

Frank Merriwell's Limit

Burt L. Standish

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CHAPTER I. THE DAWN PARTY.

Everybody yawned. A dawn party after the prom. is likely to be a dull affair, and this one in Frank Merriwell's room was no exception to the rule. All were tired. Even little Stubbs' fund of wit and repartee seemed pretty well exhausted and he had almost given up his desperate attempt to prove entertaining to Stella Stanley, with whom he had fallen head-over-heels in love at first sight. Stella was tall and stately and little Bink voted her a "peach", a "stunner," a "queen." When a Yale man calls a girl a queen, he is giving her the highest possible compliment.

Stella had found both Stubbs and Griswold amusing little chaps, and she enjoyed being amused. She did not know they had come to the verge of blows over her; she did not know that Griswold had sworn that he would have Stubbs' heart's blood. But Bink had carried her off in triumph to Merry's dawn party after the prom., and he was the happiest fellow in New Haven. He was hard hit; possibly that explains his sudden loss of sprightliness and wit. He longed to sit still, hold her hand, and gaze into her face; but Stella was not one of the handholding kind, and it did not go with her.

"What's the matter with you?" she laughed. "You were awfully funny an hour ago. Drinking tea seems to have dampened your spirits."

"Oh," said Browning with a lazy grin, "the spirits which preceded the tea were damp enough. The tea seems to have dried them up."

"If it will dry you up, take some more tea--do," begged Bink.

"Now you are beginning to talk foolishly," declared Bink.

"I do that so that you may understand me," shot back the little fellow.

Browning grunted. He could not think of anything just then that seemed to fit the occasion, and so he turned

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to renew his attempt to entertain Mrs. Hodge, who was chaperoning the party. He found her lying back in her chair, her eyes closed, apparently asleep.

"Hush!" he said, with a warning gesture to the others.

There was silence for the space of ten seconds. It was broken by Hodge, who observed:

"It must be nearly morning. He rose and looked out of the window, drawing the curtains aside for the purpose. The ground was bare on the campus and a grayish sky could be seen over the leafless trees. "It looks like spring," Bart added. "I believe we shall have an early spring."

"I think so myself," said Bink. "Only yesterday I saw a cat watching a hole in the wall with her back arched, and I consider that a sure sign of an early spring."

Hodge dropped the curtain and sat down beside Elsie Bellwood again. Close by, Frank was murmuring something to Inza Burrage.

"You're doing better, my little man," said Stella Stanley, patting Stubbs on the back.

"Don't do that—please don't!" entreated Bink. "Little man! It makes me warm."

"Small pots get hot quickly," smiled the actress.

Browning chuckled revengefully, but Bink paid no attention to him. Instead, he lowered his voice, saying:

"Miss Stanley, to—night we met for the first time in person, but I feel that we have met before in spirit."

"Do you?" she murmured, lifting her eyebrows.

"I do. I am serious. Please don't smile. I have pictured you in my mind a thousand times, divinely tall, graceful as a goddess, beautiful as a—a—anything. You're it! I said so the moment my eyes rested on you. I felt something in my heart that I had never felt there before— a pain that—"

"My dear fellow, you should consult a physician at once. I'm sure you smoke too many cigarettes. That's bad for the heart, you know."

"Now you're guying. Don't guy! I'm serious. I love you!"

"Ha! ha! ha! I believe you are more comical when you try to be serious than when you try to be funny. You don't know how amusing you really and truly are."

Bink looked pained. He tried to take her hand, but again it avoided his itching fingers.

"Listen to me!" he breathed. "I'm getting desperate! I don't like to be taken for a clown all the time. People seem to think everything I say is in jest."

"That's not 'jest' right," smiled Stella.

"Don't pun! I can't stand it! I swear I'll never pull again! Won't you take me seriously once?"

"Oh, no; I'll not take you at all. You're a goose! You've been very entertaining. Don't spoil it."

Bink realized that it wouldn't "go."

"It's all because of my size!" he hissed. "I'm not to blame for that! If you won't listen, I—I—I'll—"

"What?"

"I'll commit suicide as fast as I can! Browning, hand me the cigarettes!"

But Bruce was dozing. Stubbs looked round helplessly. Hodge was doing his best to entertain Elsie, while Frank continued to talk to Inza. In a corner Buck Badger and Winnie Lee seemed very contented.

"It's enough to drive anybody to suicide!" declared the little fellow, pathetically, getting the cigarettes for himself. "I'm the only out that's left. Every other fellow is satisfied, even Browning."

"Did you ever hear," said Stella, "that the general prizes most the fort that takes the longest siege?"

Bink jumped.

"Then you do mean—"

"Nothing."

She was baffling, and that made her all the more fascinating. He asked permission to light the cigarette, and she granted it. Then she begged him to tell her something funny, and he desperately tried to comply, but he was not nearly as funny as when he did not try at all.

The gray light began to sift in through the curtains.

"Won't you have some more tea?" asked Frank rising.

But nobody wanted tea.

"Tired out, done up," said Merry. "I don't wonder. Elsie looks completely fagged; so does Inza."

"I danced almost every dance," declared Elsie.

"And an average waltz," said Merry, "takes a person over about three-quarters of a mile. A square dance takes one over half a mile. Your programmes were well filled. You danced twelve waltzes and four square dances. That's eleven miles. It's likely that in strolling about and visiting the dressing room, you traveled nearly another mile. You see you have covered twelve-miles each to-night, which is pretty strong exercise."

"It makes me tired to think of it!" laughed Elsie.

"But the music, the flowers, the lights, and the handsome boys!" exclaimed Inza. "It was splendid! I've had the loveliest time of my life!"

"And I enjoyed it intensely," smiled Elsie, a bit wearily.

"It was good of you to invite us to come, Frank."

"Not at all; it was good of you to come. Think how lonesome I should have been if you had not."

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"Now, that won't do with us!" cried Elsie, shaking a finger at him. "You were the most popular man on the floor. Every girl ran after you. If we'd not been here, Inza—"

"I know," laughed Inza. "But he's not to blame. It's a wonder to me that all this attention has not spoiled him completely."

"It has," declared Hodge.

"How?" they gasped.

"Why, he's been so afraid of getting the swelled head that he's grown soft. He picks up any old thing. He lets any kind of fellow insult him, and then he is friendly with that fellow."

Badger looked across at Bart, but Hodge was paying no attention to him.

"I can't think that of Frank," said Inza slowly.

"Frank is always just," declared Elsie.

"You're wrong," persisted Bart. "Justice means retribution for the fellow who is nasty.. Merry lets him off."

"Not always, Bart," protested Frank.

"Convince me that a fellow is thoroughly bad, and I'll aid in giving him his just and merited dues."

"That's all very fine, but you won't be convinced."

"Oh, yes, I will! I have been more than once."

"When a man kicks me," said Bart, "I kick back. If a man kicks me when I'm down, I kick him twice when I get up."

Badger moved restlessly.

"What's the matter?" asked Winnie Lee, who had been so interested in her own chatter that she had not noticed what the others were saying. "Why do you scowl so?"

"I beg your pardon!" Buck exclaimed, in a low tone. "Did I scowl?"

"Oh, you looked black as a thundercloud!"

"I didn't know it. But it's like me, Miss Lee. I hope you won't mind it much. I reckon I have some unpleasant ways, but you know I'm a Westerner, and I have not the polish of these Eastern chaps I'll acquire it in time, don't you think?"

"I rather like you just as you are," confessed Winnie.

"Do you?" he whispered, and the look of pleasure that came to his face made it almost handsome. "If you really and truly like me, I do not care who dislikes me."

"But I wish you might be friends with Frank Merriwell. Can't you?"

Buck drew back.

"It's a mighty hard thing," he said slowly. "I don't like him, and I'll allow he has no cause for liking me. Anyhow, I've taken pains never to give him reason to like me."

"He may not like you," said Winnie "but he has confidence in your honesty. Won't you try to be friends with him—for my sake!"

She was unusually sweet and pleading in her manner.

"For your sake," said Badger, huskily, "I'll try—I'll try!"

CHAPTER II. AT DAWN.

The gray light of morning was creeping through the shades and mingling with the artificial light. The combination made the members of the party look rather wan and worn. Mrs. Hodge slept with her mouth open. Browning snored.

"It's morning," said Elsie, with a weary sigh.

Hodge looked out again.

"I think we can call it dawn." he said.

"There is no hurry," said Frank. "We might as well make a full night of it, Perhaps more tea will revive us. What's the matter with Stubbs? He's silent as a clam."

"Haven't got anything to say," mumbled the little fellow, sourly.

"Well, it's the first time in months that your mouth has had a rest—unless you were sleeping," laughed Frank.

"Very good, but rather too pointed, as the fish said when he swallowed the bait," returned Bink.

"Griswold says you talk in your sleep," grinned Frank.

"Shoot Griswold! He's a —fabricator. Some day I'll sit on him hard."

"How can you do it," laughed Stella "you're so soft."

That squealed Stubbs. He looked at her reproachfully for a moment, and then announced that he was ready to throw up the sponge.

"I can't say anything back," he sighed, sadly.

He snapped the stub of his half-smoked cigarette at Browning and it struck fairly on the big fellow's chin, with a burst of sparks. Bruce awoke with a roar, and that caused Mrs. Hodge to start up. The big man made a jump for Stubbs before he realized there were Ladies present, but the little chap easily avoided him. Then Hodge again announced that dawn had arrived.

"Never saw the Elephant move so sudden before," said Stubbs, from behind a couch, where he had taken refuge.

