

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH PERCY RESCUES TOM AND HARRY; TOM AND HARRY RESCUE PERCY; AND A THIRD PARTY RESCUES THE TRIO.

"PERCY, old fellow, don't you know me?" Tom, supporting Percy's head upon his bended knee, was looking down earnestly into the child's face.

Percy, who had just opened his eyes, smiled with a great joy.

"Water," he whispered.

"Hurry up, Harry!" shouted Tom, turning his head towards the creek.

Harry came breathlessly up the hill with a tin can filled with water. Percy drank of it eagerly; the color returned to his pallid face.

"That's right, old boy," said Tom. "You'll be as good as new in a minute."

"Oh, Tom," said Percy, pressing his hand, "I came so near missing you."

"I should rather say you did. If it weren't for the infernal noise you made with that whistle, Harry and I would have been half-way back to St. Maure's by this time. But what on earth brought you out here, losing yourself tramping over the prairie, when any sensible boy with legs like yours would be in bed? Suppose you had missed us in the state you are in now; you mightn't have been

able to get home to-night. But I suppose something must have gone wrong. Has anybody been bothering you?"

"Oh no, Tom, the boys as a rule are very kind to me. And when they do tease me for being just a little too girlish, you know, they are so good-natured about it."

"Oh, awfully!" said Tom, sarcastically.

"I came," continued Percy, "to tell you both not to go home the way you intended, but to take the railroad-track."

Tom whistled.

"You don't mean to say," he exclaimed, "that you've nearly ruined your little legs, and half killed yourself, to come and tell us another way of walking home!"

"Yes, Tom. If you go home the way you intended, there's Richards and a lot of others—Peters, and I don't know who else—who are in hiding by this time, waiting to tie and gag you, and leave you out on the prairie all night. I was so afraid I wouldn't find you two; and I did come very near missing you; but now I'm perfectly happy."

For the first time in a long while, Tom's eyes filled. Harry Quip fairly cried.

"Well, Percy Wynn, if ever I said you weren't a real boy, I was a *fool*," said Tom, in a tone wherein energy and feeling were equally blended. "You couldn't walk a single foot without pain when I left you after dinner; and now you come four miles to help a poor idiot like me. You've almost killed yourself for us two. Oh, Harry!"

And Tom furtively wiped his eyes.

"Dear me!" said Percy, "please, *please* don't make such a fuss about it. It really wasn't so very hard, and I'm not hurt in the least. It's only because I can't stand much exercise that I gave out. Indeed, I'd gladly do much more for either of you."

"I know what a boy is now better than ever I did before," pursued Tom. "I thought I knew a lot yesterday; but now I feel as ignorant as a young calf. Oh, Percy, how could you?"

Percy arose.

"Come on, boys. I'm all right, and we can start for the college now. And really, I never was so glad in all my life. You see, I didn't hope ever to be of any use to you."

"But you are, and you were," protested Tom. "And you've taught me more than all my books."

"And I never expected you'd teach me half as much as you've done this hour, Percy," added Harry, whose emotion had sufficiently subsided to allow him to put his gratitude into words: "though, all along, you've made me do a heap of thinking, since I first met you."

These two friends were beside themselves with admiration at Percy's noble and self-sacrificing conduct. Justly to appreciate nobility, one must be noble one's self.

"But how are we going to get back?" asked Harry. "You could hardly bring yourself this far, and you've nearly the same distance to go over again."

"Oh, I think I can walk," said Percy, bravely. "It was the running which wore me out. I had less than an hour to make it in."

In silence they moved slowly towards the railroad-track.

"Oh," said Tom, clinching his fists indignantly, "if Keenan or Donnel were with us, you may be sure we'd go back the way we intended."

"It's growing colder," added Harry, reflectively, "and we're going to have a frosty night. Ugh! just think of shivering out here in the Kansas gentle zephyr, and not being able to move, or say as much as 'Howd'y 'y' do'?"

As they wended their way slowly collegewards, Percy told them how he had happened to overhear the plot against them; but his voice was extremely weak, and Tom noticed with anxiety that his steps were faltering, and at times lines of pain revealed themselves on his face.

It was now getting on towards five o'clock, and they had accomplished barely half a mile.

"Percy," said Tom, when the boy had made an end to his narration, "you're not fit to walk. You mustn't do it. Oh, I'd give anything if I could lend you my legs; they'd be in decent company for the first time."

"Don't mind me, Tom; I'm all right. Of course, I *am* a little stiff, you know. I've never had any practice at running."

"Well," said Tom, "Harry and I will lend you as much of our legs as we can. Here, Harry, get his right arm and brace him up. I'll take the other. Let's imagine we're policemen, and that we're hustling this young man off to the station."

