

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

twenty minutes before supper-time. If a single one of you report late, his case will become even more serious than it now is."

Leaving the disconcerted band in a state of terror, he now took his way at more leisure, always contriving to keep the railroad in sight.

Some few minutes later, the prefect from an eminence on the prairie perceived some one running at full speed along the track. In an instant he was upon him.

"Oh, Mr. Middleton," shouted Harry, "I'm just looking for help. Poor Percy is about half-dead. You'll find him and Tom about a mile farther down the track."

"Why didn't you take him home the shorter way across the prairies, if he was so weak?" asked the prefect, hurriedly.

"Because—because Percy didn't want us to take that direction," answered Harry, evasively.

"Hum! Take a rest here, Harry, and try to get your breath before I send Tom on to join you. I'll take care of Percy."

He dashed on with increased speed, till he came upon Tom, now walking rather unsteadily under his delicate burden.

"Good boy, Tom! good boy! But you are worn out. Is Percy unconscious?"

"Oh, I'm all right, Mr. Middleton. How do you do, sir?" answered Percy in a faint voice. "Only my legs are a trifle weak."

"Can you hand him up to me, Tom?"

"Certainly, sir," said the young porter, puffing at a great rate. "He's not as bad as some dumb-bells I've lifted."

Mr. Middleton placed Percy in front of him, as conveniently as the circumstances would permit.

"Poor child!" he said sorrowfully. "It's all my fault, too. I should have remembered, when you spoke to me this afternoon, that you were in no condition to walk."

"Oh, I'm so glad you let me go, Mr. Middleton! I wouldn't have missed that walk for anything."

"Well, Tom," continued the prefect, "push on along the track: you'll find Harry, who is as much out of breath as yourself, awaiting you. Percy and I will go on ahead, and we'll manage to have a good supper ready for both of you; won't we, Percy?"

Percy smiled faintly.

"When you reach the college, go straight to the infirmary,—you and Harry. I'll persuade the infirmarian to have supper for three, and an extra one at that."

Mr. Middleton then turned the horse's head and, at a pace suitable to the delicate condition of his companion, made for the college. He drew rein at the door of the infirmary, and, descending with his charge, entered the small boys' sick-room.

"Brother, here's a boy who tried to see how far he could walk without killing himself," he said to the infirmarian, as he gently laid Percy on a bed. "He's very weak, as you see, and needs something to tone him up."

The Brother hurried into the little drug-shop hard by, and quickly returned with a small glass of light wine.

"Swallow that, boy, and you'll feel ever so much better at once. I'm glad you've come," he

continued as Percy emptied the glass, "for there's not a boy in the infirmary at present, and I'm so anxious for something to do that I've begun to feel lonesome."

"Oh, by the way," said Mr. Middleton, "you won't be so lonesome to-night, I fancy. There are two more boys, Playfair and Quip, whom I have ordered to come here. They'll be on very soon. Both of them have had a rather hard time of it helping Percy on; and as they are very tired and too late for supper, I'm sure you'll be kind enough to give them board and lodging for the night in your best style."

"That I will," said the Brother, heartily, and rubbing his hands. "They'll get such a supper to-night as they never yet had in St. Maure's."

"Excellent! Now I've quite a number of things to clear up, if possible, before night-studies begin; so I'll leave everything to you. Good-by, Percy."

"Good-by, Mr. Middleton. My sisters, no, not even my mamma, could have been any kinder to me than you have been."

The prefect smiled as he hurried out. I suspect that his haste was partly caused by the fear of being discovered in the act of blushing.

The boys had finished supper some time before, and were now engaged at play, preparatory to night-studies. But Mr. Middleton, instead of going to the yard, returned to his room, sending word through a student, whom he chanced to meet in the corridor of the main building, that he wished to see Richards.

Seating himself at his desk, the prefect buried

his face in his hands, and surrendered himself to a train of thinking.

"I'm going to find all the ins-and-outs of this matter," he reflected. "Let me put together what I know. Playfair interfered with these fellows this morning, when they set upon persecuting little Granger; and, owing to Mr. Kane's appearance on the scene, they come off worst. Then they hold some evil counsel in the yard. Whatever it is, it is something more than usually bad; for Sommers leaves them. Ah! by the way, Sommers did *not* go out with them on the walk. Then Percy came on the scene, all fright and anxiety, having evidently got some word of their machinations. He goes out to warn Tom and Harry. The conspirators don't return with their companions from the walk. I go out, and discover them all in hiding beside the stone wall. It seems clear enough that they expected Tom and Harry to return from the creek in that direction; it is clear, too, that their scheme, whatever it was, was to be carried out there; and lastly, it is no less clear that Tom and Harry, who know the walks well, would surely have come back that way had they not been warned, for it is by far the shortest and most pleasant road. Now the great question is, what were the intentions of these boys in endeavoring to waylay Tom? and, more important still, who is the real ringleader? However, there'll be little difficulty, I believe, towards getting something definite on both these points."

