CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH ARE SET DOWN THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A RUNAWAY.

PETERS had just torn Percy's photographs, and was about to destroy his precious packet of letters, when the entrance of Richards brought his despicable bit of spite-work to a sudden end.

On leaving the study-hall, the young thief found his way stealthily into the garden, and, sneaking along the walls of the infirmary building, crawled through a hole in the hedge-row bounding the college grounds to the northeast, and took the path along the railroad-track in the direction of Sykesville.

Mr. Middleton had conjectured aright. Peters had no thought of taking the train, no thought even of showing himself in the neighboring village. His plans were very simple. He would walk on till he had put six or seven miles between himself and the college, and would then seek some sheltered nook for the night. His manner of pressing on, by an odd coincidence, was not unlike Percy's on that very afternoon. He ran till his breath failed him; relaxed into a walk, and, when he had recovered his wind, broke into a run again.

Yes, their actions were singularly alike; but how different their motives!

The young villain, however, had been guilty of

one oversight. He had forgotten to take his overcoat along. Heated as he was with running and rapid walking, he foresaw with dread and many a muttered curse that, unless he could find a very favorable shelter, it would go hard with him.

He had made another oversight—the oversight of his pitiful life. He had not brought with him the cloak of the soul, a good conscience. The gathering darkness, the lonely night, the widespread silence, broken only by the sobs and sighings of the northern blast, filled his soul with awful forebodings. There was a sinking at his heart, a presentiment of coming evil.

An hour and a half had passed, when he saw gleaming in the distance a few faint lights from the village. Well-nigh exhausted, the boy deserted the track, and, wandering about at haphazard, peered into the darkness in search of a favorable spot for his night's shelter.

Half an hour passed by in fruitless search, and he was about to abandon his quest in despair, when hope was aroused in him by the sight of a dark object looming up in his path.

He hastened forward, and gave a low cry of triumph upon discovering that he had come upon a row of hay-stacks. He forgot his fears, his forebodings, in the joy of his discovery. All would now be well. With a little trouble, he could burrow into one of the stacks, and, crawling within, would be safe and warm for the night.

Without further ado, he began feeling about the base of the nearest stack, in the hope of finding a place already prepared. He had not proceeded far in his investigations, when, sure enough, he

came upon an opening just such as he desired. He put in his hand, but withdrew it with a stifled cry.

"Cospetto!" came a voice. "Wat is dis?" And a rough head emerged from the hiding-place.

Waiting for no more, Peters took to his heels. But the gentleman he had disturbed was one of that class accustomed to decide promptly and act quickly. Peters had not cleared thirty yards, when a strong hand closing about his neck brought him to an abrupt stop.

He uttered a cry for help.

The hand on his neck tightened its grasp, till the boy's tongue protruded from his mouth.

"Bist!" hissed the strong Italian. "You little bist, eef you make one oather ward, I weel choke you."

And turning the thoroughly frightened boy around, he conducted him to the hay-stack.

"Tim! Tim!" he whispered, "waken oop!"

"Shut your foreign mouth," came the answer from a rough-looking, unshorn man of two or three and twenty. "I'm as wide-awake as ever I was. Who's that boy?"

As the man spoke, he peered closely into Peters' face.

"I'm an orphan," chattered Peters, recovering from his fright sufficiently to lie. "I'm a poor boy with no home, and I'm looking for work. I felt so cold, I thought I might sleep here to-night. But if you'll please let me loose, I'll go on."

"Tim, what is de orphan? Does it sinyify a snick-a-teef?"

This home-thrust, random arrow though it was, sent a shudder through the boy's frame.

"An orphan, you outlandish Garibaldian, is a feller as hasn't got no mother nor daddy."

The speaker was an Irish-American, the product of the large city, bad company, and a year or two of the public school. The man to whom he spoke would have been a "patriot" in our Italy of to-day, a "socialist" in a large American city; here and now, still true to the same spirit, he was an outlaw. The former came from the land of saints; the latter, from the land of art. American civilization has yet some riddles to read.