"I wish we were policemen," said Harry as he complied with the suggestion. "Wouldn't I whistle and yell for a patrol-wagon? Oh no!"

Thus supported, Percy went on for a long time. But in spite of their assistance, his anxious friends noticed that the ghastly pallor was deepening on his face, and that sharp spasms of pain were ever and anon racking his delicate frame.

"And all this for me and Harry," Tom reflected, his eyes again filling. "If we don't do something, the boy will be ruined for life. I wish he hadn't heard of that plot. Even if I didn't manage to scratch through, I'd rather spend a week bound and tied than see poor Percy in such a state." He added aloud: "Here, let's stop one moment and take a rest."

There was a grass-covered embankment hard by, which at once suggested itself for a stopping-place.

Tom and Harry instinctively threw off their coats, and silently arranged them as a temporary mattress for the sufferer.

"Now, Percy," added Tom in his gentlest tones, as he seated himself, "lie down on these coats: you're so heated from your exertions that you'll surely catch cold if you lie on the ground. I'm sorry there's nothing like a pillow convenient, but you must make the best of my knees."

Percy smiled affectionately on Tom as he obeyed the order. He sank back, and almost immediately his eyes closed as though he were lost to consciousness.

Both boys gazed in lively anxiety on the still, calm, beautiful face. They were in the greatest alarm. To them that face was as the face of the dead.

"Harry," said Tom after a few moments of thinking, and his voice had sunk to a grave whisper,

"it's nonsense to think of Percy's taking another step. I'll stay with him here for a while, and then I'll try to carry him along the track, (oh, if I were a man for an hour or so!) and you had better start right now, and run as hard as you can till you get off to the town-road crossing the track, and try to get some wagoner to wait and give us a lift. I'll be on as soon as I can."

Without delay or hesitation, Harry set off at the pace of a foot-racer. He was an excellent runner, and, with the skill of long practice, he had no doubt that he would reach the road—a little over a mile off—within seven or eight minutes.

Presently Percy's eyes opened.

"Oh, Percy!" cried Tom. "Thank God! How are you now, old boy? Don't you feel better?"

The invalid noticed Tom's anxiety and alarm.

"Oh yes, indeedy!" he said with a bright smile.

"I think I can go on now."

"Very good, Percy. On you go."

Percy was in too weak a condition to express his surprise at the extreme novelty of the proceedings, when Tom, as if it were but a matter of every-day life, picked him up in his arms and started off for the college.

Luckily for Tom, Percy, though a year older, was very lightly built. Still he was an extraordinary weight for a boy of twelve to carry. Tom, however, was strong and enduring. Gratitude, too, and generosity came to his aid.

So onwards he moved with quick and steady stride, his countenance, though he could not but breathe heavily, fixed into a matter-of-fact expression, as though the work in hand were something

he had given himself to from early youth. Percy said nothing; but his face expressed wonder.

"Don't be alarmed, Percy; I'm not tiring myself one bit," he said reassuringly. "In fact, I rather enjoy it: I'm awfully fond of exercise, you know. I'd run with you, only I'm afraid of tripping up."

Suddenly Tom perceived through the gathering darkness a horseman coming towards them at a furious gallop. His heart beat high with hope as horse and rider drew nearer and nearer.

"Hurrah!" he said as the approaching help came within the distance of his distinct vision. "Well! did you ever hear of such a thing, Percy? If it isn't Mr. Middleton!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH MR. MIDDLETON FINDS HIS LOST SHEEP, BOTH WHITE AND BLACK.

MR. MIDDLETON it was. A few words will explain his presence.

When Mr. Kane had returned about supper-time from his walk, and reported Richards, Peters, and some seven or eight others absent, a light dawned upon Mr. Middleton's mind. He remembered distinctly the morning's incidents; he called to mind Percy's anxiety to meet Tom and Harry. Clearly there was some evil scheme on foot, which Percy had set out to frustrate.

"Mr. Kane," he said hurriedly, "will you please take the boys to supper this evening? I must make an examination into this matter at once; I fear there is something wrong going on."

Girding up his habit, he hurried over to the stables back of the college, saddled the swiftest horse, and set out with all speed for Pawnee Creek.

As his horse trotted on over the prairie, the prefect's watchful eyes caught sight of a skulking figure hastily retreating under shelter of the old stone wall. Putting spurs to his horse, he came a moment later upon the conspirators all huddled together. With a prefect's practised glance, he took them in. Every one of Mr. Kane's reported absentees was there.

"Go home at once," he said sternly. "It is now