him. The three went on deck and walked aft till they were quite alone.

The "Eagle" was plowing along over a deserted sea. The waves were running heavily, and night was shutting down grimly over the ocean.

"What's the matter with you, Diamond?" asked Browning. "Why have you dragged us out here? It's cold, and I'd rather go into our stateroom and take a loaf after eating so heartily. By Jove! if this keeps up, they won't have provisions enough on this boat to feed me before we get across."

"I wanted to have a little talk without," said Jack; "and I didn't care about talking in the stateroom, where I might be overheard."

"What's up, anyway?" demanded Frank, warned by the manner of the Virginian that Jack fancied he had something of importance to tell them.

"I've been investigating," said Jack.



“What?”

“Well, I found out that there is something the matter on this boat.”

“Did you learn what it was?”

“I don’t know that I have, but I’ve discovered one thing. I’ve learned the kind of cargo we carry.”

“What is it?”

“Petroleum and powder!”

CHAPTER VII.

Premonitions of peril.

“Well, that’s hot stuff when it’s burning,” said Merriwell, grimly.

“Rather!” grunted Browning.

“If I’d known what the old boat carried, I think I’d hesitated some about shipping on her,” declared Jack. “What if she did get on fire?”

“We’d all go up in smoke,” said Merriwell, with absolute coolness. “That is about the size of it.”

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"Well," said Jack, "I heard two of the sailors talking in a very mysterious manner. They say the 'Eagle' is hoodooed and the captain knows it. They say he has not slept any to speak of since we left New York."

"Sailors are always superstitious. They are ignorant, as a rule, and ignorance breeds superstition."

"Do you consider Mr. Slush ignorant?" asked Bruce.

"Didn't have time to size him up, but he's queer."

"I shall feel that I am over a volcano during the rest of the voyage," said Jack. "What if there was somebody on board who wished to destroy the ship?"

"It wouldn't be much of a job," grunted Browning. "A match touched to a powder keg would do the trick in a hurry."

"But he'd go up with the rest of us," said Frank.

"Unless he used a slow match," put in Jack. "These captains always have their enemies, who are desperate fellows and ready to do almost anything to injure them. The steamer might be set afire by means of a slow match, which would give the villain time enough to get away."

"I hardly think there's anybody desperate enough to do that kind of a trick, for it would be a case of suicide."

"Perhaps not. The chap who did the trick might have some plan of escaping. Then I have known men desperate enough to commit suicide if they could destroy an enemy at the same time."

"Well, it's likely all this worry about this vessel and cargo is entirely needless and foolish."

"I don't believe it," said the Virginian. "I know now that the captain has been worried. I have noticed it in his manner. He is pale and restless."

"Well, it's likely he may be rather anxious, for it's certain he cannot carry any insurance on such a cargo."

"He was not at the table to-night."

"No."

"I'd give something to be on solid ground and away from this powder mill. You know that sometimes there is such a thing as an unaccountable explosion. A heavy sea must cause motion or friction in the cargo, and friction often starts a fire on shipboard. Fire on this vessel means a quick road to glory."

"Huah!" grunted Bruce. "I'm not in the habit of worrying about things that may happen. It's cold out here. Let's go back to the stateroom."

"It will be well enough to keep still about the nature of the cargo, Diamond," said Frank.

"Oh, I shall keep still about that all right!" assured Jack.

As they moved back along the deck they discovered somebody who was leaning over the rail and making all sorts of dismal sounds and groans.

"The next time I go to Europe I'll stay at home!" moaned this individual. "Oh, my! oh, my! How bad I feel! Next that comes will be the shaps of my twos—I mean the taps of my shoes!"

"It's Rattles!" laughed Frank, softly; "and he is sicker than ever. He's tried to crawl out to get some air."

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At this moment a man opened the door near Rattleton, and asked:

"Is the—ah—er—moon up yet?"

"I don't know," moaned Harry. "But it is if I swallowed it. Everything else is up, anyhow."

"If the—ah—moon comes up red tonight, it will mean——"

"I don't give a rap what it means!" snorted Rattleton. "Don't talk to me! Let me die without torturing me! I'm sick enough without having you make me worse!"

Mr. Slush, for he was the anxious inquirer about the moon, dodged back into the cabin, closing the door hesitatingly.

Then Rattleton, unaware of the proximity of his amused friends, hung over the rail and groaned again.

Frank walked up and spoke:

"I see, my dear boy, that you are heeding the Bible admonition."

"Hey?" groaned Harry. "What is it?"

"'Cast thy bread upon the waters!' You are doing it all right, all right."

"Now, don't carry this thing too far!" Rattleton tried to say in a fierce manner, but his fierceness was laughable. "The worm will turn when trodden upon."

"But the banana peel knows a trick worth two of that. Did you ever hear that touching little poem about the man who stepped on a banana peel? Never did? Why, that is too bad! You don't know what you've missed. Listen, and you shall hear it."

Then Frank solemnly declaimed:

"He walked along one summer day,
As stately as a prince;
He stepped upon a banana peel,
And he hasn't 'banana' where since."

Rattleton gave a still more dismal groan.

"You are conspiring with the elements to hasten my death!" he said. "I can't stand many more like that."

"You should wear a sheet of writing paper across your breast, same as I do," said Diamond. "Then you won't be sick."

"I've got two sheets of writing paper across mine," declared Harry.

"You should drink a bottle of ginger ale to settle your stomach," put in Frank.

"Just drank three bottles of ginger ale, and they've turned my stomach wrong side out," gurgled the sick youth.

"You should allow yourself perfect relaxation, and not try to fight against it," from Browning.

"Oh, I haven't allowed myself anything else but perfect relaxation," came from Harry.

"You all make me tired!"

Then he staggered into the cabin and disappeared on his way back to the stateroom.

Diamond and Browning followed, but Frank lingered behind.

Although he had kept the fact concealed, Merry was troubled with a strange foreboding of coming disaster. In every way he tried to overcome anything like superstition, but he remembered that, on many other occasions, he had been warned of coming trouble by just such feelings.

"I'd like to know just what is going on upon this steamer," he muttered, as he walked forward. "I feel as if something was wrong, and I shall not be satisfied till I investigate."

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CHAPTER VIII.

In the stoke-hole.

