

## CHAPTER XXI.

*IN WHICH FRANK ASKS A GREAT MANY PEOPLE A GREAT MANY QUESTIONS; TEACHES PERCY HOW TO "STRIKE OUT;" AND MAKES A CHRISTMAS SPEECH BEFORE BREAKFAST.*

THE morning of Christmas Eve—clear and cold. The sun, now risen with undimmed lustre, was making a million diamonds sparkle from frosted tree, from stunted grass, and from frozen earth. The boys, as they came running from the refectory to their yard, evinced unwonted animal spirits. The river, they were sure, was fit for skating.

While Percy was stooping over his box in the wash-room, looking up his skates, Frank entered and, sobbing as if his heart would break, flew to his side.

"Why, Frank!" Percy exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"I wish I was dead!" sobbed Frank.

This strong expression is common enough in the mouths of passionate children, and also, I am told, of young ladies given to pettishness. But Percy had never before heard so shocking a wish. He was appalled.

"Frank! Frank! don't speak in that way. You surely can't mean such a wicked thing."

"Yes, I *can* mean it; and I *do* mean it; and I *am* wicked. That's just what's the matter," cried Frank, still sobbing.

"Surely, no one has been teasing you!"

"No, they're all nice enough. But they laugh at me."

"I'm sure," said Percy, still stroking the little head—"I'm sure they don't mean any harm. Indeed, the boys who know you like you very much—all of them."

"It doesn't matter—I'm a Jew. I'm sure I am. This morning when we were in that chapel before breakfast, I talked to the fellow next to me; and he wouldn't answer—only grinned. And then when I got upon my seat and looked around, I saw a lot of the boys laughing at me. Oh, I'm sure I'm a Jew!"

Despite his sympathy, Percy was amused.

"What's your idea of a Jew, Frankie?"

"I don't know. But I'll bet it's something bad and ugly and foolish."

"Not at all: Jews may be very excellent people, though they have not the happiness of the true faith. Some of the noblest characters in history were Jews. But as for you—you don't look one bit like a Jew."

"Well, I'm a heathen anyhow," sobbed Frank with lessening grief.

"No indeed, you're not. You're my friend."

Frank did not seem, thus far, to have considered the matter in this light. He ceased sobbing, but his face still gave evidence that he had his doubts.

"Tom Playfair said I was a Jew."

"You don't understand Tom. He was only joking you know. Tom likes you immensely."

"Does he?" Frank was softening into smiles.



"Yes, indeed! But look, Frank, aren't you coming skating?"

"No, sir," answered Frank, with a relapse into gloom. "I want to stay right here and get religion."

Poor Frank had already become painfully aware of his ignorance in regard to sacred matters; and, being an earnest, ambitious child, it was the consciousness of his inferiority, in this respect, to his college companions which had brought on this burst of feeling, and fortified him to forego the pleasure of a morning on the ice.

"Can't you skate?" asked Percy, hardly able to suppress a smile at Frank's constant expression, "get religion."

"Oh yes; I know how to skate well enough. And that's why I won't go. You see, I want to learn something I don't know."

"Oh my! Can you skate?"

"Yes; of course."

For the first time in his life, I dare say, Percy indulged in a bit of finesse.

"I'm so glad to hear it," he went on; "because you can do me a great favor."

"Do you a favor?" echoed Frank, his gloom-contracted countenance bursting from apathy into full-blown interest. "Oh, I'm so glad! What is it?"

"Teach me to skate."

Frank's face put on all the wonder it could assimilate.

"What! *what!* Don't *you* know how to skate?"

"I couldn't make one stroke, Frank; I never had an ice-skate on in my life."

Frank unbent in a radiant smile; then broke into a laugh, which he kept up for some time.

"Well, if that isn't funny! And you're ever so much bigger than I am. But I'm so glad I can teach you anything, Percy; and I'm going to teach you to skate, all by myself."

Frank had now brightened up wondrously. His pessimistic views on the value of life had vanished into thin air; he moved about with alacrity, produced his skates with a certain air of dignity, and, breaking into another smile, added:

"I take it all back: I don't wish I was dead. I want to live and teach you how to skate."

"Thank you, Frank. And can you play baseball?"

"Oh, can't I!" ejaculated Frank with increasing animation.

