CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH PERCY FALLS FOUL OF THE VILLAGE YOUTH, AND IS COMPELLED TO "RUN THE GAUNTLET."

IT was a bright, clear, crisp afternoon in December, as three students with linked arms, and gayly facing the biting wind which brought a glow to their cheeks, set off at a swinging stride for the village of St. Maure's.

"Only two more days!" said Donnel.

"Yes," assented Keenan. "And then a great week of fun. There'll be a hard, solid frost to-night, I think; for it's getting colder all the time. If it keeps on this way, the thermometer will sneak down below freezing-point before seven this evening."

"Oh, I *do* hope so!" chimed in Percy, the third member of this cheerful party. "My skates have come, and I'm so anxious to try them."

"You have never done any skating yet, have you?" asked Keenan.

"Oh dear, no! How could I? My sisters couldn't teach me that, you know."

"Well, we'll see you through safely," said Donnel. "I can't see what use a boy has for winter if he can't skate."

"But I can slide," said Percy, modestly. "Still, I must confess I never did care much for winter."

"No wonder," Keenan remarked. "A boy who can't throw snow-balls, or even make them, nor skate, nor go sleigh-riding, nor go hunting, can't have much cause for liking freezing weather. For my part, I much prefer winter to summer."

"Indeed! you don't say! You astonish me!" Percy exclaimed.

"So do I," put in Donnel. "Give me winter, knee-deep in snow. Give me the winter winds wearily sighing, as Tennyson has it; give me—well, to come down a little bit—give me a good pair of skates, and let me go flying along a frozen stretch of river, with the wind frolicking about my ears, and the frost trying for all it is worth to nip my nose, and I'm perfectly happy."

"And give me," said Keenan, "a clear, cold winter's night, with the moon and stars shining clear and keen—ever so much brighter than in summer. Then give me the ground covered with snow, and sparkling and twinkling in the fairy moonlight; then let me hear, rising upon the silence of the wintry night, the merry sleigh-jingles or some low, deep bell, and I feel a—well, I feel just immense."

It should be remembered that our two friends are members of the poetry class. But Percy, though no poet, was by no means wanting in imagination.

"Indeed, George," he said softly, "I have often felt the beauty of such a scene as you speak of. But there is one memory which gives it a still greater charm and makes it more beautiful than any other scene. Whenever I have looked out of my window at home on such a night, another

thought has always come to my mind. The bleak trees, and the hills covered with snow, have brought back the country about Bethlehem. The bright stars have reminded me of the wonderful star that the Magi followed, and the sharp cold, the Infant Jesus, Who came to us in His love on just such a night."

"Honestly," said Donnel, "some like thought has often occurred to me—not so pretty as yours, though, Percy. And do you know, I really believe that winter, with all its bleakness and sterility, has come to be loved by thousands, not least by us boys, because around with it comes Christmas with all the love and joy and good feeling of that sacred and happy time."

"True," rejoined Keenan. "Do you remember that ode of Horace's on Winter, which we translated in class about a month ago?—

> "'Vides ut alta stet nive candidum
> Soracte, nec jam sustineant onus
> Sylvæ laborantes, geluque
> Flumina constiterint acuto'—

I forget the rest. It is certainly a beautiful ode. But how little does it show of real love for winter!—'Pile on the generous logs. Out with the yet more generous wine. Let's keep warm, and eat and drink, and enjoy ourselves by the hearth'—that's the idea of the whole ode. If Horace had but known the Christ as we do, what a grand poem he would have given us! Some of the most beautiful things in art and literature are inspired by the memory of Christ's birth."

"Yes," said Percy, "like Milton's hymn on the

Nativity, which I like very much, though I can't understand many parts of it. Then do you remember what Shakespeare says on this very subject?—

> "'Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein Our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
> The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
> And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
> The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
> No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
> So hallowed and so gracious is the time.'"