"Make not names ata me, Tim. Dees boy stole my money last summer. I remember me hisa face."

Here Peters struggled with what strength he had left to escape the inquisitorial hand of the young American. In return he received a strong open-handed blow on the face.

"You young devil," growled the fellow, "if you make another move, or speak above a whisper, I'll strangle you!"

He continued his search in the boy's pockets, while tears, due as much to vexation as to bodily suffering, coursed down the cheeks of his hapless victim.

"Ha! I've got it! Bah! you little liar! I thought you had no money. Why, you're wealthy as a lord."

"'Ow mooch?" inquired the Italian, his dark eyes gleaming.

"Thirteen—fourteen—fifteen dollars! Why, this is a windfall. Well, young feller, we'll let you

take the hay-stack for the night. Our charges are moderate: I'll charge you seven-fifty for my share, and the yeller-face, there, will charge you the same for his share. You're in luck."

Peters sobbed and scowled in impotent rage.

"Nice-a little boy!" said the other. "We will now tie you oop, so you slip tight."

"Oh," cried Peters, finding words at prospect of this new calamity, "don't tie me! I won't tell; I give you my honor I won't tell. I'll get down on my knees and swear I won't tell."

"You can just bet you won't tell," said the native, forcing a handkerchief into the boy's mouth. "We'll not put you in under the hay, young feller," he continued, "or you'll never be found till you're starved to death. We'll leave you out here. It's pretty cold; but we didn't make the weather. Some country-jake will find you to-morrow, I reckon; and then you can tell all you like. We'll be out of danger by that time. Good-night; hope you'll sleep well." And with this, the heartless villains left the lad to the bitter exposure, to the dark, and to his own thoughts.

To his own thoughts! Thoughts of a misspent life, memories of sin and evil deeds, prospects of death—exposed, alone, face to face with an invisible God Whose mercies had seemingly been drained. Fancy added to his fears. He could almost see the demons surging about him to take his soul to hell. The forlorn creature, suffering keenly from the cold, feared, not without reason, that his death was imminent. What an awful coloring it gave to his past life! Drops of sweat, the sweat of agony, froze upon his face, as sin after sin came back to

his memory in all their horrid nakedness. As that foul procession passed in its unmasked, undisguised loathsomeness before his mind, he gradually began to entertain thoughts of despair. It was too late: his chances were past; hell now claimed him. In his heart, he was on the point of cursing himself, cursing God, when a sudden, gracious memory recurred to him.

Was it not but yesterday that Mr. Middleton, in catechism-class, had spoken so sweetly, so earnestly of God's infinite mercy? The whole scene came back with a vividness which astonished the poor fellow.

Mr. Middleton had first said a few words about the necessity of contrition, then had put questions to the boys in order to ascertain whether they had taken his meaning.

"Harry Quip," he began, "answer me this. Suppose, my boy, that you had been a great sinner since you were capable of committing mortal sin; suppose that all your sins were still on your soul; that all your confessions had been bad, and you were suddenly to learn that you were to die here and now in this very room. Would you despair?"

"No, sir," answered Harry. "I would ask our blessed Mother to obtain grace for me to make an act of contrition, and then I would throw myself upon God's mercy."

"But suppose, Carmody," continued the professor, "suppose that you had never done one single good act, and, on the other hand, suppose that you had upon your conscience all the sins that every boy now alive in the world had com-

mitted. What would you do in that case, were you to be told that you were to die at once?"

"I would confide in the infinite merits of the Precious Blood," answered Carmody.

"Joe Whyte, I will make the case stronger. With all these sins I have spoken of upon your soul, imagine yourself sinking, alone, companionless, in mid-ocean; no priest near to absolve you, no kind friend to pray with you."

Joe answered with a certain elevation borrowed unconsciously from his teacher's words. "I would try with God's grace to make an act of perfect contrition, then I would sink into the sea as though I were sinking into the arms of God; for He is everywhere."