He had scarcely pieced out these circumstances, when there came a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Richards, crestfallen, pale, and trembling, entered.

"Well, sir. This is a pretty business. I believe Mr. Kane told you and your sorry companions this morning that you were acting like cowards. I fear that he rather understated the real fact. What have you to say for yourself, sir?"

"Really, sir, and truly, I didn't propose the plan," protested Richards. "I'm awfully ashamed of the whole matter: I am, upon my word, sir. Oh, Mr. Middleton, it never occurred to me, when I first agreed to the thing, that it would turn out to be a frosty night."

"Oho! exposure to the night air," thought the prefect; "that's something." He added aloud: "But you should have thought of it. Suppose the boys were to have contracted some grave malady from exposure?"

"Well, I objected all along to tying them and gagging them; but Peters said they'd make such a noise as to spoil everything."

"Oh, indeed!" said the prefect, who now knew all he desired. "I'll consider the case. You may go."

"But, Mr. Middleton, upon my solemn word, I'll change if you give me another chance. Indeed I will. Please don't get me expelled this time. I am sure I can do better. I never thought I should go so far. I'll have nothing to do with Peters after this; and you'll see that I'll act quite differently."

"Well," answered Mr. Middleton, really moved by the lad's sorrow and distress, "I'll try to save

you, Charlie; to-morrow we'll have a talk together, and I'll give you some advice."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do anything you think proper."

"I thought so," reflected the prefect, as Richards left the room; "Peters is the real leader. Richards is his cat's-paw. Peters must have caused these boys to believe that, on account of the large number concerned, there would be no thought of expulsion. Still he must assuredly have a strong hold on them to bring them round to so hare-brained a scheme. Certainly he is a dangerous boy. No enterprise so hazardous and wicked has come under my notice since my coming to St. Maure's."

Meanwhile, the party in the infirmary were having, as Harry Quip styled it, "a high old time." Tom and Harry, to do them justice, had capital appetites after their long excursion; and the service was indeed, as the Brother had promised, something extraordinary. How the buttered toast did disappear! and the eggs! and the jam! Well, I shall say nothing on that matter, lest the gentle reader may think I wish to slander the young trio.

The good infirmarian compelled Tom to tell the whole story over again—he had heard it already from Percy—and then called upon Quip to narrate it, which that young gentleman did with some interpolations very creditable to his imagination, but very astonishing to his hearers, who were kept quite busy contradicting him and keeping him down to facts. The Brother's delight knew no bounds.

"It's as good as a book," he said, rubbing his hands. "If I had time, I'd write it out and publish it."

Harry Quip was in great form on this memorable evening. He told funny stories until the room rang with laughter—Percy's sweet, silvery voice above the rest. Our little hero was too weak to do the meal justice, although Tom and Harry more than supplied his deficiencies in this respect. But how he did laugh! In spite of his aching limbs, he beamed with joy. When, at length, the conversation began to flag, nothing would do him but to sing a song.

"Aren't you too tired to sing?" queried Tom.

"Oh la! no. It refreshes me to sing."

"And it makes me infinitely weary," said Harry, with an eye twinkling the contradiction to his words.

"Well, here's something in honor of our host, the Brother." And Percy, with much feeling, gave Moore's beautiful "Harp that once through Tara's Halls."

The effect upon the infirmarian was marked. As he listened, his old eyes kindled with enthusiasm till they became dimmed with tears.

"Are you from Ireland, boy?" he asked, when Percy's voice had ceased.

"Not directly," answered Percy. "I've come most of the way, though. I'm from Baltimore; but my mamma comes from there."

"Well," said the enthusiastic Brother, "I didn't think any one away from the old sod could sing like that."

The talking and laughing resumed right merrily

"Boys," said Percy, when the hour-hand of the clock was hard upon the number nine, "do you know I think this is a punishment to my vanity."

"What?" asked Quip, innocently. "The supper?"

"Of course not, you tease! I mean my sore legs."

"How's that?" asked Tom.

"Well, you know I used to dance a great deal with my sisters, and I was very vain of my skill. But," he added ruefully, "now I'll never be vain of my legs again."

"After that remark," said the Brother, "I think you had all better go to bed."

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Meantime, the small boys were poring over their books in the study-hall. The study-keeper noticed, as he took his seat, which commanded a view of the whole room, that the students were restless; and although he had heard nothing of the late events, he at once inferred that something out of the common had happened.

On running his eyes down the benches, he perceived that there were several vacant seats; and taking out the "map" of the study-hall, he set about ascertaining the names of the absentees.

He was about to make a note of the missing ones, when Mr. Middleton quietly entered, and advancing noiselessly up the aisle, whispered in his ear:

"Is Martin Peters here?"

"No," said the study-keeper; "there's his seat, second bench on the second row."

Peters had run away.