Frank found the chief engineer taking some air. Merry fell into conversation with the man, who was smoking and seemed quite willing to talk.

Having a pleasant and agreeable way, Frank easily led the engineer on, and it was not long before the man was quite taken with the chatty passenger.

Frank was careful not to seem inquisitive or prying, for he knew it would be easy to arouse the engineer's suspicions if there should be anything wrong on the steamer.

However, Merry was working for a privilege, and he obtained it. When he expressed a desire to go below and have a look at the engines and furnaces, the engineer invited him to come along.

They passed through a door, and then began a descent by means of iron ladders. The clanking roar of the machinery came up to them. Frank could hear and feel the throbbing heart beats of the great boat.

The engine room was quickly reached, and there the engineer showed him the massive machinery that moved with the regularity of clockwork and the grace and ease that came from great power and perfect adjustment.

All this was interesting, but Frank was anxious to go still deeper.

"Go ahead," said the engineer, showing him the way. "Down that ladder there. You'll be able to see the furnaces and the stokers at work. I don't believe you'll care to go into the stoke-hole."

Frank descended. Great heat came up to him, accompanied by a glow that shifted and changed, dying down suddenly at one moment and glaring out at the next. He could hear the ring of shovels and the clank of iron doors.

He reached an iron grating, where a fierce heat rolled up and seemed to scorch him. From that position he could look down into the stoke-hole and see the black, grimy, sweating, half-clad men at work there.

Above him, at the head of the ladder he had just descended, a pair of shining eyes glared down, but he saw them not. He had not observed a cleaner who was at work on the machinery in the engine-room, and who kept his hat pulled over his eyes till Frank departed.

The blackened stokers looked like grim demons of the fiery pit as they labored at the coal, which they were shoveling into the mouths of the greedy furnaces.

The shifting glow was caused by the opening and closing of the furnace doors, which clanged and rang.

For a moment the pit below would seem shrouded in almost Stygian darkness, save for some bar of light that gleamed out from a crack or draft, and then there would be a rattle of iron and a flare of blood-red light that came with the flinging open of a furnace door.

In the glare of light the bare-armed, dirt-grimed stokers would shovel, shovel, shovel, till it seemed a wonder that the fire was not completely deadened by so much coal.

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Sometimes the doors of all the furnaces would seem open at once, and the glare and heat that came up from the place was something awful.

Merry wondered how human beings could live down there in that terrible place.

Some of the men were raking out ashes and hoisting it by means of a mechanism provided for the purpose.

Frank pitied the poor creatures who were forced to work down in that place. Yet he remembered it was not so many months since he had applied for the position of wiper in an engine round-house, obtained the job, and worked there with the grimest and lowest employees of the railroad.

There was something fascinating in the black pit and the grimy men who labored down there in the glare and heat. Frank was so absorbed that he heard no sound, received no warning of danger.

Merry leaned out over the edge of the iron grating. Something struck on his back, he was clutched, thrust out, hurled from the grating!

It was done in a twinkling. He could not defend himself, but he made a clutch to save himself, caught something, swung in, struck against the iron ladder, and went tumbling and sliding downward.

At the moment when Frank was attacked, a glare of light had filled the pit. One of the stokers had turned his back to the gleaming mouths of the furnaces and looked upward, as if to relieve his aching eyes.

He saw everything that occurred on the grating. He saw a man slip down the ladder behind Frank and spring on his back. He saw that man hurl Frank from the grating.

The stoker uttered a shout and ran toward the foot of the ladder, expecting to find Frank laying there, severely injured or killed. He was astounded when he saw the ready-witted youth grasp the grating, swing in, strike the ladder, cling and slide.

Down Frank came with a rush, but he did not fall. He landed in the stoke-hole without being severely injured. He was on his feet in a twinkling, and up that ladder he went like a cat.

His assailant had darted up the ladder above and disappeared. Merry reached the grating from which he had been hurled, and then he ran up the other ladder.

He was soon in the engine-room.

In that room there was no excitement. The machinery was sliding and swinging in a regular manner, while the engineer sat watching its movements, talking to an assistant. Oilers and cleaners were at work.

"Where is he?" cried Frank, his voice sounding clear and distinct.

They looked at him in amazement.

"What's the matter?" asked the engineer, coming forward.

"I was attacked from behind and thrown into the stoke-hole," Merry explained. "The fellow who did it came in here."

"Thrown into the stoke-hole?"

"Yes."

"From where?"

"The grating at the foot of the first ladder."

The engineer looked doubtful.

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"My dear fellow," he said, "you would have been maimed or killed. You do not seem to be harmed."

Frank realized that the engineer actually doubted his word.

"He might have fallen," said the assistant; "but it would have broken his neck."

"I tell you I was attacked from behind and thrown down!" exclaimed Frank. "I managed to get hold of the ladder and slide, so I was not killed."

The engineer looked annoyed.

"This is what comes of letting a passenger in here," he said. "It's the last time I'll do it on my own responsibility. Now if you go out and tell you were thrown into the stoke-hole, there'll be any amount of fuss over it."

"I am telling it right here," said Frank, grimly, "and I want to know who did the trick. Somebody who came from this room must have done it."

"Impossible!"

"Then where did he come from?"

The engineer and his assistant looked at each other, and the former began to swear.

"What do you think of it, Joe?" he asked.

"Think you made a mistake, Bill; but his story won't go. Nobody'll take any stock in it."

Frank was angry. It was something unusual for his word to be doubted, and he felt like expressing his feelings decidedly.

He was saved the trouble. The grimy stoker who had witnessed the struggle and the fall appeared in the door of the engine-room. He saw Frank and cried:

"Hello, you! So you're all right? Wonder you wasn't killed. You came down with a rush, young feller, but you went back just as quick."

Frank understood instantly.

"Here is a man who saw it!" he cried. "He will tell you that I am not lying."

The engineer turned to the stoker.

"How did he happen to fall?" he asked.

“He didn’t fall,” declared the begrimed coal heaver.

“No? What then—”

“Nother chap jumped on his back and flung him down. It’s wonderful he wasn’t killed.”

Frank was triumphant. He regarded the engineer and his assistant with a grim smile on his face.

“This is incredible!” exclaimed the engineer. “Who could have done such a thing?”

“Somebody who came from this room!” rang out Merry’s clear voice.

