

CHAPTER XII.

*IN WHICH MR. MIDDLETON MAKES A DISCOVERY, AND
PASSES A RESTLESS NIGHT.*

WHEN Charlie Richards left Mr. Middleton's room, he was a changed boy. He realized that his course thus far at college had been the downward course, and, reflecting bitterly on the events of the day, he was appalled at the depths to which he had descended.

As he reached the foot of the stairs, he noticed that the study-hall was open, and, desiring to avoid the boys for the present, he entered.

As his foot crossed the threshold, he was roused from his thoughts by the slamming of a desk. He raised his head, and found that he was face to face with Martin Peters, who, standing by the side of Percy Wynn's desk, looked very much out of countenance.

"I was just hunting for my Latin grammar," said Peters, speaking hurriedly. "Some fellow has stolen it."

"Peters," said Richards, "I'm sorry for you. I didn't mean to tell, but I was so frightened just now, when I was talking with Mr. Middleton, that I rather think I let him know you were at the bottom of this dirty business. I'm sorry that I've got you into trouble; at the same time, I'm more sorry

that I ever allowed you to run me. I've been a fool."

"Well," said Peters, in a voice strange and forced, "I guess I'll look for that Latin grammar during studies." And with an expression on his face which, in the light of after-circumstances, Richards never forgot, Peters hurried from the study-hall.

At studies that night, Charlie noticed Peters' absence at once, and, as his strange manner and remarks about the loss of the Latin grammar recurred, a horrible suspicion flashed upon his mind.

Whilst he was still under the influence of this horrible suspicion, Mr. Middleton, whom he had seen enter the study-hall and speak with the study-keeper, advanced to his side.

"Richards," he whispered, "do you know anything about Peters?"

"No, sir. Just after leaving your room I came in here, and saw Peters. He said he was looking for his Latin grammar, and that some one had stolen it."

"Was he looking for it in the desks?" continued Mr. Middleton.

"Yes, sir; at least I think he was. When I came in he was closing one."

Mr. Middleton advanced on tiptoe to Peters' desk, threw the cover up, and glanced over the books.

Peters' Latin grammar was there.

Mr. Middleton's face remained unchanged; he knew that nearly every eye in the study-hall was fastened on him.

He returned to Richards' place.

"What desk was he closing when you entered the room?"

"Percy Wynn's, sir."

"Very good. Now, my boy, please go outside the study-hall, and wait for me in the passage, as I shall probably have something to say to you. You needn't be alarmed, Charlie," he added in a kindly voice, as he noticed the expression of uneasiness which came upon Richards at these words. "I have spoken to the president about your case, and all will be well."

As Richards left the study-hall, the prefect moved softly over to Percy's desk, and looked in.

Percy's tin box (nearly every boy in St. Maure's used a tin box for the keeping of letters, diaries, money, and small valuables) was open. The lock had been forced. There were in it, besides a bundle of letters, some dozen and odd photographs. The letters were untouched; the photographs had been torn into halves—the photographs of Percy's mother and sisters.

"Poor Percy!" thought the prefect. "He'll feel this more than the loss of any sum of money. Could I only manage to keep him from knowing it! If I remember right, Percy had some money in this box. Yes, I'm sure of it. He spoke to me this morning about it. Peters has robbed him."

He shut the desk, and left the hall. "Charlie," he said to Richards, who was awaiting him outside, "you may suspect that Peters was in the study-hall for some other purpose. But be sure to say nothing about your meeting him here. Peters has run away. You've already guessed that, too; but keep it a secret. You may tell the

boys at recess, if they ask about him, that he's been expelled, which is a fact. Now, my boy, you may go back to your books."

After a short visit to the college president, the prefect, on returning to his room, seated himself at his desk, and fell into a brown study.

Finally he seemed from his expression to have hit upon a solution of his difficulty; whereupon he took up his pen and wrote the following letter:

"DEAR MR. WYNN: I regret to say that Percy's photographs have been torn into halves. Percy is very sensitive, and—happily ignorant of his misfortune yet—I fear it would be a shock to him were he to learn that the pictures of those he loves so well have been thus rudely treated. The tearing, it seems, has been a bit of spite on the part of a boy who, I am ashamed to say, was, up to a few hours ago, a student of our college.

"I enclose you the mutilated photographs, and beg you to send me on at once their duplicates. Percy shall never know that these his most cherished reminders of his home-life have been thus desecrated.

"Yours sincerely in Ss. Cc.,

"FRANCIS MIDDLETON, S.J."

As he directed this letter, the bell for the five minutes' recess between study-hours sounded.

He hastened to the study-hall, and, as the last boy issued into the yard, took Percy's tin box, and brought it to his room.

When he came into the playground a moment later, he found that the wind, coming from the north, was strong and biting. The boys, however,

who, under ordinary circumstances, were wont, when it changed to cold, to run and play with increased liveliness, were now for the most part gathered together in knots, and talking in low tones.

"Mr. Middleton," asked John Donnel, approaching in company with five or six of his companions, "is it true that Peters has been expelled?"

"Yes, John. I hope it may be the last boy we shall lose this year." And Mr. Middleton, taking out his hand-bell, rang it as a signal for all to return to their books.

"Gracious!" added John. "It's getting awful cold. I hope Peters doesn't stand on the platform to-night. Did he go by the six-forty-five train, sir?"

"Hurry up, or you'll catch cold, John," answered the prefect, hastening away.