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"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Hodge, looking round. "Have I been asleep?"

"No, indeed," protested Browning; "but I'm afraid I dozed."

"You're a big sleepy-head, anyhow," said Stubbs, who was feeling rather malicious and not at all good-natured.

"Mr. Hodge is a it anxious to get away" said Elsie.

Bart protested that he was not, but Mrs. Hodge rose hastily and asserted that that such dissipation was very bad for college men, which made Stubbs chuckle.

"Come, children," said the chaperone, in a motherly manner, "it is time for us to go. Mr. Merriwell has been very kind."

"Mr. Merriwell!" exclaimed Merry, reproachfully.

"Frank, then, if you like it better," said Bart's mother.

"I do like it better," he nodded. "Won't you have some more tea, Mrs. Hodge—something to brace you before going out?"

But she protested that she wished no more tea, and Merry threw aside the curtains, allowing the full light of morning to enter by the windows, outside which the bare trees were pointing toward the cold sky with their sapless branches.

Inza looked out and shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"My!" she exclaimed, "I never dreamed it could seem so lonely here. It must depress you when you see it like this."

"When he sees it like this!" chuckled Stubbs. "Don't believe that ever happened before. We all have to make a sprint for it mornings to get into our togs and reach chapel in time."

"That's because you stay up late nights", said Inza.

"Grinding," winked Frank, and Stubbs choked. "That's slang for studying, you know."

"Do you have to study so hard?" said Mrs. Hodge, sympathetically.

"We do if we cut any ice," admitted Stubbs; "but most of us are not in the ice business. It's only Merriwell and Badger who are greasy grinds."

"You forgot me," put in Browning.

"You!" sneered Stubbs. "No man in college ever knew you to study. You'll never graduate unless you take a brace."

"Oh, the worst is over now," came shamelessly from the lazy giant. "I've managed to crib along so far, and I've been dropped only once, so I have hopes of going through."

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"No one can call me a grind," said Frank. "I study when I can, but that's not half what I ought."

"You're a phenom.," said Hodge. "You always managed to pull through recitations, somehow."

"I'm afraid you are all very bad boys," smiled Mrs. Hodge, "and I am not going to permit my girls to associate with you any more to-night."

"To-day," corrected Inza, with a laugh.

So they prepared to break up the party, and Badger found all opportunity to whisper a few final words in the ear of Winnie, who looked fresher and less wearied than the other girls.

Stella Stanley grasped Binks' arm and looked down at him seriously, saying:

"You have deceived me!"

"Eh?" gasped Stubbs. "I must have been in a trance when I did it."

"I thought you were funny."

"Oh, hang it! I wish somebody thought something else of me! I told you I was tired of being regarded as a clown."

"It's your only chance. I expected you to keep it up, but you have failed. Henceforth I give smiles to you friend Griswold."

"My friend! Don't call him that! he's no friend of mine! That little, sawed-off runt! I choose men for my friends." And Bink stretched himself as much as possible in order to reach the five foot mark.

Stella laughed.

There were hand-shakings and fare-wells. The girls told what a "perfectly delightful" time they had enjoyed. Then they were escorted down to the large closed cab Merry had waiting for them. The cab rolled away, and it was over.

Back in his room, Frank dropped on an easy chair before the fire that smouldered in the grate, and thought it over. He had been puzzled by Elsie's behavior. She had not been cold or distant, and yet he had obtained but two dances with her, against four with Inza. All her other dances had been taken. She had seemed to prefer the company of Hodge, and Bart had waltzed with her four times. Frank felt jealous, and yet he wondered if he had any real right to feel so. Perhaps it was all diplomacy on Elsie's part.

And Inza—well, she had been the belle of the prom. There was no question about that. Elsie had been a great favorite, but it was dark-eyed, dashing Inza who created the sensation. Every one sought an introduction to her, or asked questions about her. Every one envied Frank because he knew her so well.

There he sat, with the fire dying out on the hearth, thinking and wondering, when there came a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called, surprised.

But he was still more surprised when Buck Badger entered.

CHAPTER III. FRIENDS OR FOES?

"You?"

"Yes." Frank got up. "Don't rise" said Badger.

"Have a chair," invited Merry.

Badger sat down.

"Cold morning," he said.

"Yes, chilly," said Frank.

Both felt awkward for a moment, but Merry quickly recovered, although the Westerner did not. Frank sat down again, and there was a pause. Merry eyed his visitor steadily and searchingly, but the other stared at fire embers amid the gray ashes on the grate. Frank resolved to let him speak.

"I reckon," said Buck, "that it's in place to thank you for inviting me here with the others."

"Don't mention it."

"But I have to. I allow I would not have come, but Winnie—er—Miss Lee said I must."

"Then I have her to thank for the pleasure of your society."

Badger made a gesture, a hot flush in his cheeks.

"Don't be sarcastic, Merriwell!" he exclaimed. "Confound sarcasm!"

"Didn't mean it that way."

"Hanged if it didn't sound that way."

"All right. But I know my company was not particularly pleasant."

"I think it was—to Miss Lee."

Frank bit his lip to repress a smile, and Badger scowled at an ember on the grate, which glowed out bright and died down, as if winking at him in a knowing manner.

"Look here," said Bink, suddenly, "you've made me feel mighty disagreeable!"

Frank whistled.

"That was the farthest thing from my thoughts," he declared, sincerely.

"Was it?"

"Of course. Did you think—"

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"I didn't know, I don't understand you, but I've begun to see you have a way of getting square with your enemies that is all your own."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I reckon you sort of put them in your debt, return good for evil, and all that sort of thing, so that they feel mighty cheap if they don't knuckle down and eat humble pie."

"Do you think so?"

"I do, and I want to asseverate right here that I don't like it none whatever. That's plain. I like it a heap sight better when a fellow comes back at his enemies with both feet and knocks 'em west-end-and crooked if he can. That allows he has a temper, an' I naturally take to a man with a temper."

Frank laughed in honest amusement.

"My dear fellow," he said, "it's plain you are a hard man to suit; but I want you to understand one thing at the start, and that is that I did not invite you here on your account to-night. If it had not been for Winnie Lee you'd received no invitation. Now that is straight and plain."

Somehow, this did not make Badger feel any better; on the contrary, it caused the scowl on his face to become even blacker, if possible.

"All right," he growled, "and you can be mighty sure I'd not come if it hadn't been for Winnie Lee. I don't want you to think I'm any whatever like those other chaps who hang round you on all the time and fawn over you. I'm not built for fawning."

"I fancy not. But don't get a foolish notion into your head, Mr. Badger— don't think for a moment that I am anxious for your friendship. I'm not. I have plenty of friends without you."

"Don't worry; you'll not have it in any great hurry."

"It is positively a pleasure to hear you say so. As an enemy you have proved very interesting; as a friend, I fancy you would be a great bore."

The Kansan felt like rising and smiting Merriwell fair on his smiling mouth. He had not expected anything like this. He had come to that room with the plain intention of freeing his mind and declaring

that it was impossible for him to be Frank's enemy in the future, even though he might not be a friend; but Merry had cut him short and turned him on quite a different tack, and he realized that he was not cutting a particularly handsome figure.

"That's right!" he snarled. "Talk right out! I like it better when you talk that way!"

"I'm glad you do. I've longed to tell you some things for quite a while, and now I have the opportunity. To begin with, you are by nature an obstinate, selfish, belligerent fellow. Your bump of combativeness is abnormally developed, and your good sense does not control it. You had rather fight than eat, and you're never happy unless there is some one you can hit. You are a natural born fighter, and that's the full size of it."

Badger gasped, "Anything more?" he asked.

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"Lots. If you're going to make a success in this world, you'll have to get sense enough into our head so that you can control your ugliness. It's all right for a man to want to fight sometimes, but it's all wrong for him to want to fight all the time. Besides that, when you form an opinion on any point, you never change your opinion."

"Never!"

"That allows you lack good sense. It's very well for a man to stick to his opinions as long as he has any ground to stick on; but the wisest men change their opinions when they discover beyond the shadow of a doubt that they are wrong."

"Yah!" snapped Badger.

"You formed all opinion about me sometime ago--"

"I've stuck to it!"

"You have."

"I shall!"

"All right. Just the same, down in your heart, you know you are wrong."

"I don't!"

"You do! Don't contradict; it'll do no good. You have resolved to hate me, and you mean to stick to it, That's all right. It does not worry me."

"Glad of it!"

"Now, Badger, there is another side to you, and I am free to say that I admire you for it. You are a square enemy. I never knew you to do but one dirty thing and you did that under the impulse of intense passion."

"What was that?"

"When I was down, in the Dartmouth game, you kicked me in the head, which came near sending me off the field on a stretcher. That, Badger, was a dirty thing!"

Badger actually hung his head. All at once, he looked up.

"I did kick you!" he said. "I couldn't help it! I felt like kicking your head off!"

"Haven't a doubt of it. But it was a piece of dirt, just the same."

"I hated you enough to do anything then."

"Don't doubt it, and still I never gave you any real reason to hate me. Your own selfishness made you hate me. You did it because you fancied I might fill some position that otherwise would fall to you. Don't deny it, Badger, for you know it's true. You think I've been soft toward you? Ha! Ha! Why, my dear fellow, I've read you like an open book. But under all your outward crust of ugliness I fancied I could catch a glimpse of a strong, honest heart. I may have been wrong, but I don't think so. I believe you stand at the parting of the

roads; one road leads to crookedness, meanness, vileness, while the other leads to uprightness and honor. I think you call choose your course. I hope you will choose the right one, and, somehow, I believe you will."

