

CHAPTER XIX.

BEGINNING OF THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS. PERCY IS CALLED TO THE PARLOR.

"WELL," said Ryan, as he gained the bridge much in advance of McNeff, "I thought you belonged to the peace-party. But you look as though you had been knocking out the small-fry of the village by contract. What's happened?"

"It seems," Donnel made answer, "that Percy left the village several minutes before us, and took it into his head to break up a meeting of some twenty or thirty roughs."

"I only told them to go away," said Percy. "They were making fun of a little boy whose father was lying on the ground—and, would you believe it? I think the man was actually drunk—so drunk that he couldn't walk. I never saw any such thing before outside of a book. But the whole thing was so cruel. I had to speak out; I couldn't help myself."

"Yes; and they'd have spoilt his chances of enjoying the Christmas holidays if we hadn't come up. You see, Ryan, they were making him run the gauntlet."

"Oh, the brutes!" exclaimed Ryan in great indignation. "Percy, you're the knight '*sans peur*.' But what's the matter with your hand?"

"I think a stone must have struck it," said Percy, holding it up. "Oh dear! it's bleeding, too."

"It's about time for you to notice it." And Ryan, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, wrapped it about Percy's bleeding fingers. "And your mouth is swollen, also," he added, "and there are marks of blood about it—and then you've a stiff ankle. Good gracious! you look uglier than myself, which is saying a great deal. Here, boys, bring him up to the college, and induce the infirmarian to put him into plasters, or he'll come to pieces. If he's attended to now, he'll be all right for Christmas. Donnel, your face is cut a little."

"Oh, I enjoy having my face cut above all things. I was just on the point of asking some one to cut it for me, when a big village tough of the name of Buck, seeing my desire, kindly obliged me. Yes," he added merrily, "I now want only one thing to complete my happiness—and that's a black eye."

"But, Mr. Ryan," put in Percy with all earnestness, "I'm so anxious about that little boy and his father. Those mean boys may return on them."

"I'll bet they don't stay long, then," said Ryan, decidedly. "You just go home, Percy, and swallow all the medicine the Brother will give you. McNeff and myself will see the man home safely, if we have to carry him."

With this promise Percy was thoroughly satisfied; and Ryan, having learnt the whereabouts of the drunken man, set off at a pace which, giving it the most dignified expression allowable, might be called very fast walking, fully determined to carry out his promise, even should he bring the whole village about his ears.

It may be added that he had no difficulty in putting his promise into effect.

The following day was December the twenty-third. In the afternoon the closing exercises of the year were held in the college study-hall. After an overture from the college orchestra, the "testimonials of excellent deportment," or "conduct-cards," were distributed. The names of the boys meriting this honor were read out in alphabetical order. When John Donnel advanced to the platform to receive his card from the hands of the president, his face, very much out of shape—"Lob-sided, isn't it?" whispered Tom to Harry Quip—there was so vigorous a clapping of hands that Donnel blushed. Keenan's appearance elicited a no less hearty applause. But when Percy Wynn, the last on the list, advanced to the platform, his face dotted with sticking-plaster, his hand bandaged, and with a perceptible limp, there arose such a cheer as had never before startled the echoes of the hall. Cheering in any room of the college was, of course, against all rule. But the president was not over-mathematical: he could make allowances. Indeed he afterwards remarked, it was said, that he felt tempted to join in himself. As for the prefects, the guardians of order, not one of them made so much as a gesture of disapproval. Nay, more: several of the boys afterwards asserted that Mr. Middleton had himself taken an active part in the applause; but this, I take it, was an exaggeration. The boys readily accepted it as a fact, however, and liked their prefect the more for it.

That Percy was fully up in his studies was evidenced by his class-standing. In English com-

position he was first, Richards second; in arithmetic, Tom first, Percy second; English grammar, Quip, Playfair, and Wynn equal; Greek, Wynn and Playfair equal; in Latin, Wynn *first*, Playfair second.

Tom shook his fist at Percy.

"You plastered-up pugilist," he whispered; "next time I teach you any Latin, it will be a very cold day, and you'll have to whistle!"

"You'll have to teach me how to whistle first, Tom."

"Not if I know myself," replied the humbled professor. "I don't care about seeing you beat me at that too."

But for all this, Tom was proud of the success of his pupil. As a slight expression of his overcharged feelings, he was known to have turned several handsprings in private; and he went about during the day, speaking of Percy as a "crippled pupil of his, who had had the impudence to beat his professor." It was the first time in a year that Tom had missed the monthly Latin medal; but he was far more gratified at Percy's earning it than he had ever been at his own success. His was too large a heart to be disturbed by petty jealousy.

The premiums all distributed to the leaders of the various classes, the college choir came forward with a pretty Christmas hymn, consisting of solo and chorus. Percy had the solo. The exhilaration of the time and place, the Christmas emotions throbbing in the hearts of his audience, the warm feelings which the kindly demonstrations of the students had awakened in his bosom—all combined to raise Percy to such a state of exaltation

that the glory and peace of that Christmas night of long ago seemed to find echo in his silvery voice. The chorus, too, animated by the fine spirit Percy had evoked, sang with a tenderness and feeling far above their ordinary efforts.

When the song was concluded, there was scarcely any applause. The religious element in its sweetest and most charming form had been touched, and the enthusiasm of it was expressed in reverential silence.

The president then made a few remarks, ending with cordial wishes for a merry Christmas to all; and presently the boys, freed from their books, were hard at it, chasing the wayward foot-ball.

Percy, in his maimed condition, was unable to join them in this sport. So he and Tom repaired to the playroom. Just as they were finishing a game of checkers, a boy came running in, with—

"Oh, I say, Percy; you're wanted in the parlor."

"Goodness! perhaps it's my mamma! Oh, it's too bad!"

"Well, you're a nice, affectionate son! The idea of beginning to growl at the prospect of seeing your mother!" said Tom, with his most serious expression.

"You know what I mean, Tom. She'll be shocked at seeing me in sticking-plasters."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother," said Tom. "You look just immense behind a sticking-plaster. If I were you, I'd wear one all the time for ornament. You might make it fashionable. It looks every bit as sensible as wearing a bang, anyhow."

"Well, I don't care about starting the fashion on mamma first. But perhaps it's some one else. In

her last letter, she wrote that she wouldn't be here before the first of January. Do you think it can be my mamma, Tom?"

"If I were you, I'd go and find out," said the malicious professor of Latin. "You might tell her that I intend to put in a bill for teaching you, with interest at ten per cent."

Percy made a few hasty changes in his toilet, and hurried over to the parlor.

It was with trembling hand he turned the door-knob. He hesitated even then for a moment before throwing open the door. But his anxiety was at once dissipated. No mamma was there, expecting to see her darling child the picture of health, freshness, and vigor. Seated beside the president of the college was a strange gentleman, his hand clasped in affectionate familiarity by a little boy, who released his clasp as Percy entered, and ran eagerly forward to meet him. Percy had no difficulty in recognizing the child as his little friend of the previous day's adventure. But he could hardly bring himself to believe that the stately, dignified gentleman before him was the drunkard of the village common.