

his former friends—their jeerings, their insults! No: it was asking too much. He would take no hand in the matter, cost what it might. But for the rest, he would say nothing

"Perhaps," he communed with himself, "something may spoil their plan. I hope so. But I haven't the heart to tell on my old friends."

Not quite satisfied with himself, he kept his way towards the village, turning the matter in his mind, and vainly striving to square his resolution with his duty.

"Ah! I know what I'll do," he said, brightening. "If Tom doesn't come back to-night before bedtime, I'll tell."

This, after all, was but a compromise with his conscience: he could not but realize that it was his duty to give word at once, and so avert all danger.

But, in spite of his desire to do better, he was still a coward. Prayer and perseverance, let us hope, will in time give him true courage.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH PERCY MAKES A DESPERATE RESOLVE.

IN the meantime, we have been neglecting Percy. Where was he all the morning? Quietly seated at his desk in the study-hall. Too much exercise had again crippled him. So stiff and sore were his legs that it was with pain and difficulty he could move at all. Entirely ignorant, therefore, of the many events narrated in the last chapter, he read page after page of "Dion and the Sibyls." Nor did he leave the study-hall till the bell summoned him to dinner in the refectory.

The afternoon was inviting. The day had become warm and bright; so Percy, instead of returning to his desk, brought his book to the yard, and, desirous of avoiding all interruption, obtained permission from Mr. Middleton to retire from the playground proper into a little shaded recess beyond the old church-building. Here, selecting a cosy corner, he was soon wrapped in the story. Percy had the faculty of so concentrating his mind as to lose himself entirely in his reading—a fact which Tom Playfair had been in the habit of verifying by picking Percy's pockets, filling them with stones, twisting his tie, and indulging in other such pleasantries, much to Percy's subsequent surprise. But on this afternoon no Tom Playfair

was about to put this power of abstraction to the test. All the same, Percy was far away from the land of the real. The shouts from the playground, the roaring of a passing train, the piping of the latest lingering birds, the occasional rumble of heavy wagons to and from St. Maure's,—these and a hundred other noises were entirely without the sphere of his consciousness. Several hours passed on. Percy was still in another land and dealing with other people.

Two boys stealing from the yard entered into earnest conversation almost within five feet of Percy, who was screened from their sight by a projecting end of the old building. As the conversation proceeded under his very ears (if I may use the expression), Percy *did* get an indistinct idea that he was not alone; but it was such an idea as one has in a dream, where, fully believing in the images presented by the fancy, one still realizes in a faint manner that one is not really awake. Hence the words of the two speakers fell upon ears that gave them no meaning. Had the boys then departed, Percy would never have been able to say positively that he had heard so much as one word.

Suddenly he was brought back from the days of Dion to his own little hour with a start; his book fell from his hand.

"Yes"—these were the words that attracted his attention—"Playfair may catch pneumonia, or something of the sort, if he's kept out all night in the frost and damp. It's almost sure to be cold to-night. I tell you, the thing is going too far. It's downright wicked—it's criminal!"

Percy recognized the voice as that of Sommers.

"Well," said the other, whom Percy failed to make out, "it's too late now to do anything. Peters has found out some way or other—he seems to know everything—that Quip and Playfair have taken an afternoon walk to Pawnee Creek. Peters and Richards and all the other fellows except you and me have gone walking with the prefect: and when the prefect stops for a rest, they'll get permission to walk about for a while. Then they've arranged to get scattered from the other boys, and pretend, when they come home, that they've been lost. But just as soon as they get away from the prefect's eyes, they're going to make for the old stone wall out on the prairie at a run. They'll fix a hiding-place there and wait till Playfair and Quip come along. Then they're going to tie and gag both of them, and if they can get a tree or post convenient they'll fasten them to it."

"I'll never have anything to do with those fellows again," said Sommers with energy. "Oh, I'm a coward! Why didn't I give a hint while there was time? But what's the use talking? If I had the morning over again, I'm sure I'd do the same thing. I *am* a coward. But what on earth are they going to tie and gag Quip for?"

"Peters insisted on it. He says that Quip will be sure to smash the whole thing if he once gets to the yard."

"Well, perhaps they won't catch them, anyhow," said Sommers. "Maybe Tom will walk home by the railroad-track."

"No, he won't. He's sure to come back along by the place where they intend waiting for him."

Peters has found out in some queer way that the two intend to explore about Pawnee Creek till about four o'clock; then they are coming back, and, on the road, intend stopping to examine some rabbit-traps which they have set near the stone wall. Peters knows just where the traps are. He's a sharp fellow."