Badger sat limp as a rag, staring at Merry with wide open eyes, utterly flabbergasted. After a time, he gasped:

"Well, I swear no onery critter ever talked to me this way before! If anybody'd told me a week ago that I'd stood for it from you, I'd thumped him instanter. But I can't do that with you—here—now."

"Don't let your nasty pugnaciousness get the best of you, Badger. I've talked straight to you, and now—"

"And now," cried Buck, springing to his feet, "by the eternal Rockies, I'm going to talk straight to you! Do you hear? You have had your say, Frank Merriwell, and now I'll have mine. I reckon you'd best sit right still and listen!"

"Go on," smiled Merry, blandly.

CHAPTER IV. A FULLER UNDERSTANDING.

Badger had tried to hold himself in check, but Merriwell's straightforward manner of speaking had proved altogether too much for him, and now he was excited. He walked up and down, finally stopping in front of Frank.

"You have applied adjectives to me that I don't like any whatever," he grated. "You have called me selfish, mean, ugly, dirty! Why, blame your insolence! I'd like to thump you good and hard for it! I'd like to make you swallow it all!"

"That's impossible," declared Frank, unruffled. "I believe I've also said some things that were rather complimentary."

"Bah! You called me honest. What of that? Any fellow that his the least self-respect is honest."

"There was a time, Badger, when I was not at all sure that you had the least self-respect."

"What do I care! I don't care whether you think me honest or not! I'm not honest because I want to win your re- spect, and you call stake your dust on that. But I'm just as honest in my dislike for you as in other things."

"That's what makes you interesting, Badger. You are quite different from the other snobs who hate me because I'll have nothing to do with them, and who would crawl round after me quick enough if I'd pick them up. Those chaps are sickening."

Badger nodded.

"They are," he agreed. "I reckon I know some of them. Don't put me on the list."

"I never have."

Badger showed grim pleasure.

"Glad to know it. All the same, you've put me in a mighty bad box."

"How?"

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"Well, you've made me seem all in the blame, While you posed as injured innocence. I hate a fellow that'll do that!"

Frank laughed.

"You exaggerate, my dear man,"

"Don't 'dear man me,' Merriwell! Don't patronize me! I won't have it! I'm as good as you!"

"At least, you think so.

"I know it!"

"Very well, let it go at that,"

"But, in your crafty manner, you've made it seem that I'm cheap. You've put me all in the wrong."

"And you're none to blame? Did you ever take boxing lessons of Buster Kelley?"

"Yes."

"And did he teach you a certain little trick whereby you might break an enemy's neck in a clench?"

"What of it?"

"I don't suppose you were thinking of me when you learned that trick?"

"I never used it."

"Because I was on, and I warned you to go slow."

"Bah! Nothing of the sort! It was because I did not care to use it. I learned it—"

"And I knew it long before you learned it. It would have been dangerous for you had you tried it on me."

"Do you think I was scared?"

Frank shrugged his shoulders, which caused Badger to grind his teeth with anger.

"You never saw the day you could frighten me, Merriwell! The reason why I never tried it on you is because it was trick—an underhand trick."

"Thanks."

"I confess that I—"

"Don't confess. I know enough about you. If you keep on, I'll begin to think I was wrong in fancying you such a honest fellow."

"And I don't care for that any whatever. Think what you like. I confess did have an idea of trying it on you when I learned the trick. After I thought I over, I said no. It was not the kind of game I wanted to play."

"Great relief!"

"If I downed you at all, I wanted to down you on the level in a way that everybody could see was fair and square."

"That would give you far more glory."

"You beat me at the shooting match by a split shot. I made the split, and you scored the same number of shots, but without the split. If I had not made the split—if that had been a fair bull's-eye—"

"I'd made one more bull's-eye than I did. Don't you know that I threw away two shots, Badger?"

"That was what galled me most. You seem to think yourself infallible. You seem to think you cannot fail at anything!"

"That's better for any man than it is for him to think he may fail."

"Rot! It is incipient swelled-head."

"It may be, but did you ever notice any further indications of the disease in me?"

"That's just it, that's where I don't understand you. I allowed you must have swelled head, but you seem to hide it most successfully. How do you do it?"

Badger was not talking as bluntly as he had intended; somehow, he couldn't bring himself round to it.

"My dear fellow," said Frank, "I hope I haven't got it. It's the one thing I have guarded against, for I've seen it spoil plenty of chaps who were all right till they caught the affliction, I confess that it has attacked me several times, but I hope I've held it in check. You were going to say something to me. What?"

"It's this: I've found out that you've done me some good turns.

"Is that all?"

"It's enough! Why should you do me a good turn? I never did you one."

"Save the time in the car, when you kept two bruisers from jumping on me, while I knocked a few corners off their companions."

"I had to do that."

"Why?"

"You were a Yale man, and those chaps were ordinary ruffians. I'd done the same for any other Yale mail."

"All right. That is settled. Go on."

"On the other hand, when Chickering's gang jumped on me one night that I was dopey, you sailed in and walloped the whole of them."

"Um!"

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"That was just after Winnie Lee threw me down because she thought I'd been doing you a crooked turn."

"Ah!"

"That was her throw-down that drove me to fill up with red-eye, I don't like the stuff! I hate it!"

"Glad to hear that, Badger, 'Wine is a mocker and strong drink is raging.'"

"I'm in earnest; I hate it. But I had to do something that night. I felt that you were the cause of all my trouble. That was the night when I cut clear of Chickering's set."

"A commendable move."

"Let up. I told the whole gang what I thought of them, and then I stowed away more red-eye. I don't remember much about anything after that."

"You would have made an excellent 'horrible example' at a temperance lecture."

Badger scowled. He did not like to be told this, and he felt heartily ashamed.

"I don't allow that it makes a fellow any more manly to get drunk," he snapped.

"There are lots of chaps who seem to think it does."

"Well, I'm not one of 'em. Next morning after quitting Chickering's gang, I woke up and found I'd been thumped. When I thought it over, it seemed to me that you did the job. I seemed to remember that you and your gang jumped me."

"When you were loaded? Oh, Badger! And that after our little bout when both were sober."

"Don't tell me you could have done it alone! I know you got the best of me in that scrap. What's the use to speak of it?"

"I didn't."

"You hinted; you said as much; you did speak of it! Never mind. I thought you did the job: I've thought so ever since till lately."

"Lately?"

"I found out. They were telling how they had attempted to do me when I was loaded, and how you chipped in and put 'em to the stampede."

"That was easy."

"But you might have stood still and had the satisfaction of seeing me done up by some fellows I'd associated With."

"I assure you it would have been no satisfaction."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"It would have been to some fellows. They said you got me into my room without being seen by the proctor and put me to bed."

"I did, Badger."

"And you never told about it!"

"What was there to tell?"

"Some fellows would have blowed it all over in less than twenty– four hours."

"It seems pretty hard for you to get it through your head that I'm not to be classed with 'some fellows.'"

"Still, I reckon you allowed it would all come out in time. You allowed it'd make me feel all the cheaper to know I'd been wrong all along."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes."

"Well, think so."

"But there is one thing I don't understand."

"There are several, Badger—several."

Without heeding this, Buck went on:

"You did have a chance to queer me with Winnie Lee."

"Perhaps."

"She told me so. She told me that she sent for you and asked you about me."

"Girls always tell such things."

"If you had done that, I'd never known it, as she had thrown me down already. They say you don't drink, and I've heard that you have a poor opinion of any fellow who does. You had seen me loaded, and you might have told her of that."

"Well?"

"You didn't. You even told her that you were sure I had no hand in tampering with your automobile that time when it ran away with you."

"Which was true."

"Still, without saying so direct, you might have thrown suspicion on me so that I could never have shaken it."

"Possibly."

"I know it. What you said to her fixed it so I was able to patch it up with her. I owe all that to you."

"Forget it."

"It is that one thing that has made me feel cheap."

Frank uttered all exclamation of surprise.

"You feel cheap!" he gasped. "I didn't suppose anything—"

"Don't say it. I can't understand why you did it."

"To tell you the truth, Badger," said Frank, "I can't tell myself. More than that, it has worried me some. I was not sure then, and I'm not sure now, that you are a suitable fellow to associate with Winnie Lee."

"Blazes!" grated the Kansan, looking as if he longed to jump at Frank.

"But I saw that she liked you very much," Merry went on, with perfect calmness, "and there was a chance of making a mistake the other way."

"How?"

"I might have queered you, made her miserable, and afterwards found out that I had done wrong, I've worried over it, for Winnie Lee is a fine girl, Badger. She has made up with you, and she is happy. Now, sir, see that you treat her right! If you do not, by Jupiter, I'll make you sorry you ever met her!"

Badger had his hands on his hips as Merriwell rose up before him and looked straight into his eyes. They stood there, silent, for some seconds.

"You don't have to threaten any whatever, Merriwell," said Badger, after a time, "There is not the least danger that I'll ever use her otherwise than is a gentleman uses a lady."

Frank saw that the Westerner was sincere, and he felt relieved.

"Then, no matter what may happen between us, Badger, I shall not be sorry that I did not queer you with her. That's all."

Frank sat down again.

CHAPTER V. HODGE AND BADGER.