“This shall be investigated!” declared the engineer. “Look around! See if you can find the man who attacked you. The only ones here are myself, Mr. Gregory, and the wipers.”

“I want a look at those wipers,” said Frank.

“You shall have it. Mr. Gregory and I were talking together over here all the time you were gone.”

“Oh, I do not suspect you,” said Merry; “but I want a good look at those wipers.”

“Did you see the man who threw you into the stoke-hole?”

“No, but—”

“Then how will you know who it was if you see him?”

“Whoever did so had a reason for the act—a motive. He must have known me before. I may know him.”

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"Come," invited the engineer.

He called one of the wipers down from amid the sliding shafts and moving machinery. The man came unhesitatingly.

Frank took a square look at this man, who did not seek to avoid inspection.

"Never saw him before," confessed Merry.

The wiper was dismissed.

"Hackett," called the engineer.

The other wiper did not seem to hear. He pretended to be very busy, and kept at work.

"Hackett!"

He could not fail to hear that. He kept his face turned away, but answered:

"Yes, sir."

"Come here. I want you."

The wiper hesitated. Then he turned and slowly approached. His face was besmeared till scarcely a bit of natural color showed, and his hat was pulled low over his eyes. He shambled forward awkwardly, and stood in an awkward position, with his eyes cast down.

Frank looked at him closely and started. Then, in a perfectly calm manner, but with a trace of triumph in his voice, he declared:

"This is the fellow who did the job!"

CHAPTER IX.

In irons.

"What?" cried the engineer, in astonishment.

"How do you know?" asked the engineer's assistant, incredulously.

"That's it—how do you know?" demanded the engineer. "You said you did not see the person who attacked you."

"I did not."



"Yet you say this is the man."

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I know him."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"You have seen him before?"

"I should say so, on several occasions. He is one of my bitterest enemies. This is not the first time he has tried to kill or injure me. He has made the attempt many times before. He is the only person here who would do such a thing."

"If this is true," said the engineer, grimly, "he shall pay dearly for his work!"

The assistant nodded.

"What have you to say, Hackett?" demanded the engineer.

"I say it's a lie!" growled the fellow. "I never saw this chap before he came into the engine-room. He doesn't know me, and I don't know him."

"You hear what Hackett has to say," said the engineer, turning to Frank.

"I hear what this fellow has to say, but his name is not Hackett."

"Is not?"

"No, no more than mine is Hackett."

"Then what is his name?"

"His name is Harris!" asserted Merry, "and he is a gambler and a crook. I'll guarantee that he has not been long on the 'Eagle.'"

"No; we took him on in New York scarcely two hours before we sailed. We needed a man, and he applied for any kind of a job. Found he had worked round machinery, and we took him as wiper and general assistant."

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"It was not so many weeks ago that he attacked me at New Haven," said Frank. "He failed to do me harm. When he found I was going abroad he declared he would go along on the same steamer. At the time he must have thought I was going by one of the regular liners; but it is plain he followed me up pretty close and found I was going over this way. As there is no second-class passage on this boat, he decided he could not travel in the same class with me without being discovered, and he resolved to go as one of the crew, if he could get on that way. That's how he happens to be here."

"If what you say is true, it will go pretty hard with Mr. Harris. We'll have him ironed and —"

A cry of rage broke from the lips of the accused.

"There is no proof!" he snarled. "No one can swear I attacked this fellow and threw him into the stoke-hole!"

"Oh, yes!" said the stoker who had come up from below. "I saw the whole business. By the light from the furnaces, I plainly saw the man who did it, and you are the man!"

"That settles it!" declared the engineer. "You'll make the rest of the voyage in irons, Mr. Harris!"

"Then I'll give you something to iron me for!" shouted the furious young villain.

He leaped on Frank Merriwell with the fierceness of a wounded tiger.

Frank was not expecting the assault, and, for the moment, he was taken off his guard.

They were close to the moving machinery. Within four feet of them a huge plunging rod was playing up and down, moved by a steel bar that weighed many tons. Harris attempted to fling Frank beneath this bar, where he would be struck and crushed.

The villain nearly succeeded, so swift and savage was his attack.

Frank realized that the purpose of the wretch was to fling him into the machinery, and he braced himself to resist as quickly as possible.

Shouts of consternation broke from the engineer and his assistant. They sprang forward to seize Harris and help Frank.

But, before they could interfere, Frank broke the hold of his enemy, forced him back and struck him a terrible blow between the eyes felling him instantly.

Merriwell stood over Harris, his hands clenched his eyes gleaming.

“Get up!” he cried. “Get up you dog! I can’t strike you when you are down, and I’d give a hundred dollars to hit you just once more!”

But Harris did not get up. He realized that his second attempt had failed, and he stood in awe of Frank’s terrible fists. He looked up at those gleaming eyes, and turned away quickly, feeling a sudden great fear.

Did Frank Merriwell bear a charmed life?

Surely it seemed that way to Harris just then. For the first time, perhaps, the young rascal began to believe that it was not possible to harm the lad he hated with all the intensity of his nature.

The engineer and his assistants grabbed Harris and held him, the former swearing savagely. They dragged the fellow to his feet, but warned him to stand still.

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Harris did so. For the moment, at least, he was completely cowed.

A man was sent for the captain, with instructions to tell him just what occurred. Of course the captain of the steamer was the only person who could order one of the men placed in irons.

The captain came in in a little while, and he listened in great amazement to the story of what had taken place. His face was hard and grim. He asked Frank a few questions, and then he ordered that Harris be ironed and confined in the hold.

“Mr. Merriwell,” said the captain, “I am very sorry that this happened on my ship.”

“It’s all right, captain,” said Frank. “You are in no way to blame. The fellow shipped with the intention of doing just what he did, if he found an opportunity.”

“It will go hard-with him,” declared the master. “He’ll not get out of this without suffering the penalty.”

Harris was sullen and silent. Frank spoke to him before he was led away.

“Harris,” he said, “you have brought destruction on yourself. I can’t say that I am sorry for you, for, by your persistent attacks on me, you have destroyed any sympathy I might have felt. You have ruined your own life.”

“No!” snarled Sport. “You are the one! You ruined me! If I go to prison for this, I’ll get free again sometime, and I’ll not forget you, Frank Merriwell! All the years I am behind the bars will but add to the debt I owe you. When I come forth to freedom, I’ll find you if you are alive, and I’ll have your life!”