"Well, Percy," said Donnel, "there'll be no standing you by the time you get as high as the poetry-class. Even now you out-poet the poets. Where did you learn all your quotations?"

"Sister Jane, my oldest sister, used to point out passages for me to memorize."

"I wish I'd had a few sister Janes when I was young," said Keenan. "I'd know a little more."

"I've got three sisters at home," added John. "But if ten sisters could do such great work with you, you wretched small boy, I really wish now that I had twenty-seven."

Percy answered with a laugh: "Ten are very good, John, but twenty-seven might be too much of a good thing."

They were now walking along the principal street of the village.

"Well," added Percy, "I'll have to leave you now, if you're going up to the shoe-store first. I'm going in here to get some gloves and things. So good-by."

"Take care of yourself," answered Donnel.

Percy entered a dry-goods store (in which

butter, eggs, ploughs, watches, and flour were also sold), and made a few purchases. He then took a walk through the village, and, not meeting with George or John, concluded to return to the college alone.

He had not gone very far, when he descried farther up the road a gathering of people near the house of one of the village doctors. His attention was at once engaged. What could be the matter?

The doctor's house in those days—and, for aught the writer knows, the doctor may still be there—stood quite alone, being distant some sixty rods or so from the body of the village. Percy, with all the eager curiosity of youth, hastened forward. As he drew nearer he discerned that the group, as far as could be seen, consisted entirely of boys, and that they were all strangers to him. Whatever might be the object that drew them together, it was clear that they were highly amused; for they were gazing intently at some person or thing at their feet, and jeering and laughing noisily.

Making his way through the motley group, Percy's eyes were greeted with a sight which moved him almost to tears. On the ground, in a state of stupid intoxication, lay a man in the prime of life, or little beyond it, his otherwise fine, intellectual face marred by the animal expression of one under the influence of mind-stealing liquor. Any one at all observant could see at a glance that he was not an habitual drinker. Beside him, crushed and battered, lay his hat. But sad as was this spectacle of degradation, it was raised to the pathetic by the presence of another element. Kneeling beside the man, and gazing earnestly

into his face, was a pretty, well-dressed child of nine or ten, his eyes filled with tears, his cheeks pale with fright and awe, his whole countenance expressive of dismay and bitter surprise. It was the son gazing on the father's disgrace. The school-books, fallen heedlessly from his hands and lying scattered about on the ground, indicated that the child had been on his way home from the village school. The irreverent surrounders were mainly his fellow-students, their numbers slightly swelled by several juvenile idlers of the village.

"Papa! papa!" the child was sobbing as Percy came up, "come home with me. Oh, dear papa, come home!"

It seemed hardly probable that the recumbent man was at all conscious of these words.

"Shake him up," suggested a rude voice.

"Your papa's pretty drunk, Johnny," ejaculated another, unfeelingly.

"Turn the hose on him!" cried a would-be joker.

Percy's heart burned with indignation at these coarse and brutal remarks; perhaps for the first time in his life he clinched his fist with vexation.

But the poor little boy himself seemed to be entirely unconscious of these suggestions. He was alone in the world with his father; all else was forgotten.

"Oh, papa, papa!" he exclaimed in a piteous voice, "do speak to me! Are you sick, papa? Come home. It is too cold to lie here."

That these boys could laugh in the face of so bitter an experience to an innocent child may seem incredible. But such was the fact.

"Talk louder," counselled one of those unpainted savages; "perhaps the old man's deaf."

"Pull his hair, why don't you?" added a burly fellow of coarse features, who, by his swagger and general air, seemed to be a leader among the village youth.

"That's sensible advice, Buck; give him a little more of it," said a smaller ruffian, addressing the last speaker.

"Here, I'll wake him," said the individual styled Buck; and advancing, he took the man by the shoulders and shook him rudely.

The weeping child sprang to his feet, his dark eyes flashing.

"Let him alone!" he cried passionately. "He is my father. You mustn't touch him." He gave the fellow a stout push.