"A beautiful answer. But, Reynolds, suppose that God, in punishment of all these your sins, were to afflict you with a hideous disease. Suppose then that your friends were to fly from you in horror, that your relatives were to cast you out to live among beasts; suppose you were dying from exposure and want, and in the very moment of death you were to ask a priest to hear your confession, and that he, horrified by your loathsomeness, were to fly from you, crying out that God had already damned you. Would you yet despair?"

"No," Reynolds made reverent answer; "with God's grace, I would not even then despair."

"But I'll make the case more desperate, Daly. While thus loathsome you are dying, deserted by the false priest, a crowd of demons come thronging about you, shrieking out that your soul is

theirs, and that they have come to drag it away. Would you then despair?"

The boy hesitated.

"I—I—think not," he answered at length.

"Quite right. But the case might be worse, Playfair. Suppose, in resisting these foul demons, that you called upon the angels of God and His saints, and they were all to answer you with one voice that it was too late. What then?"

"I wouldn't believe them, sir," answered Tom. "God's word is more to me than the words of the angels and saints."

"But suppose, Sommers, that our Blessed Lady herself were to assure you that it was too late."

"I—I'm afraid, sir, I'd give up."

"You would? Why?"

"Because Mary is too good a mother to deceive me."

"Not a bad reason. But could any one suggest a different answer?"

There was a long pause.

"I don't believe our Blessed Mother would say such a thing, Mr. Middleton," said Tom. "You've often told us she's the best friend of sinners; and I'm sure she would be the last of created beings to give a sinner up."

"But, for the sake of bringing out our point, let us suppose this impossible case, Tom. Would you despair?"

"No, sir; I wouldn't."

"Why not?"

Tom had no answer.

"Do you think our Blessed Mother would deceive you?"

Tom could neither affirm nor deny.

"Would you despair, Percy Wynn, if Mary were to tell you it was too late?"

"No, sir. Her only possible meaning could be that it was too late in case I neglected to make an act of perfect contrition; because we know from God's holy Word that as long as we live we must not despair; and He has promised eternal life and His sweet grace to all who hope in Him and love Him."

"Boys, your answers are beautiful because they are so true. Let me add two quotations from that noble spiritual writer Father Faber. 'At the day of judgment,' he says, 'I would rather be judged by God than by my own mother.' In another place he says, in speaking of dying sinners: 'God is infinitely merciful to every soul. . . . As to those who may be lost, I confidently believe that our Heavenly Father threw His arms about each created spirit, and looked it full in the face with bright eyes of love, in the darkness of its mortal life, and that of its own deliberate will it would not have Him.' Such, my dear boys, is the infinite and most tender mercy of God."

And then Peters remembered how Mr. Middleton had covered his face and bowed his head, and how every boy in the room had lowered his eyes, and a silence like the peace of heaven settled upon all; while each, saving his own wretched self, stood face to face with the most gracious truth that God has made known to man.

Then there came back to the sufferer, whose feet and arms were now numb with cold, the conversation he had held with Percy. Was there really an

angel by his side—his own angel? A great wave of divine love flooded the boy's soul, and for the first time in years he spoke to God in accents of true contrition; and even as he avowed his sorrow and his love, and gave thanks that God had thus rudely brought him to his senses, consciousness deserted him.

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When he next opened his eyes, he found Mr. Middleton bending over him. They were in the sitting-room of a small country dwelling; beside the bed stood a doctor and the lady of the house.

"Thank God, Martin, that you're alive! Had I come upon you an hour later, the doctor says, it's doubtful whether you would ever have opened your eyes again."

Obeying a sign of the doctor's, the woman advanced and administered the boy a bowl of chicken-broth.

"Poor little fellow!" she murmured. "How beautiful he looked when the Father brought him in! I never saw a face so calm and peaceful."

Mr. Middleton had himself been astonished at the change in Peters' features.

"The boy has been praying," was his comment. He had guessed the secret: the act of contrition which transformed the soul of Peters at the moment of his sinking into unconsciousness had written itself upon his features.