Then he was marched away between two stout men, his irons clanking and rattling.

CHAPTER X.

The game in the next room.

When Merry appeared in his stateroom he was greeted with a storm of questions.

“Well, what does this mean?”

“Trying to dodge us?”

“Running away?”

“Muts the whatter with you—I mean what’s the matter?”

"Where have you been?"

"Stand and give an account of yourself!"

Then he told them a little story that astounded them beyond measure. He explained how he had taken a fancy to look the steamer over and had fallen in with the engineer. Then he related how he had visited the engine room and been thrown into the stoke-hole.

But when he told the name of his assailant the climax was capped.

"Harris?" gasped Rattleton, incredulously.

"Harris?" palpitated Diamond, astounded.

"Harris?" roared Browning, aroused from his lazy languidness.

"On this steamer?" they shouted in unison.

"On this steamer," nodded Frank, really enjoying the sensation he had created.

"He—he attacked you?" gurgled Rattleton, seeming to forget his recent sickness.

"He did."

"And you escaped after being thrown into the stoke-hole?" fluttered Diamond.

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"I am here."

"And you didn't kill the cur on sight?" roared Browning.

"He is in the hold in irons."

"Serves him right!" was the verdict of Frank's three friends.

"Well, this is what I call a real sensation!" said the Virginian. "You certainly found something, Frank!"

"Well, that fellow has reached the end of his rope at last," said Harry, with intense satisfaction, once more stretching himself in his bunk.

"That's pretty sure," nodded Jack. "Attempted murder on the high seas is a pretty serious thing."

"He'll get pushed for it all right this time," grunted Browning, beginning to recover from his astonishment.

Then they talked the affair over, and Frank gave them his theory of Sport's presence on the steamer, which seemed plausible.

"This is something rather more interesting than the superstitious man or the Frenchman," said Diamond.

"The superstitious man was interesting at first," observed Merry; "but I've a fancy that he might prove a bore."

Then Bruce grunted:

"Say, does Fact and Reason err,
And, if they both err, which the more?
The man of the smallest calibre
Is sure to be the greatest bore."

While they were talking, the sound of voices came from the stateroom occupied by the Frenchman. Soon it became evident that quite a little party had gathered in that room.

The boys paid no attention to the party till it came time to turn in for the night. Then they became aware that something was taking place in the adjoining room, and it was not long before they made out that it was a game of poker.

As they became quiet, they could hear the murmur of voices, and, occasionally, some person would speak distinctly, "seeing," "raising" or "calling."



Diamond began to get nervous.

"Say," he observed, "that makes me think of old times. Many a night I've spent at that."

"What's the matter with you?" said Frank. "Do you want to go in there and take a hand?"

"Well," Jack confessed, "I do feel an itching."

"I feel like getting some sleep," grunted Bruce, "and they are keeping me awake."

"Why are they playing in a stateroom, anyhow?" exclaimed Frank. "It's no place for a game of cards at night."

"That's so," agreed Rattleton, dreamily. "But you are keeping me awake by your chatter a good deal more than they are. Shut up, the whole lot of you!"

There was silence for a time, and then, with a savage exclamation, Diamond sprang out of his berth and thumped on the partition, crying:

"Come, gentlemen, it's time to go to bed! You are keeping us awake."

There was no response.

Jack went back to bed, but the murmuring continued in the next stateroom, and the rattle of chips could be heard occasionally.

"What are we going to do about it, Merriwell?" asked Jack, savagely.

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"We can complain."

But making a complaint was repellent to a college youth, who was inclined to regard as a cheap fellow anybody who would do such a thing, and Diamond did not agree to that.

"Well," said Frank, "I suppose I can go in there and clean them all out."

"How?"

"At their own game," laughed Merry, muffledly.

"If anybody in this crowd tackles them that way I'll be the one," asserted the Virginian.

"Then nobody here will tackle them that way," said Frank, remembering how he had once saved Diamond from sharpers in New Haven.

Frank was a person who believed that knowledge of almost any sort was likely to prove of value to a man at some stage of his career, and he had made a practice of learning everything possible. He had studied up on the tricks of gamblers, so that he knew all about their methods of robbing their victims. Being a first-class amateur magician, his knowledge of card tricks had become of value to him in more than one instance. He felt that he would be able to hold his own against pretty clever card-sharps, but he did not care or propose to have any dealings with such men, unless forced to do so.

The boys kept still for a while. Their light was extinguished, but, up near the ceiling, a shaft of light came through the partition from the other room.

Diamond saw it. He jumped up and dragged a trunk into position by that partition. Mounted on the trunk, he applied his eye to the orifice and discovered that he could see into the Frenchman's room very nicely.

"What can you see?" grunted Browning.

"I can see everyone in there," answered Jack.

"Name them."

"The Frenchman, the Englishman, the superstitious man, and our fresh friend, Bloodgood."

"Same old crowd," murmured Frank.

"Yes, and a hot old game!" came from the youth on the trunk. "My! my! but they are whooping her up! They've got plenty to drink, and they are playing for big dust."

“Tell them to saw up till to-morrow,” mumbled Bruce.

Jack did not do so, however. He remained on the trunk, watching the game, seeming greatly interested.

A big game of poker interested him any time. It was through the influence of Frank that he had been led to renounce the game, but the thirst for its excitements and delights remained with him, for he had come from a family of card-players and sportsmen.

“Come, come!” laughed Frank, after a while; “I can hear your teeth chattering, old man. Get off that trunk and turn in.”

“Wait!” fluttered Jack—“wait till I see this hand played out.”

In less than half a minute he cried:

“It’s a skin game! I knew it was!”

“What’s the lay?” asked Merry.

“That infernal Frenchman is a card-sharp!”

“I suspected as much.”

“His pal is the Englishman. They are standing in together.”

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“Yes?”

“Sure thing. They are bleeding Bloodgood and Slush. Bloodgood thinks he’s pretty sharp, and I have not much sympathy for him; but I am sorry for poor little Slush. He should have paid attention to some of his signs and omens. He knew something disastrous would happen during this voyage, and I rather think it will happen to him.”