"Splendid!" said wily Percy. "I can hardly ever hold a ball myself; and I'm very anxious to know how to do it this coming spring."

"Whoop-la!" piped Frank. "I'll teach you myself. Oh, we'll have dead loads of fun!"

This added prospect raised Frank's spirits into the uproarious. He laughed and chatted, and danced about, till Percy declared that he was like a little sunbeam; which remark flattered Frank immensely, and, if possible, made him still more lively.

"I say, Percy Wynn," cried Tom, bursting breathlessly into the play-room, "aren't you coming skating?—Why! holloa, old man!"

The "old man" referred to was Frank.

"Yes, Tom," Percy made answer, "I was just about ready to start."



"Good! I'll give you your first lesson. Aren't you coming too, old man?"

"Yes; and I don't want you to teach Percy, either."

"Depraved youth," said Tom, gravely, "is it thus you wish your friends to be treated? Of course I'll teach Percy. And I'll give you all the lessons you want, too, for nothing."

"No, you won't," answered Frank, decidedly. "I know how to skate, and I'm going to teach Percy all alone by myself."

Frank was jealous.

"Well, old sinner," pursued Tom with a smile, "won't you let me help you?"

Frank made pause, while he considered this question.

"Well," he at length made answer, "you may help, now and then, if you do just what I tell you."

"Thank you, old man; you're a jewel."

The three now set out, and hurrying forward, fell behind the foremost boys who were advancing at a smart pace towards the river.

"Tom," began Frank when the trio had swung themselves into a steady pace, "what's a sinner? You called me a sinner just now."

"Yes, but I was joking," answered Tom, who was beginning to perceive that his little friend was apt to take remarks very literally. "A sinner is a person who does very bad things. Of course you're not a sinner."

Frank pondered for a moment; then went on:

"Is a boy who hates people, and who wishes he was dead, a sinner?"

"I guess he is, if he hates them very much, and really wishes he was dead."

"Then I'm a sinner," calmly added the logical youth of ten summers, "and you were right when you called me one. But I'm going to get over it. I'm going to change. I'm going to get religion."

"You talk about getting religion as if it were put up in packages," said Tom, smiling.

"Yes," assented Percy. "But that's the way some people not of our faith talk. I've often seen it in books. They don't reform or become good; they always 'get religion.'"

As they pursued their way, Percy and Tom were kept very busy answering Frank's questions. Prayer, Mass, and a hundred other sacred matters were touched upon; and Frank was thoroughly pleased with the information he received concerning these things. Truly, after a life-long abstinence, his soul had become hungry. And when Percy, in sweet and gracious manner, told him the leading events in the history of our divine Lord, the child's intelligent face glowed with sympathetic interest.

"Are you sure that He loved little children very much?" asked Frank.

"Certain," Percy made answer. "He spoke of them so often and so lovingly. Once, when His disciples wished to keep them away from Him, He gave them a scolding, and said that in heaven all were like little children."

"Well," said Frank, with much seriousness, "I'm going to love Him back, since He loved me. And I'm going to write to my papa, and tell him the whole story; and papa will love Him too."



They were now at the river's bank.

When it came to putting on their skates, Frank was quite indignant at Tom's undertaking to assist Percy.

"No, you don't!" he exclaimed, with no little warmth. "You just go and put on your own skates. I'll attend to Percy myself."

Tom laughingly obeyed; and Frank, with a sense of importance which he made no attempt to conceal, took Percy under his own special and sole charge. When all was ready for the start, he caught Percy's hand.

"Here, Tom—Tom Playfair," he then called out, "you may take Percy's left hand; but mind you're very careful not to go too fast."

"Holloa!" cried John Donnel, dashing at full tilt into the party, and neatly stopping himself by running squarely into Tom. "I thought, Percy, I was under contract to teach you how to skate."

"Go away, John Donnel!" commanded Frank. "I won't allow it. Clear off, now. He's in *my* charge."

So delighted and so impressed was Frank with his assumed task that he would hardly allow any one to approach Percy at all. For all that, however, he was a skilful skater, and with such earnestness did he coach Percy that our hero was soon initiated into the mystery of "striking out."

"Hurrah!" cried Frank, when this important point had been gained, "ain't I a good teacher!"