But the lovely look left him with his coming to consciousness. To fix an expression such as he had worn upon the living face, years of high thought and holy purpose are necessary.

But though his face was unchanged, not so his

spirit. The boy leaning upon Mr. Middleton's arm and gazing up so wonderingly into those kind eyes was not the boy of yesterday. The boy of yesterday was indeed dead.

"Little man," said the woman, "you're lucky to have such a friend as your teacher. If he hadn't taken off his own coats and wrappings, and half frozen himself to death on your account, and if he hadn't kept rubbing and chafing you, when he got here, till the doctor came, you'd not be alive to listen to me."

Peters caught his prefect's hand and kissed it reverently.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Burns is exaggerating, Martin."

"Indeed I'm not. I'm quite sure that if you've a pet among any of the boys, sir, that boy is the one, and no other."

"Mr. Middleton," whispered Peters, "can I see you alone?"

The doctor and Mrs. Burns withdrew, and in a long colloquy Peters told what was set down in the preceding chapter.

"To hear a story like that," said Mr. Middleton, "is enough to make my memories of teaching grateful to the end of my days."

Then followed a conversation in which the prefect prepared Martin for some bitter trials. Two of the poor boy's fingers, one on each hand, were to be amputated; probably two. He would be a cripple for life.

"I am willing to suffer," answered Martin, undismayed. "I have been a bad boy; I hope God will take my sufferings in payment."

"Martin, I have to tell you another unpleasant thing. You—you're not to come back to college."

"I wouldn't think of it, Mr. Middleton. It would be wrong for you to keep a known thief among the boys."

"Not known," came the answer. "Percy Wynn is the only one in the college who knows you have taken his money, and, you may be sure, he'll never speak of it. I can go even farther: Percy will forgive you the debt, and every one of our class will remember you kindly, and pray for you, when, as you have requested me, I tell them your adventures of last night, leaving out, of course, all mention of the stolen money."

"Mr. Middleton, I have not deserved this from you."

"Ah! there's another thing, Martin: be very careful, when you write to Percy, not to mention the fact of your having torn his photographs. I trust that Percy will never find that out. You and I are the only two who, as yet, know anything about that matter. Here are five dollars, my poor boy; by this evening you will be able to take the train for home. I shall telegraph your father to meet you at the depot. Now I must go. It's eight o'clock, and I'm under orders to be asleep by nine. Good-by, my friend."

Mr. Middleton held out his hand.

The boy caught it and covered it with kisses.

"Oh, I can't say it!" he sobbed. "I can't—I can't— God help me!"

Mr. Middleton was moved.

"We shall meet again," he said softly; "and I

shall remember you daily in my prayers, and, if you wish, I'll write to you."

"Thank you! thank you!" said Peters, in tones which gave the words full meaning.

"Well, good-by," said the prefect.

But Peters turned his face to the wall and sobbed as though his heart were breaking.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH PERCY FINDS HIMSELF ON THE SICK-LIST.

WHEN Percy awoke next morning, the sun was up and shining brightly through the infirmary windows. He made an attempt to arise, but discovered to his astonishment that he was scarcely able to turn in his bed.

Tranquilly resigning himself to the situation, he made the sign of the cross and recited his morning prayers; which he had scarcely concluded, when the Brother entered bearing on a tray tea and toast, eggs and beefsteak.

"What a lazy boy you are!" he said. "At your age you should rise with the lark. Jump up! put on your clothes, and take a run about the grounds and get an appetite for breakfast."

"The spirit is willing," said Percy, with a smile, "but the flesh is weak. And besides, I don't think my appetite needs so much care at present."

The Brother bolstered him into a sitting position, and set the tray beside him on a small table.

"Now help yourself."

"Brother, I want to ask you a question. Don't you think it looks queer for a boy of my age and size to go around with his hair hanging down to his shoulders."

"It's very pretty, perhaps," answered the in-