Then Diamond thumped the wall again, crying:

“Stop that business in there! Mr. Slush, you are playing cards with crooks—you are being robbed! Get out of that game as soon as you can!”

There was a sudden silence in the adjoining room, and then M. Rouen Montfort was heard to utter an exclamation in French, following which he cried:

“I see you to-morrow, saire! I make you swallow ze lie!”

“You may see me any time you like!” Diamond flung back.

CHAPTER XI.

The horrors of the hold.

To the surprise of the four youths, M. Montfort utterly ignored them on the following day, instead of seeking “trouble,” as had been anticipated.

“Well,” said Jack, in disgust, “he has less courage than I thought. He is just a common boasting Frenchman.”

“He is not a common Frenchman.” declared Frank. “I believe he is a rascal of more than common calibre.”

“But he lacks nerve, and I have nothing but contempt for him,” said the Virginian. “I didn’t know but he would challenge me to a duel.”

“What if he had?”

“What if he had?” hissed the hot-blooded Southern youth. “I’d fought him at the drop of the hat!”

“That’s all right, but you know most Frenchmen fight well in a duel.”



"I don't know anything of the kind. They are expert fencers, but I notice it is mighty seldom one of them is killed in a duel. They sometimes draw a drop of blood, and then they consider that 'honor is satisfied,' and that ends it."

It was midway in the forenoon that Frank met Mr. Slush on deck. The little man was looking more doleful and dejected than ever, if possible.

"The—ah—the moon showed rather yellow last night," he said. "That is a—a sure sign of disaster."

"Well," said Merry, with a smile, "I think the disaster will befall you, sir, if you do not steer clear of the crowd you were in last night."

Mr. Slush looked surprised.

"Might I—ah—inquire your meaning?" he faltered.

"I mean that you are playing poker with card-sharps, and they mean to rob you," answered Frank, plainly.

"I—I wonder how you—er—know so much," said the little man, with something like faint sarcasm, as Frank fancied.

"It makes little difference how I know it, but I am telling you the truth. I am warning you for your good, sir."

"Er—ahem! Thank you—very much."

Mr. Slush walked away.

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"Well, I'm hanged if he doesn't take it coolly enough!" muttered Frank, perplexed.

Frank felt an interest to know how Sport Harris was getting along. He walked forward and found the captain near the steps that led to the bridge.

In reply to Merry's inquiry, the captain said:

"Oh, don't worry about him. There are rats down there in the hold, but I guess he'll be able to fight them off. He'll have bread and water the rest of the voyage."

After that Merry could not help thinking of Harris all alone in the darkness of the hold, with swarms of rats around him, eating dry bread, washed down with water.

Frank felt that the youthful villain did not deserve any sympathy, but, despite himself, he could not help feeling a pang of pity for him.

When he expressed himself thus to his friends, however, they scoffed at him.

"Serves the dog right!" flashed Diamond. "He is getting just what he deserves, and I'm glad of it!"

"He will get what he deserves when we reach the other side," grunted Browning.

"No," said Merry; "he is an American, and he'll have to be taken back to the United States for punishment."

"Well, he'll get it all right."

"Well, I don't care to think that he may be driven mad shut up in the dark hold with the rats."

This feeling grew on Frank. At last he went to the captain and asked liberty to see Harris.

The request was granted, and, accompanied by two men, Frank descended into the hold.

Down there, amid barrels and casks, they came upon Harris. Frank heard the irons rattle, and then a gaunt-looking, wild-eyed creature rose up before them, shown by the yellow light of the lanterns.

Frank Merriwell had steady nerves, but, despite himself, he started.

The appearance of the fellow had changed in a most remarkable manner. Harris looked as if he was overcome with terror.

"There he is," said one of the men, holding up his lantern so the light fell more plainly on the wretched prisoner.

"Have you come to take me out of here?" cried Harris, in a tone of voice that gave Frank a chill. "For God's sake, take me out of this place! I'll go mad if I stay here much longer! It is full of rats! I could not sleep last night—I dare not close my eyes for a minute! Please—please take me out of here!"

Then he saw and recognized Frank.

"You?" he screamed. "Have you come here to gloat over me, Frank Merriwell?"

"No," said Frank; "I have come to see if I can do anything for you."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Harris, in a manner that made Frank believe madness could not be far away. "You wouldn't do that! I know why you are here! You have triumphed over me! You wish to see me in all my misery! Well, look at me! Here I have been thrown into this hellish hole, amid rats and vermin, ironed like a nigger! Look till you are satisfied! It will fill your heart with satisfaction! Mock me! Sneer at me! Deride me!"

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"I have no desire to do anything of the sort," declared Frank. "I am sorry for you, Harris."

"Sorry! Bah! You lie! Why do you tell me that?"

"It is the truth. You brought this on yourself, and so——"

"Don't tell me that again! You have told it enough! If I'd never seen you, I'd not be here now. You brought it on me, Frank Merriwell. If I die here in this cursed hole, you'll have something pleasant to think about! You can laugh over it!"

"You shall not die here, Harris, if I can help it. I'll speak to the captain about you."

The wretch stared at Merry, his eyes looking sunken and glittering. Then, all at once, he crouched down there, his chains clanking, covered his face with his hands and began to cry.

No matter what Harris had done, Frank was deeply pitiful then.

"I shall go directly to the captain," he promised, "and I'll ask him to have you taken out of this place. I will urge him to have it done."

Harris said nothing.

Frank had seen enough, and he turned away. As they were moving off, Harris began to scream and call to them, begging them not to leave him there in the darkness.

Those cries cut through and through Frank Merriwell. He knew he was in no way responsible for the fate that had befallen the fellow, and yet he felt that he must do something for Harris.

He kept his word, going directly to the captain.

CHAPTER XII.

The finish of A thrilling game.

The captain listened to what Frank had to say, but his sternness did not seem to relax in the least, as Merry described the sufferings the prisoner was enduring. But Frank would not be satisfied till the captain had made a promise to visit Harris himself and see that the fellow was taken out and cared for if he needed it.

Needless to say that the captain forgot to make the visit right away.

Frank did not tell his friends where he had been and what he had seen. He did not feel like talking about it, and they noticed that he looked strangely grim and thoughtful.

Tutor Maybe tried to talk to him about studies, but Merry was in no mood for that, as his instructor soon discovered.