Badger was not satisfied. He had started out to say something very stiff to Merriwell, and he realized that he had not accomplished his purpose. Somehow, even though he did it voluntarily, he felt as if Merry had forced a pledge from him. He realized that he had confessed himself in the wrong, or very nearly that, and he had meant to confess nothing of the sort. He had thought to demonstrate that Frank's apparent generosity was no more than a crafty manner of making an enemy appear at a disadvantage, and he had failed in that. Taken altogether, the Kansan was intensely displeased with himself, and not at all pacified toward Merriwell.

"I'm going," he said, "but let us have a complete understanding before I leave."

"Do," sighed Frank, and then he covered his mouth to conceal a yawn.

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"I came to your dawn party because Winnie Lee wished me to."

"What's the rise to go back to that. You said so before."

"I tried to behave like a gentleman here."

"I've made no complaint."

"But I was insulted!"

"What?" Frank was surprised.

"Just that," nodded Badger; showing his broad white teeth.

"By me?"

"No. I'm willing to try to steer clear of you in the future, but your particular set of friends are different. Now, there's that fellow Hodge—he tries to get a fling at me every chance he can. He spoke about a fellow kicking another when he was down, and he meant me. He has used his mouth freely on other occasions about me, and the limit is reached."

"You're right, Badger, the limit is reached, and I think it is time to call a halt. You have not been any too careful about what you have said, and I fail to see that you have any right to make a kick if other have talked about you. I have not taken the trouble to remember the nasty things you have said about me, as I have not considered it worth while; but you know you have said nasty things, and you cannot deny it. Do you fancy that others have no limit, but that your dignity and your feelings must be respected?"

Badger was silent, and Frank went on:

"You know what I think of you, or you ought to know. But there are a lot of puppies who copy after you, and they are the ones who have overstepped the limit. I have disregarded them in the past, but patience has ceased to be a virtue. In the future, I propose to bring some of them up with a round turn." Buck made a gesture.

"I don't care what you do with them," he said. "I am talking about myself. I'm going to settle with this fellow Hodge."

"You are?"

"I reckon."

Again Frank got upon his feet, showing impatience.

"I have a few final words to say to you, sir," he coldly remarked. "Hodge is my friend. When you strike him, you hit me. Understand?"

"Oh, I reckon! You mean that you'll chip into any quarrel between Hodge and myself. If you do, the old fight will be on between us,"

"Then you can reckon again, and this time you may be sure of you ground. You can't bully Hodge."

"As if I wanted to bully him! But he'll have to keep his mouth closed!"

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"Between you and Hodge," said Frank, "under any circumstances I should have no hesitation in making a choice. If you are determined to pick up further trouble with Hodge, you may count on it that I shall be a factor in the game. I have let you alone as much as you would permit, but when you go over the limit I become aggressive. If I were to try, I rather fancy I could make it pretty warm for you."

"Go ahead!" snarled Badger, entirely losing his self-command. "I invite it! It'll be a good hot fight, and you can bet on that!"

"Is that all you have to say? We've spent considerable time talking, and we're right where we began. It's no use keeping it up."

"I'm going," said Badger; "but I'm going to free my mind about this fellow Hodge first. I'll tell you just what I think of him without mincing matters in--"

"If you have anything to say about me, say it to my face!"

Hodge stepped into the room,

Merry's door had been slightly ajar, and Bart had heard Badger from the outside as he came up. His face was black with anger, and his nostrils dilated, as if he scented blood. He walked in with a heavy step, advanced and confronted the Westerner.

Badger had turned, his hands clenched and his square jaw hardening, while a glitter of hatred came into his eyes. And there those two lads stood, face to face and eye to eye, bitterest hatred in their hearts.

They were much alike in many ways, as, Merriwell noted now as he looked them over. Badger was slightly the thickest about the shoulders, but the resemblance was strongest in the hair, eyes, complexion and contour of their faces, Badger was more square-jawed, and there was something that seemed to indicate the bulldog in him was developed to a greater extent.

Something like a look of scornful satisfaction came to the face of the Westerner,

"So you were listening outside the door," he sneered. "Well, I reckon this is further proof of the old saying that listeners seldom hear good of themselves."

"I was not listening!" shot back Bart. "If you say so, you lie!"

Frank stepped forward quickly, in a single stride.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Badger, scornfully. "All the same, you heard."

"Because the door happened to be open a bit. Yes, I heard--heard you shooting your mouth off about me. Now, what have you got to say? I'm here; say it."

"You're one of Merriwell's followers. You've made a heap of talk about me."

"Nothing but I'll stand behind."

"Can you stand behind anything?"

"I'm ready to back up anything I've said."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"You've called me a ruffian."

"And that's exactly what you are!"

Badger's hand was lifted, and he seemed on the point of launching himself at Bart.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Frank, planting himself fairly between them. "I don't propose to have it here—in my room."

"Do you think I'll stand for his insults?" snarled the Kansan. "By heavens! I'll break his face!"

"Not here," repeated Frank,

"Somewhere—anywhere!" panted Badger.

"What are you doing with him, Merriwell?" demanded Hodge. "How does he happen to be here? Are you patching up with him? I believe you are!"

"Do you?" asked Frank, coolly.

"Yes! You've let this cur put dirt all over you, and now you are willing to be friends with him! All right; you may do what you like, but I'm his enemy now and always!"

"I'm glad to hear that," said Badger, with a harsh laugh. "I will make you look like a sick calf before I'm done with you."

"Bah!" from Hodge, "You're not built right. Merriwell, if you patch lip with this whelp, I quit you! I give you notice of it here and now! The moment you become friends with him, I am done with you! I mean it!"

"You're excited, Hodge."

"I'm not! I mean it, I tell you! I have had respect for you, but I can never have any more after you patch up with a thing like Badger!"

"Don't let that worry you, Hodge," said Badger, still sneering. "There is no danger that there will be any patching, for I have no idea of ever becoming friendly with Merriwell, no matter how much he may desire it."

Frank laughed in genuine amusement.

"You flatter yourself, Badger," he said. "Do you think you are a fellow any one could be eager to select as a friend? Oh, no! You are not popular, and you know it."

"Because I do not choose to be."

"Because you cannot be on account of your traits of character. You are conceited, and you are a braggart."

"What?" Badger looked as if he longed to turn on Merry.

"That is the truth, and you'll realize it if you will sit down and think calmly about yourself, You began the season by boasting of your abilities and promising that you would down me. You have not been able to keep your promise, but you keep right on boasting."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"I'll not listen to this! You're a right fine chap to pile insult on insult, and you two to my one!"

"I'm simply telling you the truth. I think it will do you good to hear the truth occasionally. I doubt if you ever heard it at home. You were made to think yourself the only thing that ever happened, and it has spoiled you. But for that, you might be a very decent fellow."

Badger gasped, but somehow it struck him then and there that there might be a germ of truth in what Merriwell said. However, that simply served to make him all the more furious. He did not fancy being told the truth about himself.

"Oh, you lie!" he snarled. "You lie, I say!"

"Hit him!" palpitated Hodge.

But Merry put a hand on Bart's arm, holding him in check.

"I told you, Badger," he said, his voice level and even, "that the limit has been reached. I meant it. Now you are overstepping the bounds. I am not looking for further trouble with you, and I shall let you alone as long as you do me; but if you give me any further trouble, just as true as we are standing here, I'll make you eat your words, and I'll give you something you've never yet received. That is straight from headquarters. I fancied a little time ago that, as far as you and I were concerned, we were to steer clear of each other and let it go at that; but now it seems that you are determined to revive the old quarrel between us, for all of anything that may have happened. So be it. You have your choice. I am tired of talking to you, and there is the door to my room. Get out!"

Badger hesitated, He had thought of walking out in a dignified manner, and it galled his soul to be driven.

"I have not finished all I have to say," he declared, "and so—"

"I have listened quite long enough—no, far too long! This is my room. Get out!"

"You're in a hurry."

"Yes."

"If I don't choose to go at once—"

"I'll throw you out!"

Frank Merriwell meant just what he said when he spoke like that, and Badger saw that he was preparing to make good his word. The Westerner uttered a muttered exclamation and turned toward the door, at which he paused to say:

"You are two against me, and I reckon I won't make a fight here. There is plenty of time. You, Hodge, I'll see again."

"Any time—anywhere," shot back Bart.

Then Badger went out.

CHAPTER VI. PREPARING FOR THE FINISH.

"The beastly cad!" said Hodge. "What was he doing here, Merriwell?"

"I hardly know," admitted Merry. "I was surprised when he came back after the rest had gone. He seemed to wish to say something, but I fancy his original intentions did not mature. He has bored me."

"Bored you?"

"Yes."

"Look here, Merriwell, where do you stand?"

"On what?"

"That fellow. You know he's a low brute; he's shown it a score of times, and he showed it again this morning. Still you have acted mightily queer toward him. I've almost fancied you were anxious to make him your friend."

"Have you?"

Frank's cool manner irritated Bart.

"I have! You've given me every reason to think so."

"Have I?"

Bart said something that will not be put into print.

"Have you! You know it! Why is it? He's a brute, and you know that! What do you want of him? The rest of your friends will not chum with him, you'd have to choose between the friends you have now and Buck Badger."

"There was a time when I was given to understand the same about Jim Hoocker."

Hodge winced. That was a tender spot.

"It was different with Hooker," he said. "We were wrong about that fellow, but there can be no mistake about Badger. He shows that he is right on the surface; he does not try to hide it. Nobody accuses him of being a thief, but he's a ruffian!"

"He is," nodded Frank.

"And still you—you would take him for a chum!"