But John's question haunted him for the hour that ensued. *Did Peters take the six-forty-five train?* It was an ugly night, and perhaps the wretched boy was out in it. If he had stolen a large sum of money, he would hardly dare to take the ordinary mode of travelling. Peters was old enough and shrewd enough to know that, were his robbery discovered that night, a telegram from the college would ensure detectives awaiting him at every depot from St. Maure's to Kansas City, where he lived.

In all probability, then, he had taken the road to Sykesville, a good two hours' walk. He had left the college about a quarter to seven. Hence, in this event, he could hardly have more than made Sykesville by a quarter to nine.

Mr. Middleton drew out his watch: it was within five minutes of the hour.

"In case he's walked, I hope he's at Sykesville," murmured the prefect, returning his watch to his pocket and hastening to the infirmary.

Our three friends were kneeling in prayer beside their beds, when, touching Percy lightly, he motioned him to come outside.

"Percy," he began, "how much money was in your tin box?"

"Fifteen dollars, sir."

"I'm afraid, Percy, that you've been robbed."

"Indeedy! Oh, I hope it's not a college boy that's the thief."

"I fear it is, though. Peters has run away, and it looks as though he stole the money."

"Poor fellow! I'm so sorry for him. What a queer life he must have led!"

"Yes, Percy; but the money. What about that?"

"I don't mind the money, sir. Papa will send me more. But I'm so sorry on account of that poor boy. He must be very unhappy."

"Well, Percy, please don't speak about this to any one. We must try to save his reputation."

"That's so like you, Mr. Middleton. You're always thinking out how to save the feelings of other people. I'd never have thought of that, but I'd have gone and blurted out to every one that Peters was a thief. Thank you very much, Mr. Middleton; you've given me a new lesson in kindness."

If our little friend could have seen the letter addressed to his father, now on Mr. Middleton's desk,

he would have appreciated still more the prefect's thoughtfulness.

"One thing more Percy: I have taken your box to my room. Would you object to my keeping it for a few days? The lock has been broken, and things are upside-down. I'll return it to you in good condition. Have I your permission?"

"To keep it for a few days?" said Percy, effusively. "Mr. Middleton, you can keep it for a month—for a year—*forever*."

Smiling his thanks, the prefect bade Percy a hearty good-night. Percy received his box in due time, and, I believe, does not know to this day that the photographs, which he still cherishes, are not the photographs he brought to St. Maure's.

As the night advanced, it grew colder and colder. Mr. Middleton could not banish from his mind the thought of the runaway. The more he considered, the more he felt certain that Peters had not dared to take the train. Once his imagination got working upon this impression, the prefect began fancying all manner of dread possibilities. Would Peters even venture to seek a warm shelter? Peters, he remembered, was an adept at subterfuges. It would be of a piece with his character to keep clear of anything which might lead to his being traced.

The prefect retired at eleven of the night; but his imagination would not allow him rest. Hour after hour passed, and, wide-awake and restless, he followed in fancy the steps of the wretched wayfarer.

At four o'clock, when the first gray gleaming of

dawn moved along the eastern horizon, he arose, dressed, and, leaving the dormitory, took a turn in the garden fronting the main building.

"I can't stand it. I must go after that wretched boy—God help him! Shall I awake the president?" He glanced towards the president's room.

To his joy, he perceived a light shining from the windows.

Presently he was knocking at the door.

"Come in," said the president, rising from his knees. "Why, Mr. Middleton, what are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

"Father, I can't sleep. I've been thinking of Peters all night. Somehow, I can't get rid of the idea that he may be suffering from exposure. Would you kindly give me leave to go after him? I'll be back in time for class."

The president had been scanning Mr. Middleton's face closely.

"Yes," he made answer, "you may go—on one condition."

"Name it, Father."

"That, on your return, you take the visitor's room and go to bed. I'll take your place in class, and I'll see that some one helps Mr. Kane in the yard. Of course, it's your duty to look after the boys; but it's mine to look after the teachers. You need a rest, my dear friend. Now, never mind, you needn't make any excuses. If you're not fast asleep by nine o'clock this morning, I'll send you off for a week's rest. You've been worrying too much of late, and it's telling on you."

"Thank you, Father. Now please give me your

blessing. I'm afraid I'll sleep but poorly if I don't find that boy."

Mr. Middleton fell upon his knees before him whom as a college-boy he had known and loved.

With no little fervor, his superior blessed him, and, as he rose, added kindly, "God bless you."

And the eyes of the two met in a glance which rendered further words unnecessary.

A few minutes later, Mr. Middleton was clattering along the frozen road to Sykesville. He reached the village before it was fairly light, and, to the no small disgust of many of the sleepy inhabitants, succeeded in learning that Peters had not set foot in the village.

By the time he had finished these inquiries, the dawn had grown to that sweet, soft, almost sacred light which is the immediate forerunner of sunrise. Mr. Middleton concluded that Peters was somewhere between the college and Sykesville; and accordingly he started back for St. Maure's slowly, carefully; not taking the road, but riding far and wide to right and left of the direct course, and examining every nook and recess which, in his judgment, Peters might have chosen for the night's shelter.

In this fashion, he had made about a mile and a half of his homeward journey, when he came upon three hay-stacks standing close together. He rode up to them, and, on turning to the farther side, saw Peters lying upon the earth, with his face to the ground.

Thanking God heartily, Mr. Middleton jumped from his horse, and caught the boy in his arms.

The sun was just then freeing its lower rim from the under-world, as Mr. Middleton, looking into the boy's face, gave a low cry of horror.

Peters was gagged. The fate he had designed for Tom and Harry he had met himself. Bound and gagged, Peters had spent the night in the open air!