"I'm afraid there'll be some harm done," said Sommers, gloomily. "Those fellows with Peters running them will be cruel as wild beasts. I feel that Peters has made me act that way more than once. They'll tie those poor boys so tight that they'll not be able to move a limb, and, besides the danger of passing a night in the cold, they'll be sore for weeks. Well, it can't be helped, I suppose."

Imagine Percy's terror and anxiety on hearing these words! His best friends in danger! What could he do? Here he was, unable to walk one step without pain—and Tom and Harry separated from him by several miles!

"O my God!" murmured Percy, "give me light, give me grace, give me strength." Percy had the beautiful habit of having recourse to God in all dangers and difficulties. With him prayer was a living thing, not a formality.

For several minutes he prayed and pondered, pondered and prayed; while, in the mean time, the two boys had again slipped into the yard. Finally, throwing his book to one side, he hurried, despite his stiffness, into the playground, and looked anxiously around. Only a few boys were about, none of whom he could take for a friend in counsel.

"Oh, if I could just find Donnel or Keenan!"

thought Percy. "Oh, Mr. Middleton!" he said, addressing the prefect, "can you tell me where I might find John Donnel or George Keenan?"

"They're out walking, Percy," answered Mr. Middleton, who perceived at once that the boy was in a state of unusual excitement, "and they won't be back in all probability till supper-time. It is now a little after three. What's the matter, my boy? you look troubled."

Percy stood in thought for a moment before replying. Like most students he hated anything in the nature of tale-bearing, especially if the matter could be settled without bringing his school-fellows into trouble with the authorities. It had been his intention to inform Keenan and Donnel of the state of affairs as he understood it, trusting to their tact and energy to bring Tom and Harry through unharmed. Would it be wise, he pondered, to tell the prefect? After all, he himself might set out, warn Tom, and thus avert the impending danger, without exposing his fellow-students to punishment. Besides, he felt that he could scarcely make a straight story out of what he had gleaned from the conversation. Here and there he had lost a word; and all that he could clearly make out was, that if Tom and Harry were to return home by the road they had resolved upon, across the prairies, they incurred the danger of spending the night bound and gagged in the open air. In a moment he had made his resolve. He himself, without informing Mr. Middleton of what was on foot, would defeat the plan.

Perhaps it had been wiser had Percy told all that he knew to the prefect. In grave cases it often be-

comes a duty to inform higher authorities. But he acted according to his lights. Had he realized that it was proper and right for him to reveal the scheme, he would certainly have done so. But on this occasion there was no time for the balancing of nice probabilities.

"Mr. Middleton, would you please give me permission to go out and meet Tom and Harry? I have something very important that I want to tell them."

The prefect was wondrously sympathetic with boy-feelings. He perceived at once that Percy had strong reasons for preferring his request. But being a very considerate man touching school-boy honor, he refrained from worrying the lad with further inquiries. And yet a fine instinct in regard to the thoughts and emotions of students does not necessarily supply information as to their state of physical health. Had Mr. Middleton but known how stiff and sore were poor Percy's legs, he might have taken a different course.

"Yes, you may go."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Middleton! I shall never forget your kindness. Could you please tell me the shortest way to Pawnee Creek?"

"The shortest way is across the prairie; the surest, along the railroad. But have you ever been there?"

"No, sir, but I know the direction." And Percy waved his hand so as to embrace the whole east in a general way.

"Don't trust the prairie, then: those undulations are very deceptive. Before you know it, you'll be lost, and after an hour's walking you may find

that you've been going in a circle. Better take the railroad-track. It's a good four miles, and will take you at least an hour's sharp walking."

"Oh dear! oh dear!" almost groaned Percy "and it's three o'clock now."

"Just ten minutes past three."

"Well, good-by, sir." And Percy, realizing that not one moment was to be lost, made his polite little bow, turned, and walked rapidly towards the gate leading from the yard.

His kind, affectionate heart was throbbing with suspense. What if he should miss them? What if they were to resume their homeward route earlier than four o'clock?

As he reached the gate, he heard his name called. He turned, and discovered Mr. Middleton hurriedly advancing towards him.

"Hold on one moment, Percy," said the prefect, who had evidently been pursuing some similar train of thought. "I've been thinking you may have some difficulty in finding your friends. Here is a whistle which may be of some use to you. It makes a tremendous noise, and carries to a good distance. You might try it, if you can't get sight of Tom and Harry."

"Well, if you aren't just too kind!" exclaimed Percy, his round, blue eyes and mobile lips expressing the liveliest gratitude. "Mr. Middleton, I'll love you and pray for you the longest day I live."

And with a smile and a bow, he hurried away, leaving the good prefect buried in thought.