"You say so, but you've never heard me say so. You may suppose anything you please, Hodge; it will make no difference with me."

"I hate the fellow; so does Browning, Diamond, Rattleton and all the rest. We have sworn never to have anything to do with him. There you are. It's a case of choosing."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"Don't let it worry you. Can't I use a fellow decent without becoming chummy with him?"

"But why should you use him decent? He's never used you that way."

"And is that any excuse for indecency on my part? Must I lower myself because he chooses to do so?"

"Oh, I don't mean that! You have such a way of putting things! Do you lower yourself when you give a man as good as he sends?"

"Lots of times you do."

"But with this fellow—he can't be kept in place unless he is crushed into it and held there. Somebody's got to do it. You've tapped him up a little, Merriwell, but that hasn't done the job. He hopes to down you at something somehow. He's looking to even that score. Bet you anything he'd come round smiling like a basket of chips if he could do you in style at something. He'd be ready enough to make friends then. What are you going to do? Are you going to let him throw you in order to have peace with the cur?"

"Not a great deal!" answered Merry, with emphasis. "I tell you now, as I told him, that the limit has been reached, and I propose to call a halt."

"How'll you do it?"

"I don't know just how. I've given him a rattling good drubbing, but that doesn't seem to end it. By Jove!"

Frank slapped his knee, an eager look coming to his expressive face.

"What is it?"

"I have it!"

"Tell me."

"You must do the job."

"I must?"

"Sure thing."

"How?"

"You must fight him!"

"I'm willing enough for that, bet your life!" exclaimed Hodge; "but that won't stop it."

"It will."

"How can it? It will make him worse. You know I had it with the fellow once."

"And got the worst of it."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"I didn't give up," said Hodge, bitterly. "He had to put me out, and then I wanted to have some more soon as I could stand on my feet, but he'd gone away with his gang."

"I know. I had my turn at him after that."

"And you put him out."

"But he was a hog, just the same as you. He wanted more as soon as he could stand."

"Don't compare me with that brute!"

"All right; but I'm going to put you against him, and you'll make an end of this business."

"I'd like it, but I don't see how I can do it. You can bet I'll try. Won't you take a turn at him after he finishes me off?"

"He isn't going to finish you off."

"What?"

"Not a bit of it," assured Frank. "You're going to do him this time. I don't like this business, and you know it. I hate fighting. It's brutal. But in this world there are lots' of human animals who never know their places till they are knocked into them. Badger is one."

Bart's eyes glowed and his nostrils dilated again, like those of an animal that scents its prey.

"I'll fight him!" he panted. "I've got good reason to do it! I know I shall have to do it anyway! But I've been afraid it might make it worse if—if—"

"If he got the best of it; but he won't..."

"He did before."

"Because I wasn't there, Because you were not prepared for him."

"Prepared?"

"Yes. You will be this time."

"How?"

"I had it with him, and I noted all his weak points. Spurred and fooled with him long enough for that."

"What good will that do me?"

"All kinds."

"I don't see it."

"I am going to give you lessons."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"In what?"

"Getting at Badger's weak point. I am going to show you just how to do it."

Bart's face glowed.

"Will you?"

"I will. In less than a week I'll have you so you can do him in a fair and square set-to."

Hodge felt like hugging Merry.

"Oh, if I can do it!" he cried. "That will take him down."

"Exactly; it will squelch him. If I'm not mistaken, it will put an end to his bragging and swelling around. I hate to do it—I hate to plan anything of this sort, but the case demands it. He has reached the limit, and I'm going to stop it—or rather, you are."

"If I do, I'll owe it all to you. I'll swallow everything I've said about you."

"Don't have to, old man. I understand you better than you understand yourself. I think I understand Badger, also. He'll not stand out at the fence and blow himself any more after you have finished with him."

"Are you sure you call put me on so that I can do it?"

"Hodge, let me tell you this: Badger knows something about fighting, but you are more scientific than he."

"Sure?"

"Sure, my boy. But you have to keep your head. That's where you fail lots of times. You lose your head, get blind, and try to rush the other fellow off the earth. That's what whips you."

"I know it," admitted Bart; "but I can't seem to keep cool, the way you do. I've seen you fight like the devil and smile all the time. I don't understand that. I can't do it."

"No, and you never will. We are different. But I wish to tell you some more things about yourself. You never could keep cool at anything till I took hold and steadied you. You got angry and lost your head at baseball, football, any old thing."

"That's right."

"Now, with me in the box, you are a wonder behind the bat."

Hodge attempted to say that Merry was making it pretty steep, but Frank, both hands on the shoulders of his chum, said:

"You are a wonder. Everybody acknowledges it, and I know it. You are the best man I ever tossed a ball to."

Bart's pleasure showed in his face, but now he could not say a word.

"That is because I steady you—I help you keep your head. You do not fly off the handle. Am I right?"

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"You are."

"Very well. Now I am going to teach you how to get at the weak point of this man Badger, and then I am going into the fight with you. I am going to be your second. I am going to hold you steady every moment of the time with my influence. I am going to keep you cool, and you are going to give Buck Badger the worst licking he ever received. That's the way we'll put an end to this foolishness of his."

Hodge actually laughed!

"Merriwell," he cried, "I know you'll do it!"

"You'll do it, Hodge."

"No; it will be you. I feel confident now. I shall feel you there close at hand all the time, and your will power will control me. I shall knock Buck Badger out!"

"That's the way I want you to feel. Never feel any other way for an instant, no matter how hard he may give it to you. Keep your confidence, but do not let over-confidence spoil you. He's a bulldog. You know that."

Hodge was tingling all over. The thought that he was to whip the boasting insolent Westerner filled him with savage joy.

"When will you begin giving me lessons?" he asked.

"As soon as possible."

Bart ran to the wall and ripped down a set of boxing gloves.

"Now!" he shouted.

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he smiled; "but only a little. I'll show you a blow I want you to practice."

They put on the gloves, sparred a moment, and then Merry bit Bart a peculiar swinging blow that landed on the neck just over the jugular vein: He did not strike hard, but the blow made Bart dizzy.

"Just note how I did that," instructed Merry. Then he went through all the motions again, opening Bart's guard with a feint, and showing how he got that queer swing in to land as it did.

"Now," said Frank, "I've found that Badger always opens up on that feint. All the same, you must not try it too often, but you must make it count when you put it in. The first one may set him giddy and cause him to drop his guard. Then you can put him out with one right on the point of the jaw. That's all."

He took off the gloves, and Bart did the same. Then Hodge prepared to leave.

"We'll end it, Merry," said the dark-faced lad, confidently. "I see the finish of Badger."

"Confound such business!" muttered Frank, when Bart was gone.

CHAPTER VII. CAMPUS GOSSIP.

And so it happened that Merriwell gave Bart instructions in that particular line every day, and Bart caught on rapidly. Hodge was given his turn at trying to get in the blow on Merry, and Frank kept him at it till he was pretty skillful.

One day Bart went at Frank in earnest, getting rather excited in his efforts.

"Keep cool," Merry advised. "Remember what I've told you."

"This way?" asked Hodge, feinting.

Merry guarded.

"And this way?" inquired Bart, cracking Frank a dandy on the neck.

Merry gasped.

"And like this?" breathed Hodge, swinging full and fair on the point of Frank's jaw.

It was a surprise, and Frank dropped.

Just then the door banged open, and in trooped Stubbs, Browning, Diamond, Rattleton and Jones. They saw Hodge standing over Merriwell, who was down on the rug, and they stopped, their eyes popping in amazement.

"What's this?" squealed Stubbs,

"Ye gods!" grunted Browning.

"Merriwell—down?" muttered Diamond.

"Wonderful!" said Rattleton.

"How have the mighty have fallen!" droned Jones.

"Come in," laughed Frank, as he got up. "Just giving Hodge some pointers, you know."

"Looked like it," said Browning,

"What was he giving you?" grinned Stubbs.

"He can't do it again!" declared the loyal Rattleton.

"What's up?" asked Diamond.

"Merriwell was down," said Stubbs.

"Go on," they all urged.

Frank Merriwell's Limit

But both Frank and Bart took off the gloves and declined to continue the bout. There was a great deal of guying, which Frank took laughingly. Hodge protested that it was an accident, but Merry said it was an accident well planned. When he was alone with Bart again, he said:

"You're getting there, old man. You did it fair and square. I was dropped nicely."

"Oh, but you weren't expecting me to hit so hard. You opened up to give me a chance to get in the blow."

"Nothing of the sort," asserted Merry. "Don't know how it happened, but I didn't open up intentionally. If you do it as slick is that with Badger, you'll have him—you'll do him."

Hodge was impatient. He wanted to find occasion to pick up the quarrel with the Westerner right away.

"No," said Merry. "Let him bring it on, that will put him in the wrong. He'll give you plenty of show in time."

"But why is he keeping so blessed still?" asked Bart.

"Is he?"

"He is. Why, he hasn't opened his clam since that morning in your room. I expected he would hold forth on every and all occasions. What does it mean?"

"You say."

"It can't be that he's decided to quit, can it?" asked Bart, fearfully. "That would be a wretched shame."

"It may be."

"I won't have it!"

"What will you do?"

"I'll have him to force his hand."

"If you do, I'll withdraw."

Bart was hot in a moment.

"All right!" he cried. "I can manage that. You've shown me his weak points, and I'll go to him whether you stick by me or not."

"You won't."

"Eh?"

"You'll need me behind you when you go up against him, and you know it. If I'm not there to hold you steady, you'll lose your head and get the worst of it. Don't be a fool, Hodge."

