

## CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH PERCY MAKES A BRAVE FIGHT AGAINST DISCOURAGEMENTS.

ONCE on the railroad-track, and beyond sight of the yard, Percy broke into a run. Under the excitement of the occasion, he no longer felt the stiffness in his limbs. No one looking at him now would imagine that but a few hours before he could scarcely move across the yard. For several minutes he trotted sturdily on, the quick patter of his feet being the only noise to disturb the silence; till, by degrees, his breathing, growing shorter and shorter, also lent its aid towards disturbing the solemn stillness. But he continued to hold his pace, though at every moment he panted more and more. Finally his heart began beating so violently that he became frightened.

"Oh dear, dear! What shall I do?" he murmured as he relaxed his pace to a walk. "I'm so weak and short-winded, and poor Tom and Harry in danger. Oh my dear angel, help me!"

For five or six minutes he walked briskly on,—almost every step accompanied by an ejaculation to his invisible guide for help,—till he came to a mile-stone.

"One mile passed. Only three miles more. Now for another spurt."

With a yet more earnest prayer to his attendant

angel, whom, like a Catholic boy, he really saw with the vision of trusting faith, he again broke into a run. But this time he gave out much sooner. In less than four minutes he was going at a walk. To add to his trouble and anxiety, the morning's stiffness reasserted itself. Every step was now registered in pain, and his pretty, delicate face was flushed with exertion and beaded with sweat. But his compressed lips and his steady eye gave evidence that in that poor, pain-racked frame there dwelt the spirit and the will of a hero. Did I say that every step was registered in pain? Doubtless every step was also registered in a place where pain and sorrow enter not, but where love and peace and rest are forever.

The torture increased as he went on, till the tears came to his eyes. They came, and coursed down his cheeks. But it would be useless to turn back. No one but himself could now carry out the work of warning Tom and Harry. And yet he felt the strongest of desires to throw himself down on the earth, and simply lie there. How inviting the withered autumn grass beside the track appeared to his dimmed eyes!

"Oh dear, dear!" he thought. "Surely I'm giving out. But if I give up, poor Tom and Harry will— But I *won't* give up. No, I'll walk right on; and I'll not stop so long as I'm able to move."

But notwithstanding the firmness of his resolve, groan after groan broke from his lips.

"Hurrah!" he faltered presently, "there's the second mile-stone."

As he spoke, a sudden and strong gust of wind from the north came upon him, carrying away his



hat. But of this little misfortune he took no notice. What was his hat to him now? But Tom and Harry! He again broke into a run.

Strange to say, he held his pace much longer this time than even in his first attempt. But his delicate features had become knotted with pain; his long, golden hair, the sport and plaything of the unfeeling wind, had become all dishevelled, throwing itself about his eyes, or floating wildly in the breeze. Poor child! Who, looking at him now, would have recognized in him the "mamma's darling" of the last month? In that frail, delicate body there dwelt a brave heart.

For some seven or eight minutes he had been running briskly along, when he happened to strike his foot against one of the railroad-ties. He stumbled and fell prone. A dizziness came upon him, a strong, blind, unreasoning desire to stay where he fell, to lie there and rest—rest, come what might. His head fell back; his eyes closed. A stupor was upon him. Tom and Harry's case seemed lost. A moment passed, and with a shiver his eyes opened again and consciousness returned.

"Help me, Mother Mary!" he moaned.

With a strong effort of the will, he arose and resumed his walk, his head still swimming, his heart beating more violently than ever, literally thumping against his ribs; but on he pressed.

Presently a sound—it was not a cry—of joy broke from his parched lips. The bridge—Pawnee Bridge—was in sight; far off, but still in sight.

"Oh, thank God! thank God!" he said, or rather attempted to say, for his cracked and parched lips refused to do their duty.

Alternately walking and running, he made forward with revived energy. Nearer and nearer came the bridge. Hope grew stronger, and supplied the place of physical strength. One spurt more, but a few hundred yards, and the bridge spanning Pawnee Creek would be gained.

There he was at length, panting, breathless, his hat gone, his clothes covered with dirt and dust; his unprotected hair all dishevelled, his face twisted with pain; yet triumphant in hope, there he was, leaning against the side of the bridge, his eyes scanning the country roundabout on all sides. Alas! no sight of Tom or Harry! He drew the whistle from his pocket, and put it to his lips. It gave a high, penetrating sound.

But what should he do now? Were it best to wait for a possible answer to the call, or should he move along Pawnee Creek? He decided to explore further. But here a new difficulty presented itself. The creek flowed towards the river. Should he trace its course to its mouth, or rather should he go up-stream along its windings through the prairie? He was entirely ignorant of the locality; but reflecting that Tom and Harry were to take the prairie on their way back to college, he quickly decided to go up-stream. Almost dragging himself, he moved with labored steps towards an eminence several hundred yards off on the prairie, which, he judged, would command an extensive view of the creek in its various windings. It was an agonizing progress, but love and hope spurred him on, in spite of growing languor, in spite of increasing weakness, in spite of a thousand sharp pains. Half-way up the eminence, he was



compelled to stop from sheer exhaustion ; his head seemed to be turning round and round ; he felt that he was about to fall.

"Heart of Jesus," he murmured, "strengthen me!"

Percy believed in prayer ; hence his prayers were never unheard. He again pressed on. A few painful, toilsome moments and the summit was gained. In part his expectations were realized. The eminence did command an extensive view of the stream ; for over half a mile he could descry its various nooks and bends, except where the trees lining its banks were unusually thick. But no sight of the two boys.

Percy did not burst into tears. His sufferings were too deep for such expression of grief ; but his heart grew sick. Again he swept the horizon. Half a mile from the creek, in a westerly direction, arose a prairie undulation of unusual size. Were there not two figures in it, standing out in the light of the dropping sun ? Percy could not make sure. His head was still swimming, and a mist was before his eyes. Yes, surely there must be something there ; could it be they ? But even so, they were beyond his call. He was powerless to catch their attention. What could he do ? Oh yes, the whistle. Once more he blew it, clear and loud. Was it heard ? Were the figures he perceived merely an illusion of the fancy or really his two friends ? and did they, as it seemed to him, turn at the sound ? He was sure of nothing ; but he again blew the whistle, and made a great effort to shout. Poor fellow ! his cry would not have disturbed a singing bird at his side.

His dizziness increased ; scarcely knowing what he did, he eagerly looked about him. At his feet there chanced to lie a long pole—doubtless once used by some St. Maure students on a fishing excursion. Hastily tying his handkerchief to its tapering end, he raised the rod into the air and waved it several times ; then staggered and fell to the earth senseless.