Despite the fact that the sea was running high, Rattleton seemed to have recovered in a great measure from his sickness, so he was able to get on deck with the others. At noon, he even went to the table and ate lightly, drinking ginger ale with his food.

An hour after dinner Frank found a game of poker going on in the smoking-room. Mr. Slush was in the game. So were the Frenchman, the Englishman, and Bloodgood.

No money was in sight, but it was plain enough from the manner in which the game was played that the chips each man held had been purchased for genuine money, and the game was one for "blood."

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M. Montfort looked up for a moment as Frank stopped to watch the game. Their eyes met. The Frenchman permitted a sneer to steal across his face, while Frank looked at him steadily till his eyes dropped.

At a glance, Merry saw that Bloodgood was “shakey.” The fellow had been growing worse and worse as the voyage progressed, and now he seemed on the verge of a break-down.

A few minutes after entering the room Frank heard one of the spectators whisper to another that Bloodgood was “bulling the game,” and had lost heavily.

Bloodgood was drinking deeply. Mr. Slush seemed to be indulging rather freely. The Frenchman sipped a little wine now and then, and the Englishman drank at regular intervals.

The Frenchman was perfectly cool. The Englishman was phlegmatic. Slush hesitated sometimes, but, to the surprise of the boys, seemed rather collected. Bloodgood was hot and excited.

Frank took a position where he could look on. He watched every move. After a time he discerned that the Englishman and the Frenchman were playing to each other, although the trick was done so skillfully that it did not seem apparent.

Bloodgood lost all his chips. The game was held up for a few moments. He stepped into the next room and returned with a fresh supply.

“This is the bottom,” he declared. “You people may have them as soon as you like. To blazes with them! Let’s lift the limit.”

“Ah—er—let’s throw it off—entirely,” suggested Mr. Slush.

Bloodgood glared at the little man in astonishment.

“What?” he cried. “You propose that? Why, you didn’t want to play a bigger game than a quarter limit at the start!”

“Perhaps you are—er—right,” admitted Mr. Slush. “I—er—don’t deny it. But I have grown more—more interested, you understand. I—I don’t mind playing a good game—now.”

“Well, then, if the other gentlemen say so, by the gods, we’ll make it no limit!” Bloodgood almost shouted.

The Frenchman bowed suavely, a slight smile curling the ends of his pointed mustache upward.



"I haf not ze least—what you call eet?—ze least objectshong," he purred.

"I don't mind," said the Englishman.

Now there was great interest. Somehow, Frank felt that a climax was coming. He watched everything with deep interest.

Luck continued to run against Bloodgood. To Frank's surprise, it was plain Mr. Slush was winning. This seemed to surprise and puzzle both the Englishman and the Frenchman.

It was hard work to draw the little man in when Hazleton or Montfort dealt. On his own deal or that of Bloodgood, he seemed ready for anything.

"By Jove!" whispered Frank, in Diamond's ear. "That man is not such a fool as I thought! I haven't been able to understand him at all, and I don't understand him now."

At length there came a big jack-pot. It was passed round several times. Then Hazleton opened it on three nines.

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Bloodgood sat next. He had two pairs, aces up, and he raised instantly.

Montfort was the next man. He held a pair of deuces, but he saw all that had been bet, and doubled the amount!

Mr. Slush hesitated a little. He seemed ready to lay down, but finally braced up and came in, calling.

Hazleton did not accept the call. He raised again.

Bloodgood looked at his hand and cursed under his breath. It was just good enough to make him feel that he ought to make another raise, but he began to think there were other good hands out, and it was not possible to tell where continued raising would land him, so he “made good.”

With nothing but a pair of deuces in his hand, Montfort “cracked her up” again for a good round sum.

The hair on the head of Mr. Slush seemed to stand. He swallowed and looked pale. Then he “made good.”

Hazleton had his turn again, and he improved it. For the next few minutes, Montfort and Hazleton had a merry time raising, but neither Slush nor Bloodgood threw up.

“This is where they are sinking the knife in the suckers!” muttered Jack Diamond.

Frank Merriwell said not a word. His eyes were watching every move.

At last the betting stopped, and Slush picked up the pack to give out the cards.

Hazleton called for two. He received them, and remained imperturbable.

He had caught nothing with his three nines.

Bloodgood had tumbled to the fact that he was “up against” threes, and he had discarded his pair of low cards, holding only the two aces. To these he drew a seven and two more aces!

Bloodgood turned pale and then flushed. He held onto himself with all his strength. Here was his chance to get back his losings. Everything was in his favor. He was confident there were some good hands out, and it was very likely some of them might be improved on the draw, but he felt the pot was the same as his.

The Frenchman drew two cards.

Slush took one.

Then hot work began. Within three minutes Hazleton, with his three nines, had been driven out. Bloodgood, Montfort and Slush remained, raising steadily.

There was intense excitement in that room. The captain of the steamer had come in, and he was looking on. Some of the spectators were literally shaking with excitement.

Bloodgood's chips were used up. He flung money on the table.

All that he had went into the pot, and still he would not call. He offered his I.O.U.'s, but Mr. Slush declined to agree.

"Money or its equivalent," said the little man, with such decisiveness that all were astonished.

"I haven't any money," protested Bloodgood.

"Then you are out," said Slush.

"It's robbery!" cried Bloodgood.

"Why, you can't kick; you haven't even called once."

"Not even once, saire," purred the Frenchman.



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"By blazes! I have the equivalent!" shouted Bloodgood.

Into an inner pocket he plunged. He brought out a velvet jewel box. When this was opened, there was a cry of wonder, for a magnificent diamond necklace was revealed.

"That is worth ten thousand dollars!" declared Bloodgood, "and I'll bet as long as it lasts!"

Mr. Slush held out his hand.

"Please let me examine it," he said.

He took a good look at it.

"Ees it all right, sair?" asked the Frenchman, eagerly.

"It is," said Mr. Slush, "and I will take charge of it!"

He thrust the case into his pocket, rose quickly, stepped past Montfort and clapped a hand on Bloodgood's shoulder.

"I arrest you, Benton Hammersley, for the Clayton diamond robbery!" he said. "It is useless for you to resist, for you are on shipboard, and you cannot escape."

Bloodgood uttered a fierce curse,

"Who in the fiend's name are you?" he snarled, turning pale.