"Thanks! But what if the beast keeps corked up and never gives me a show?"

"That will be the end of it."

"You mean that I can't fight with him?"

"Not without putting yourself in the wrong. If Badger has concluded to be decent, we must let him alone. I'll not sympathize with anybody who tackles him."

Hodge was desperate.

"You're a queer one, Merriwell," he said. "You know this fellow has rubbed dirt over us, and now, simply because he chooses to close his face and pretend that he does not know we are on earth, you are willing to let him off. As for me, his manner of ignoring me is even more insulting than his bragging."

Frank could not repress a smile.

"You're the same old Hodge," he said. "You've got to get over it, my boy. You ought to be able to hold your head just as high as this Badger."

"But I'm not. He knocked me out! I can't forget that! It's been a sore spot ever since, and it is sorer now than ever. It's all right for you to talk about holding up your head, for you did him up. With me it is different."

Frank could not help sympathizing with Bart, for he understood the proud, sensitive spirit of his friend; and still, if there was to be a fight, bruiser fashion, he wished the blame to rest entirely with the Kansan.

"I think he'll give you chance enough in time. It's my opinion that he can't keep still long, for he is a natural braggart. It hurts him to keep still."

"Well, Merriwell, I'd do almost anything for you, and so I'll wait; but I'm impatient."

"We'll keep up the practice all the time."

Thus it went on, and Hodge grew more and more skillful under Frank's teaching.

But now a queer thing happened. It became known that Merriwell and Hodge were practicing boxing in Frank's room, and the story got out that Hodge had knocked Frank down. That set everybody wondering, and it produced discussions. Hodge—why, how could he do such a thing? Badger had whipped him, and Badger had proved easy fruit for Merriwell.

The fence took it up. Football was over, and interest in the baseball team of the coming season was not fully aroused. The men had to have something to talk about.

"It's a fake yarn," declared Bell Halliday. "Hodge isn't built right to do it."

"Who invented the story?" asked Puss Parker, in derision. "He ought to be shot!"

"There were witnesses," asserted Bob Brewster.

"Name one," commanded Phil Porter.

"Bink Stubbs," said somebody.

Then there was a shout of scorn.

"Did it come from him?" asked several.

"It did."

"Then it's a canard."

"Somebody ought to wring Stubbs' neck!" exclaimed Pink Pooler.

"I'd like to see the man who can do it!" piped Stubbs himself, appearing on the scene.

Then he was seized by a score of hands and dragged into the midst of the throng.

"Don't tear the clothes off a fellow!" he cried. "I didn't say I'd like to see you all do it; I said one man. Put one man up against me, and I'll lick him if he catches me before I get away!"

"Look here, you little prevaricator," said Bob Brewster, confronting the little chap threateningly, "What's this tale you've been telling about Merriwell and Hodge?"

"Dunno. What is it?"

"You said Hodge knocked Merriwell down when they were boxing in Merriwell's room.

"Yep."

"You know that's rot."

"You go to—down below! Its straight goods. I saw it."

"Alone?"

"No."

"Who else?"

"Browning, Rattleton, Diamond, Jones—we all saw it. Opened the door and walked in just as Hodge dropped Merriwell."

"Alas," said Jones, as he slowly walked into their midst, "he speaks the sad, sad truth."

Then he corroborated Stubbs' story, whereupon there was wonder and amazement to no small extent. It caused the tongues of the gossips to wag all the more freely, and Bart Hodge was looked upon with added interest and respect.

CHAPTER VIII. HOW IT CAME ABOUT.

Coming along the corridor Frank heard some one say:

"It's true. Merriwell hath both tho the girlth on the twing. He hath made love to them both, and they are all bwoke up over the cad. They thay he's a wegular devil the with the girlth, and he'll fool Mith Burrage and Mith Bellwood, jutht the thame ath he hath the otherth."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

Then Merry had Lew Veazie by the collar, having caught him in the midst of set of college gossips, who were listening to his stuff, ready to spread it.

"You miserable little wretch!" exclaimed Merry, his eyes flashing. "I'll teach you to talk about ladies your dirty tongue is not fit to mention!"

Then he whipped Veazie over his knee, face downward, and proceeded to give him a good sound spanking.

Lew kicked and squawked:

"Help, fellowth!" he cried. "Don't let the big brute murder me! Take him off!"

But those fellows had no heart to tackle Frank Merriwell, and they slunk away in a hurry, leaving Veazie to his fate.

Frank did the job to the queen's taste, and Veazie bellowed lustily.

"Oh—oh dear!" he cried. "Don't—pleathe don't! You are hurting— oh! ow! I beg your pawdon! I—ow! ow!"

He sobbed and choked.

"There," said Frank, as he stood the caddish little wretch on his feet, "that's just a taste of what you really deserve, and it's a warning, of what you'll get if I ever hear you mention those young ladies again! You have told your dirty stories about me till you have reached the limit, along with the rest of your set. Go tell them what has happened to you, and tell them what has happened to you, and tell them I'll serve them one and all the same if they give me reason."

Then Frank let him go.

Of course it was known in short order that Merriwell had spanked Veazie, and it began to be evident that Frank had tired of ignoring the malicious foes who sought to injure him by their gossiping tales.

Hodge was rejoiced when he heard of it.

"Merriwell has awakened," he said, "and there is bound to be something doing now, when he gets started, he clears the atmosphere for a while."

Chickering's crowd, to whom Veazie belonged, was very indignant. They talked it over in Chickering's room, amid the perfume of musk and the odor of cigarettes.

"He had to pick out the smallest man he could find," said Tilton Hull, his collar holding his chin high in the air, as usual.

"It's a good thing he didn't try it on me!" grated Gene Skelding, his vest unbuttoned to show the broad expanse of his new pink shirt.

"What would you have done, Skeld?" asked Julian Ives, patting his bang down on his forehead.

"I'd—I'd killed him!" declared Gene, as savagely as possible.

"I didn't have anything to kill him with," said Veazie.

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"Why didn't you get out your knife and cut him?" asked Skelding.

"I didn't have anything but a little penknife, you know."

"Poor Merriwell!" said Chickering. "He is just a low, common brute. I'm sorry for him,"

"Rot!" said Ollie Lord. "Poor Lew! Think of being spanked! It's awful!"

"It ith awful," sighed Veazie, snuggling up to Lord and putting an arm round him. "The fellow's hand hurt Wretched, I never wath hurt tho bad before."

"What are we going to do about it?" solemnly asked Hull. "It's an outrage we can't overlook."

"What can we do?" asked Ives. "Lay for him—sandbag him!" grated Skelding.

"That's all right," said Hull; "but he's a bad man to try that on. I fear we'd not make a success of it alone."

"If we had a good man to go with us—a fighter."

"But we haven't," sighed Lord; "and Merriwell is a fighter."

"Oh, you're all afraid of him!" sneered Skelding.

"I don't suppose you are?" asked Ives, sarcastically,

"No! He's an athlete, and I'm no match for him. I know that, but I'm not afraid of him. I'd like the chance to crack him with a club."

"Will you take a hand in this, Chickering?" asked Hull.

Chickering looked nervous.

"You don't suppose," he said, "that we might fail and that he would—he would—ah—serve us all the way he served Veazie?"

It was ludicrous, but not one of them smiled. The fear that Merriwell might spank them all in turn seemed to settle on them, Skelding was the only man that ridiculed it.

"But," said Chickering, "I think Skelding is right in saying we need a fighter to go with us. Where can we find one? If you think it is absolutely necessary to administer chastisement to Merriwell, let's go about it in the right way."

"There's Badger," said Lord.

"He called me a hypocrite," said Chickering.

"He called me a puppy!" squawked Veazie.

"He insulted me," said Hull, with attempted dignity.

"And he said I was sickening!" murmured Chickering.

"Said I was crooked," grated Skelding.

"But he can fight," they all admitted.

Then they looked at each other in silence. After a time Hull added:

"And he hates Merriwell."

"He came to us after that," said Ives, "and wanted us as witnesses against Merriwell when he thought he had the fellow in a snap."

"And we gave him the slam down when we found he was off his trolley on the affair," muttered Skelding. "We told him he was too cheap for us to associate with. I think that settles it as far as Badger is concerned."

"I don't know," murmured Rupert, "Lots of time has elapsed since then. He hasn't too many friends, and he may be ready to join with us again. Let's try him."

They talked it over, and finally decided to approach Badger. Thus it happened that Buck was stopped by them that day on the open campus, and he listened to them in grim silence, while they proposed to back him in anything against Merriwell. When they had finished, he gave them a shock.

"You're an ornery set of scabs, the whole bunch of you!" said the Westerner with scorn. "I've had my fill of you and your like! If I knew you could do Merriwell, I'd not join you. Instead of that, I'd go to him and warn him to look out for you, you set of snapping, mongrel curs!"

Skelding ground his teeth together.

"I knew it!" he hissed. "Badger's been broken by Merriwell, and he's turned crawler. He'll be wiggling round after Merriwell with the others after this."

"You're a liar!" said Badger, coarsely. "I have no more to do with Merriwell than with you! You can bet your pile on that!"

"Then," said Ives, "it's because Merriwell will have nothing to do with you."

"You're another!" retorted Buck, "It's because I don't choose."

"You're afraid of him!" sneered Skelding. "I know you've been keeping still lately. He's taken all the nerve out of you. You don't dare open your face."

"I dare knock the stuffing out of you if you don't close yours! Dry up!"