"I don't care whose father he is," said the callous young ruffian. "Come on, old man, wake up!"

The little lad became furious with rage. He caught Buck with one hand, and with the other tried to beat him off.

"Oh dear, dear!" cried Percy, unable to be silent any longer, and breaking through the crowd. "This is too sad. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sir," he said, his blue eyes flashing with indignation, as he addressed the rude fellow. "If you don't respect the man, you might at least spare the feelings of the boy."

Buck, heedless of the blows rained upon him by the angry child, released his hold and started back in surprise. Even the boy desisted from his attack, and turned to look in silence upon his defender. The crowd for a moment became breathless with astonishment. That a slight, fair-faced college-boy, almost girlish in form and feature, should make bold to reprimand Buck, the terror of every village-lad, was too much for their slender and poorly developed imaginations. But astonishment soon gave way to indignation, derision, and contempt.

"Oh my! what a dude!" "Go home to your mamma." "He's a college dandy." "Who let you loose?" These and a number of rude jests and exclamations were bandied from mouth to mouth; while gentle Percy, his bosom heaving with pitying emotion, stood, in the strength of his indignation, fearless and unabashed, boldly facing the burly leader.

Buck, his face purple with rage, raised his hand as a signal for quiet.

"You little fool," he growled, "what do you mean by speaking to me that way?"

Percy placed himself between Buck and the man.

"I can't bear it; I really can't," he protested. "It should move a heart of stone to see a poor boy in this sad condition. And you boys come around him, and laugh and make fun. Oh, it is cowardly!"

"Cowardly!" echoed Buck.

"It is; it is."

The bully struck Percy a heavy blow with his open palm. Percy fell, but arose quickly, his mouth bleeding.

"You may strike and strike," he said, in a low, firm tone. "But I say it is cowardly. It is! it is!"

All had now forgotten the drunken man. Even the child standing beside his father turned from his own great trouble, and stood gazing upon Percy in astonishment—and love. Of all the many eyes fixed upon our hero, his were the only ones which expressed the least sympathy.

A boy of about Percy's height, though some what stouter, now stepped from the crowd.

"You said we were cowards," he snarled. "I'm your size. Do you want to fight?"

"No, indeedy! I don't believe in fighting. Oh, but please *do* leave this poor man alone. You know it is cowardly to insult a helpless man in the presence of his son."

There was a moment of indecision.

"Let's make him run the gauntlet!" shouted one.

There followed a general chorus of assent; and Buck immediately seized Percy, who, ignorant of the nature of running the gauntlet, made little or no struggle. But the little boy could not bear to see his champion thus treated. He rushed forward and threw his arms about Percy.

"Help, help!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

"Shut up, you little sneak!" growled Buck, vainly trying to disengage the child from his hold on Percy's body. "Here, some of you fellows, pull this chap off."

The child was quickly, rudely torn away, and Percy was left in the cruel grasp of his captor. In less time than it takes to tell it, the boys closed together in a double line, facing one another, and with just a little space between. Through these two lines Percy was to make his way, receiving, as

he passed, cuffs, kicks, and such indignities as each of these cruel boys had the power and opportunity of inflicting.

"Now," said Buck, bringing him to the opening at one end of the ranks, "run right through as fast as you can."

Percy had no knowledge whatever of "running the gauntlet." Poor boy! the vile tricks of the ruder class of youth were as yet unknown to him. So he stood irresolute. But a rude push from the leader sent him stumbling in between the boys. He was at once greeted with kicks and blows from those who were nearest; and the delicate boy almost immediately fell flat to the earth. No sooner had he fallen, however, than one of the roughs raised him and pushed him on. A few steps farther and he fell again, dazed and almost stunned. He was mercilessly forced to his feet, and the disgraceful violence renewed.

Suddenly a loud shout arose, and as Percy fell to the ground for the third time, two of his persecutors measured their length beside him. Donnel and Keenan had come to the rescue.