And "Mr. Slush" answered:

"Dan Badger, of the New York detective force! Permit me to present you with a pair of handsome bracelets, Mr. Hammersley."

Click—the trapped diamond thief was ironed!

CHAPTER XIII.

Fire in the hold.

Everyone except the detective himself seemed astounded. The clever officer, who had played his part so well, was as cool as ice.

The Frenchman cried:

"But zis pot—eet ees not settailed to whom eet belong yet!"

The detective stepped back to his chair.

"The easiest way to settle that is by a show-down," he said. "Under the circumstances, further bettering is out of the question."

"And I rather think I am in the showdown," choked out the prisoner. "I'll need this money to defend myself when I come to trial."

"You shall have it," assured Dan Badger—"if you win it."

"Well, I think I'll win it," said the ironed man, spreading out his hand. "I have four aces, and you can't beat that."

"Oh, my dear saire!" cried the Frenchman. "Zat ees pretty gude, but I belief zis ees battaire. How you like zat for a straight flush?"

He lay his cards on the table, and he had the two, three, four, five and six of hearts.

There was a shout of astonishment.

"Ze pot ees mine!" exultantly cried the Frenchman.

"Stop!" rang out Frank Merriwell's clear voice. "That pot is not yours!"

Everyone looked at Merry.

"He is using a table 'hold-out!'" accused Frank, pointing straight at Montfort. "I saw him make the shift. The five cards that really belong in his hands will be found in the hold-out under the table!"

There was dead silence. The Frenchman turned sallow.

"It makes no difference," said the quiet voice of the detective, breaking the silence. "I have a higher straight flush of clubs here. Mine runs up to the eight spot, and so I win the pot."

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He showed his cards and raked in the pot.

With a savage cry, M. Montfort flung his hand aside, leaped to his feet, sprang at Frank, and struck for Merry's face.

The blow was parried, and he was knocked down instantly.

A sailor, pale and shaking, came dashing into the room and whispered a word in the captain's ear.

An oath broke from the captain's lips, and he whirled about and rushed from the room.

Slowly Montfort picked himself up. There was a livid mark on his cheek. He glared at Frank with deadly hatred.

"Cursed meddlaire!" he grated. "You shall pay for this."

There was consternation outside. On the deck was heard the sound of running feet.

"Something has happened!" said Diamond, hurrying to the door. "I wonder what it is."

The "Eagle" was plunging along through a heavy sea. On the deck some men were running to and fro. Everyone seemed in the greatest consternation.

Jack sprang out and stopped a man.

"What is the matter?" he demanded.

"The ship is on fire!" was the shaking answer. "There is a fire in the hold!"

Diamond staggered. He whirled about and sprang into the smoking-room. In a moment he was at Frank's side.

"Merry," he said, "what I feared has come! The steamer is on fire!"

"Where?"

"In the hold."

Frank remembered the barrels and casks he had seen there.

"Then we are liable to go scooting skyward in a hurry!" he said. "It can't take the fire long to reach the petroleum and powder!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Saving an enemy.

In truth, there was a fire in the “Eagle’s” hold. The captain and the crew seemed perfectly panic-stricken. The thought of the explosion that might come any moment seemed to rob them of all reason.

Frank Merriwell and his friends rushed out of the smoking-room.

The hold had been opened in an attempt to get water onto the flames. Smoke was rolling up from the opening.

“Close down the hatch!” shouted somebody. “It is producing a draft, and that helps the fire along!”

Then faint cries came from the hold—cries of a human being in danger and distress!

“It’s Harris!” exclaimed Diamond. “He is down there, and his time has come at last!”

“A rope!” shouted Frank Merriwell, flinging off his coat.

“What are you going to do?” demanded Bruce Browning.

“By heavens! I am going down there and try to bring Harris out!”

“You’re a fool!” chattered Harry Rattleton. “Think of the oil and powder down there! The stuff is liable to explode any moment! You shall not go!”

Frank saw a coil of rope at a distance. He rushed for it, brought it to the hold, let an end drop and dangle into the darkness from whence the smoke rolled up.

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"You are crazy!" roared Bruce Browning, attempting to get hold of Frank. "I refuse to let you go down there!"

"Don't put your hands on me, Browning!" cried Frank. "If you do, I shall knock you down!"

They saw that he meant just what he said. He would not be stopped then. Bruce Browning, giant that he was, felt that he would be no match for Frank then.

The rope was made fast, and down into the smoke and darkness slid Frank, disappearing from view.

Barely had he done so when some sailors came rushing forward and attempted to close the hatch.

"Hold on!" thundered Browning. "You can't do that now!"

"Get out of the way!" commanded one of them, who seemed to be an officer. "We must close this hatch to hold the fire in check long enough for the boats to be lowered."

"A friend of mine has gone down there. You can't close it till he comes out!"

"To blazes with your friend!" snarled the man. "What business had he to go down there? If he's gone, he will have to stay there. His life does not count against all the others."

Then, under his directions the men started to close the hatch.

Browning sailed into them. He was aroused to his full extent by the thought of what would happen if the hatch was closed and Frank was shut down there with the fire and smoke. He knocked them aside, he hurled them away as if they were children. They could not stand before him for an instant.

There was a cry from below.

"Pull away, up there!"

It was Frank's voice.

Willing hands seized the rope. There was a heavy weight at the end of it. They dragged the weight up, with the smoke rolling into their faces in a cloud that grew denser and denser.

And up through the smoke came Sport Harris, irons and all, with the ends of the rope tied about his waist!



Frank had found Harris, and here the fellow was.

They untied the rope from Sport's waist in a hurry. Then they lowered it again.

"Pull away!"

Frank Merriwell was dragged up through the smoke.

"Now," said Browning, "down goes the hatch!"

And it was slammed into place in a hurry, holding the smoke back.

CHAPTER XV.

The sea gives up.

The pumps were going, in an attempt to flood the hold, but the men did not attempt to fight the fire in anything like a reasonable manner.

The knowledge of the cargo down there in the hold turned them to cowards and unreasoning beings. They were expecting to be blown skyward at any moment.

Of a sudden the engines stopped and the "Eagle" began to lose headway. Men were making preparations to lower the boats.

"Well, I'll be hanged if they are not going to abandon the ship!" exclaimed Frank. "The case must be pretty bad. I wonder how the fire started?"