"Come away, fellows," urged Chickering.

"We don't want a fight with the low ruffian. He's been cowed by Merriwell, and all the college is talking of it. I've heard twenty men declare that Badger doesn't dare say his soul's his own while Merriwell is round."

Then they walked away, leaving Badger in a very unpleasant frame of mind.

"I wonder if that is what the men do think," speculated Buck, when he was alone in his room. "I suppose it is. It must seem queer that I keep so still. I'm in the habit of expressing any mind. I can't stand it long."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

He walked up and down, fancying that the students were saying all sorts of things about him behind his back. He could not endure being regarded as a coward; nothing could gall him more than that.

"I'll show them!" he finally muttered, mopping the sweat from his face. "I did think I'd keep still and let Merriwell alone. After I thought the whole thing over, I began to believe I was in the wrong, and it made me fancy I'd change my course; but I'm in so deep that I can't turn back now without being called a coward. Somehow, it seems that I've got to fight Merriwell or knuckle to him, and a Badger never knuckles to any man."

So the spanking of Veazie caused a change in Badger's course of action.

CHAPTER IX. A MISHAP TO RATTLETON.

Frank was starting for a walk out into town when Harry Rattleton overtook him.

"Hold on, Merry," he cried, "and I'll wake a talk with you – I mean take a walk."

"If you get your feet tangled the way you do your words, you'd not be able to walk," laughed Frank.

It was a crisp mid-winter day, and the air was exhilarating. They walked along with swinging steps, their shoulders thrown back and chests expanded.

"This is the sort of weather to put ginger into a man," said Merry. "Fill your lungs, Harry."

"I'm, doing it," assured Rattleton. "This air is great—simply great."

"It is," nodded Merry, "I don't see how any fellow can round up and let his chest sink in such days."

"Lots of them do."

"I know it. Whenever I see one, I feel like going up to him and giving him a lecture. There are lots of fellows who never fill their lungs with good fresh air. Some of the air cells are never expanded. Those cells need exercise in order to remain healthy, just as much as any part of the body. Without proper exercise, they become weak and useless. When they are weakened, they cannot resist disease, and then the fellow gets a bad cold, and it settles on his lungs. He begins to cough and he finds he cannot throw the cold off. His vitality is weakened, and then follows consumption. All this comes about because he does not walk with his shoulders back, his chest expanded, and give his lungs the proper exercise."

"There are some fellows in college who need to be told this."

"That's right, and some fellows have been told so by me. College men will spend all their time plugging make terrible mistakes. I do not object to any man because he is a grind, but I feel like telling him, 'My poor fellow, you are losing more than you are winning.' To-day, it has become understood generally that work of body and work of mind must go together in order to accomplish the best results."

"That's all right."

"Neglect either body or mind, and the result is a failure. The man who makes himself a grind and neglects his body comes out of college weakened physically, possibly with shattered health."

"Then what's he good for?"

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"He is not fitted to fight the battle of life, for I am satisfied that life is a battle. A man can't step out of college and into a fine paying position just because he happened to stand at the head of his class."

"He may have a pull."

"That's different. I mean a man without influence. Therefore, the fellow whose body is weakened is easily buffeted about when he gets into the battle of life. Perhaps he meets with rebuff after rebuff. He finds he is not fit physically for the struggle, and he loses heart and gives up. He makes a failure in life, though he was such a brilliant success in the college class room. Then chumps who think they know it all rise up and say he was overeducated. They even assert that he failed because he had a college education. Such fellows make me a trifle languid!"

"How is it you think about all these things, Merriwell?" asked Rattles, looking at Frank wonderingly.

"Why? It's natural, it seems to me, for any one to think about them."

"Some fellows don't seem to think about anything."

"I know. It seems to hurt them to think. Chickering's set, for example. Never mind then. As I was saying, the fact has become recognized that in order to properly succeed in the battle of life a man should not neglect the education of his body. There was a time when college were sneered at and joked about. The comic papers were full of jokes about the chap who went to college to learn football. The faculty of the college looked on athletics askance. Things have changed in later years. Now athletics are encouraged, and they are considered a part of the college life, which is a very good thing. "

"Jove! Merriwell, you're making me feel guilty."

"Am I?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

"Well, I know I have not been taking regular exercise of late.

"Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've got to brace up, old man. Now get your chest out and fill your lungs. Draw in a deep breath. Fill the upper part of your lungs, as well as the lower. Don't you know you can fill part of your lungs and let a part remain idle? Expand the upper part of your chest."

"Whew!" breathed Harry. "If I have to expand any more than that I'll bust."

Frank laughed.

"Now this is only once. Keep it up as we walk along. Draw in good, deep breaths, and let them out slowly—slowly. That's the way. To finish with, take a long breath and hold it. See how many you can count while you field it. That will be the test to show you whether you are progressing. Little by little, you will be able to count more and more."

"I believe I'll try it every day. Seems to warm a fellow up all over."

"Sets your blood to running warm. Quickens the action of your heart without artificial stimulants. A fellow drinks whiskey and it makes his heart beat swiftly, and thus it seems to warm him up. Let him exercise properly, breathing deeply, and he accomplishes the same result, but without the false exhilaration of intoxication."

"Is this to be a temperance lecture?"

"Oh, no. I'm exercising my mouth now."

Frank laughed, and Harry exclaimed;

"Badger's beginning to exercise his again."

"Is he?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Heard him."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Where?"

"Fence."

"What was he doing?"

"Bragging, same as usual."

Frank smiled in a singular manner.

"Hodge will be pleased," he said.

"What?" asked Harry, surprised. "Why should he be pleased?"

"Never mind. Something will happen if Badger has started to talk. Where are you going, Rattles?"

"To the laundry."

They were out in town now, and walking along one of the principal streets. Suddenly they came face to face with two young ladies, whom they recognized. Frank lifted his hat, and so did Harry. Alas for the latter!

As Rattleton lifted his hat, there was a shower of soiled linen. Collars and cuffs rained down about him and fell on the sidewalk, to his horror and dismay.

Frank realized what had happened, and he repressed his laughter with difficulty. The girls were forced to smile, for Rattleton was ludicrous in his horror and dismay. A small boy pointed him out and shouted to another:

"Come here, Chimmy, an' see der duck dat's sheddin his lawndree! Hi! hi!"

Harry made a scramble to gather up the stuff which had fallen on the sidewalk. Some of the collars actually seemed to wiggle in an effort to avoid him. Some of the cuffs rolled into the gutter.

"Last time I'll ever harry my linen in my cat—I mean carry my linen in my hat!" spluttered Rattles, scrambling after the elusive stuff.

When he had gathered it all up, he crammed it into his hat again, yanked his hat onto his head with both hands and started off on a run, deserting Merriwell, for he could not bear to face the smiling girls.

CHAPTER X. THE OPPORTUNITY COMES.

The girls were Stella Stanley and Winnie Lee. Frank had paused to speak with them.

"Oh, dear!" laughed Winnie, looking after Rattles' fleeing figure. "The poor fellow! But what a funny place for him to carry his soiled linen in! Why do you suppose he did it?"

"Got hard up for collars and cuffs," explained Merry, "and decided to hustle them out to a laundry. Didn't want to be seen carrying a bundle, so he tucked them into his hat. Forgot he had the stuff there, and you witnessed the result. He'll not get over it for a week. Poor Rattles!"

"I wanted to see you," said Winnie.

"Did you? Am I such a sight, then?"

"No; don't flatter yourself. It's not about you. It's about Mr. Badger. "

"Oh, dear me!" Frank laughed. "How disappointed I am!"

"Oh, yes! And you have two girls who are all gone on you."

"So many?"

"You know."

"Those are not all," laughed Stella Stanley. "We had to guard him the season he was on the road to keep the girls from stealing him. They all wanted him."

"Now you are putting it on thick!" said Frank. "I protest! But what about Mr. Badger?"

"He—he called last night," said Winnie.

"Did he?" smiled Frank. "Is it a quarrel, or a wedding?"

"Neither. But he told me all about the talk he had with you in your room and about Mr. Hodge coming in."

"Ah! Told his side of it, I presume."

"I believe he told me the truth."

"Oh, yes, of course. Haven't a doubt of it. Go on."

"He said that he was more than willing to let bygones be bygones as far as you are concerned, but that others will not let him alone. He says Hodge has sneered about him, and other men have insulted him to his face."

"My dear Miss Lee, let me tell you that Buck Badger is easily insulted. He is worse than Jack Diamond, if possible. Sometimes he seems waiting for somebody to say something that he can construe as an insult."

"Oh, but I'm sure he is not that way now!" exclaimed Winnie, in distress, "All he wants is to be let alone. If the fellows will let him alone, he will not bother them."

"Without doubt he thinks so when he is with you, but there are other times, you know."

"But won't you help and encourage him—please! He needs help. He must have it. You have helped so many fellows."

Frank shook his head soberly.

"I'd be glad enough to do it, Miss Lee; but Mr. Badger is one who will receive nothing of the sort from me."

Winnie was sorry. She had hoped that Badger and Merry would become friends, and, after the dawn party, she had believed her desire was to be realized.

They talked about it there on the street for some little time, but Winnie was not fully satisfied when they parted.

When Frank returned to the college grounds he saw a gathering of fellows in front of Durfee. Coming nearer, he saw something of an exciting nature was taking place. He quickened his steps and made his way into the throng, hearing the voice of Badger.

"You're another one of Merriwell's adorers," the Westerner was saying."

"You're always ready to lick his hand, like a whipped pup. I've heard that you were his enemy to start with, but that he gave you a good licking, and you've been crawling round after him ever since. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Frank knew well enough to whom the words were spoken. He felt that Bart Hodge's time had come.

"You're a liar by the clock if you say I crawl round after any one!" was the hot retort, in the voice of Hodge.

Smack—crack!

Two blows, a writhing mob, and then Merriwell was in their midst.

"Stop!" cried Frank, thrusting them apart. "Not here!"

"Not here!" cried others.

"Anywhere!" panted Hodge.

"Steady," whispered Frank in his ear. "You have what you want, now keep your head."

It was remarkable how swiftly the hot-blooded fellow calmed down.

"Mr. Badger," rang Bart's voice, like the clang of iron, "you struck me, sir!"

"I did, I reckon," flung back the Kansan, "You bear the mark on you cheek."

"I demand satisfaction!"

"All you want!"

"Where? When?"

"Name time and place."

"To-night at Crocker's."

"With gloves?"

"Bare fists—bare fists!" panted Bart, a greedy glitter in his eyes.

"Oh, all right," said Badger, off-hand. "I was trying to spare you a little disfigurement, that's all."

"Don't worry about me. You'll have all you want, I promise you that."

"Is it settled?" asked Frank.

There were those who were astonish that Merriwell made no move to interfere. Of course he knew how Hodge had been handled on the former occasion when he went against Badger, and so it seemed strange that he was willing to permit such a close friend to be thrashed again by the fighting Westerner.

Ten minutes later Bart was walking up and down Merry's room, his dark face gleaming with a look of satisfaction.

"Got him!" he cried. "He brought it on himself, too."

"Tell me," urged Frank, sitting down.

"Not much to tell. Have been keeping watch on him. Knew he could not keep his month closed forever. Saw him in the crowd by the fence. Mingled in just in little to hear him giving our whole set a going over. Then I chipped, and he hit me. But I got back at him, and I'll bet he carried my mark."

All Hodge's fighting blood was up, and he paced the room like a raging tiger.

"What a beast you are!" said Frank, half admiringly. "You love to fight!"

"I enjoy it when it's a fellow like Badger."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

"Now, Hodge, you must remember all I have taught you."

"I will."

"Keep in your head every moment that you are to play for his weak point."

"I will."

"And knock him out—knock him out!"

"I will!"

Bart was confident, and he was fairly palpitating for the time to come. Frank sprang up and got down the gloves once more.

"Put them on," he directed, giving a pair to Bart. "I want to see how you can spar when you are excited in this manner."

Bart put them on, and they were at it directly. Hodge seemed to fancy that he was facing Badger, and he gave Frank a good hot scrimmage for a few moments.

"Go at him that way to—night, with the same dash and coolness, and you'll put him out in the end," declared Frank. "But don't wind yourself. Keep that it mind. He may play to wind you—."

"You'll be there," said Bart. "If you see I am hitting it up too hard, pull me down. "

"I'll do my best,"

"You are going to win this fight for me, Merriwell," said Bart. "That's why I am so confident, I know that you will have influence enough to hold me right just when I need it. And I'm in the best trim possible. Never felt so good before."

"You seem to be in the pink of condition."

"I am. Feel of that arm. How is that leg? My wind is all right."

"Hodge, you'll put up the fight of your life to—night, and this is where Mr. Badger is brought to a sudden halt."

Just before nine o'clock that evening the college men who were onto the affair came pouring into the private gym, where the bout was to take place. The doors were locked immediately after Badger and Hodge arrived. Then there was stripping and preparing for the fray.

Odds were ten to one Badger. That is, it stood that way at first, but a few men gobbled up everything in sight. It seemed remarkable that any one could have confidence enough to risk a dollar on Hodge at any odds. Badger had defeated him once and all who saw it declared Bart was "easy" game.

Donald Pike was Badger's second. He laughed at the idea that Hodge would stand a show.

"Buck will put him out in thirty seconds," said Pike.

There was a surprise in store for the majority of those present—a great surprise.

CHAPTER XI. THE TRICK TURNED.

The fight was on, Stripped to their waists, the enemies faced each other in the roped-off space. The owner of the gym. had insisted that four-ounce gloves he used; but a man may be knocked out in a hurry with gloves of that weight.

Pike and Merriwell were watching their men. Crocker was the referee.

Badger advanced with confidence in his sneering smile. Bart's face was like stone.

They sparred a bit, and then Badger attempted to press Hodge. Bart gave ground, watching like a hawk.

The spectators began to offer advice.

"Corner him, Badg."

"This is no sprinting match."

"Did we come to see a long-distance race?"

"Brace up, Hodge."

"Yes, brace up; it'll all be over in a minute. Just let Badger get one good crack at you."

Bart's ears seemed deaf. He continued to give ground till Buck ran him into a corner. Then there was a sharp exchange of blows, and the Kansan attempted to close in.

Right there Bart carried out Frank's instructions, and Badger was knocked down.

The spectators rose to their feet and howled. This was the beginning of the astonishment.

Badger got up quickly, and again he found Hodge wary and watchful. He was astonished by the coolness of the fellow, for Bart had appeared quite different on the former occasion.

Badger had learned a lesson. He began to realize that Hodge was in this to win, and he settled down with more earnestness. If he had thought to make a spectacle of Bart, he gave up that idea then.

Hodge showed himself clever in feints, parries, counters and ducks. He fought a good defensive battle, but Badger seemed all the time on the offensive. At the close of the first round the Westerner got Bart in a tight corner and hammered him pretty hard.

Bart's nose was bleeding when the round finished, and he looked rather bad as compared with Badger. He sat on Merriwell's knee, permitting the blood to be sponged off, and quietly said:

"I have him, Merriwell. Never kept so cool in a fight before, and I can see that it counts. All the time, when anything happened to excite me and make me lose my head, I could feel you here, even if I could not see you, and it held me steady."

"Good boy!" whispered Frank. "He thinks he has you because he set your nose bleeding."

Frank Merriwell's Limit

Bart smiled cruelly.

"Who minds that! I'll do him a worse turn in short order when the time comes!"

They faced each other again, and Hodge continued his defensive style of fighting. That led Badger on for a while, and Bart seemed getting the worst of it.

"This round ends it," declared Donald Pike. "Badger is going to get in the knock-out."

Browning, Rattleton, Diamond and others of Merriwell's set were there. They looked on ruefully, for they were not in the secret.

"Hodge is getting licked!" panted the Virginian. "It's a shame! I didn't suppose Merriwell would permit this."

"I feel hot enough to slip into the duggle—I mean dip into the struggle," spluttered Harry.

"If I were in condition," rumbled Browning, "I'd have a go at the fellow after he does Hodge."

The second round was drawing to a close, and still Badger did not seem quite able to put Bar out. Suddenly the style of the fighting changed. Hodge seemed to go into it with snap and vim, and it was fierce for a few moments. In those few moments, Buck Badger was again sent to the floor, and once more the spectators were brought up shouting.

When the round was over there was a buzz of excitement. Somehow, it seemed that more than one of those fellows began to suspect something and from ten to one the odds on Hodge changed to two to one.

"Push him a little, next time, Bart," advised Frank. "You have him worried now."

"I know it. That's what I've been playing for," said Hodge.

Don Pike pretended to be laughing as he talked to Badger, but Frank fancied Pike was wondering how the affair would turn out.

Pretty soon Badger and Hodge were called to face each other again. Evidently Badger had been instructed to go in and make short work of it, for he rushed Hodge a little at first, and Bart was hammered pretty bad. However, he did not seem to mind it at all. His face looked bad, but he kept coming for more, with his eyes open for the right opportunity. Twice he was dropped to his knees, but he recovered before he could be counted out.

Badger did the rushing at the first of the round, and Bart took his turn later. He went into it with all his peculiar dash and vim, and the Westerner found himself "up against it." The scene threw the spectators into the wildest excitement, and once Hodge seemed to be losing his head. In the midst of the uproar, a voice reached his ears:

"Steady!"

It was Merriwell, and he was steady enough after that. Of a sudden, he saw the very opening he wanted, and he took advantage of it. Badger received a crack on the neck that made him blind and caused him to lower his hands. Then Hodge swung with all his strength and landed the point of the fellow's jaw.

Badger dropped like a log and lay there. The excitement was intense while he was slowly counted out.

Frank Merriwell's Limit

It was all over, and Hodge had whipped the Westerner. "It was more than an hour before the fellow recovered from that jolt enough to get his scattered senses back," said Browning. "Oh, Hodge, you're a bird!"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Diamond; "I began to fear his neck was broken! I thought he'd never come round. How did you ever hit him such a fearful slam, Hodge?"

"Oh, I happened to know a way of doing it," said Bart, with a dark, mysterious smile, looking at Merriwell, who was not saying a single word. "it's taken all the starch out of Mr. Badger," asserted Halliday. "They say he's limp as a rag, and I don't believe he'll ever shoot his mouth off any more."

"Anyhow," said Jim Hooker, "he can't say anything about Merriwell till after he has shown himself a match for Merriwell's chums."

"Let me tell you one thing," said Hodge. "I did not defeat Badger all by my lonesome self."

"Didn't?" they shouted.

"No."

"Why, how was that?"

"I had help."

"Oh, say—"

"That is on the level."

"What sort of help?"

"I was shown just exactly how to do the job by one who knew the trick."

"Who?" they asked.

"Frank Merriwell," he answered.

[THE END.]