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"I set it!"

At his feet was Harris, whom he had just rescued from the hell below, and the fellow had declared that he set the fire!

"You?"

"Yes," said the wretch. "I was crazy. I found a match in my pocket, and I thought I was willing to roast if I could destroy you, so I set the fire. Pretty soon I realized what I had done, but then I found it too late when I tried to beat it out. The old steamer will go into the air in a few minutes, and we'll all go with it, unless we can get off in the boats right away."

"It would have served you right had I left you to your fate!" grated Frank, as he turned away.

He ran down to his stateroom to gather up some of the few little valuables he hoped to save. He was not gone long, but when he returned, he found two boats had been launched and were pulling away, the persons in them being in great haste to get as far from the steamer as they could before the explosion.

Three or four women were in the first boat.

It was rather difficult to lower the boats in the heavy sea that was running, but the men were working swiftly, pushed by the terror of the coming disaster.

A little smoke curled up from the battened-down hatches.

As Frank reached the deck, he nearly ran against M. Rouen Montfort, who was carrying a pair of swords in scabbards, which seemed to be treasures he wished to save.

The Frenchman stopped and glared at Merry.

"Cursed Yankee!" he grated. "I would like to put one of zese gude blades t'rough your heart!"

"Haven't a doubt of it," said Merriwell, coolly. "That's about the kind of a man I took you to be."

Another boat got away, and the last boat was swung from the davits.

A sailor counted the men who remained and spoke to the captain. The latter said:

"At best, the boat will not hold them all. There is one too many, at least. Let the fellow in irons stay behind."

Harris heard this, and fancied his doom was sealed. He began to beg to be taken along, but one of the men gave him a kick.

The Frenchman turned on Frank.

“Do you hear?” he cried. “One cannot go. Do you make eet ze poor deval in ze iron? or do you dare fight me to see wheech one of us eet ees? Eef you make eet ze poor devval, eet show you are ze cowarde. Ha! I theenk you do not dare to fight!”

He spat toward Merry to express his contempt.

“Let me fight him!” panted Diamond at Frank’s elbow.

“See that Harris is put into the boat!” ordered Merriwell. “I fancy I can take care of this Frenchman. If you do not get Harris into the boat I swear I will not enter it if I conquer Montfort!”

Then he whirled on the Frenchman.

“I accept your challenge!” he cried in clear tones.

Montfort uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. He flung off his coat, saying:

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“Choose ze weapon, saire.”

Frank did not pause to look them over in making a selection. He caught up one of them and drew it from the scabbard.

Montfort took the other.

“Ready?” cried the American youth.

“Ready!” answered the Frenchman.

Clash!—the swords came together and there on the deck of the burning steamer the strange duel began.

Frank fought with all the coolness and skill he could command. He fought as if he had been standing on solid ground instead of the deck of a ship that might be blown into a thousand fragments at any moment.

The Frenchman had fancied that the Yankee would prove easy to conquer, but he soon discovered Frank possessed no little skill, and he saw that he must do his best.

More than once Montfort thrust to run Frank through the body, and once his sword passed between the youth’s left arm and his side.

Merry saw that the Frenchman really meant to kill him if possible.

Then men were getting into the boat. There were but few seconds left in which to finish the duel. Rattleton called to him from the boat, shouting above the roar of the wind:

“Finish him, Frank! Come on, now! Lively!”

The tip of Montfort’s sword slit Frank’s sleeve and touched his arm.

“Next time I get you!” hissed the vindictive Frenchman.

But right then Frank saw his opportunity. He made a lunge and drove his sword into the Frenchman’s side.

Montfort uttered a cry, dropped his sword, flung up his hands, and sunk bleeding to the deck.

Merry flung his blood-stained weapon aside and bent over the man, saying sincerely:

“I hope your wound is not fatal, M. Montfort.”



"It makes no difference!" gasped the man. "You are ze victor, so I must stay here an' die jus' ze same."

But Frank Merriwell was seized by a feeling of horror at the thought of leaving this man whom he had wounded. In a moment he realized he would be haunted all his life by the memory if he did so.

Quickly he caught M. Montfort up in his arms. He sprang to the side of the steamer. The boat was holding in for him. His friends shouted to him. The captain ordered him to jump at once.

"Catch this man!"

He lifted M. Montfort, swung him over the rail, and dropped him fairly into the boat!

"He has chosen," said the captain. "The boat will hold no more. Pull away!"

It was useless for Frank's friends to beg and plead. Away went the boat, leaving the noble youth to his doom.

Forty minutes later there was a terrible flare of fire and smoke, a thunderous explosion, and the ill-fated steamer had blown up.

Harry Rattleton was crying like a baby.

"Poor Frank!" he sobbed. "Noblest fellow in all the world—good-by! I'll never see you again!"

Tears rolled down Bruce Browning's face, and Jack Diamond, grim and speechless, looked as if the light of the world had gone out forever.

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Some days later the passengers and crew from the lost “Eagle” were landed at Liverpool by the steamer “Seneca,” which had picked them up at sea. The “Seneca” was a slow old craft, but she got there all right.

A little grimy tender carried Bruce, Jack, Harry and the tutor from the “Seneca” to the floating dock. It was a sad and wretched-looking party.

On the dock stood a young man who shouted to them and waved his hand.

Jack Diamond started, gasped, clutched Browning and whispered:

“Look—look there, Bruce! Tell me if I am going crazy, or do you see somebody who looks like—”

Harry Rattleton clutched the big fellow by the other side, spluttering:

“Am I doing gaffy—I mean going daffy? Look there! Who is that waving his hand to us?”

“It’s the ghost of Frank Merriwell, as true as there are such things as ghosts!” muttered Browning.

But it was no ghost. It was Frank Merriwell in the flesh, alive and well! He greeted them as they came off the tender. He caught them in his arms, laughing, shouting, overjoyed. And they, realizing it really was him, hugged him and wept like a lot of big-hearted, manly young men.

Frank explained in a few words. He told how, after they had left him, he had belted himself well with life-preservers and left the “Eagle” in time to get away before the explosion. Then he was picked up by an Atlantic liner, which brought him to Liverpool in advance of his friends.

Thus he was there to receive them, and it seemed that the sea had given up its dead.

[*The end.*]