"Splen—did," answered Percy as he struck out anew, and sat down very suddenly on the ice.

"Are you hurt?" cried Frank, with real concern.

"Oh dear! no; but how shall I get up?"

"Tom Playfair—do you hear me?" (Tom was trying his foot on the Dutch Roll hard by.) "Tom, come on here and help."

"First class, Percy," Tom remarked as he assisted Frank to bring the beginner to his feet. "Every skater must learn to cut a star, and you've got that down fine already."

"Where's the star, Tom?" Percy asked.

"It's gone now; but you cut it all the same."

"See here, Tom Playfair," put in Frank, who took life quite seriously, "I don't want you to make fun of Percy's skating."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Professor Burdock; but honestly you are teaching him very well."

Mollified by this compliment, the professor continued his lesson. Within an hour, Percy, who was blessed with strong ankles, found himself able to stand on his legs without help; and before a second hour had elapsed, he was able to move about unassisted. And yet the awkward figure which the naturally graceful boy presented on the ice was ridiculous to see; and I am afraid that Frank made some very rash offers to punch the heads of a few boys double his size because they dared laugh at his pupil. He was quite enthusiastic about the success of his new friend, and on the road homewards offered to bet Harry Quip any sum of money under a million dollars that, before the end of winter, Percy would be the most accomplished skater in the small yard.

On arriving at the college, Frank called Mr. Middleton aside, and with an air of mystery began:



"You mustn't tell any one what I'm going to say to you, Mr. Middleton."

"Very well, Frank."

"What I want to know, is—can you prove there's a God?"

"Yes, I believe I can."

"Will you please prove it?"

Mr. Middleton, suiting his expressions, as far as could be, to the age of the precocious sceptic, explained several of the most evident arguments in favor of the existence of a Supreme Being. With close attention, the child listened to the clear exposition.

"I see it, now, Mr. Middleton," he said, when the prefect had come to a pause. "But do you know, it seems so queer. I don't feel as if I were the same boy at all that I was two days ago. Everything looks so different. Percy told me that there was a God, but he didn't prove it. I want things proved. I'm so glad to know it's true. Mr. Middleton, I want to ask you something else. Is it bad to hate people?"

"Of course. God loves all men, and He wants us to love them too."

"Well, Mr. Middleton, would you think a boy like me, and my size, could be bad, and even wish he was dead?"

"Why not? Little boys can be wicked, as well as grown men. St. Augustine, who lived a very holy life when he had become a grown man, said of his boyhood, *Tantillus puer et tantus peccator*—'So small a boy, so great a sinner.' He was a bad boy; but got over it."

"I'm glad to know that. I was thinking, you see, that I wasn't like anybody else. I've been *horrid*."

Mr. Middleton laughed at this naïve confession.

"Oh! but I'm bad—terribly bad," protested Frank. "I'd like to shoot Buck; and this morning I got mad and wished I was dead."

"But now that you know it's very wrong, would you shoot Buck if you had the chance?"

"No—o! I wouldn't now; but I'd *like* to."

"Then it's not so wrong."

To Frank's evident relief, Mr. Middleton explained that wickedness does not consist in the way we feel, but in the yielding to our bad feelings. He showed that the inclination to do wrong is a temptation—not in itself a sin, but capable of becoming sinful by the assent of the free will. All of this he made clear by an abundance of practical examples.

"Thank you, sir," said Frank, when he had mastered the explanation. "I'm going to be good after this. Will you help me?"

"Certainly, my dear boy; and to-morrow when we commemorate the birth of the Infant Jesus, ask Him to help you, too."

"Indeed I will, sir. He loved little boys, so Percy told me, and I love Him; and I'm going to try to do something to please Him. And I'm going to write to my papa and get him to love Our Lord too."

Christmas morning dawned, ushered in by a snow-storm. According to the sweet and hallowed custom of the place, the students attended three Masses. The clear voices of the singers—faint echoes of the angelic choirs; the beautiful vest-



ments of celebrant and acolytes; the joyous decoration and splendor of the altar; above all, the fervor and devotion, which cast gleams of glory over the faces of the young worshippers, filled Frank with wonder and delight. But hardly did he take his eyes for a moment from the pretty Bethlehem crib. Quite naturally he joined his little hands in prayer for the first time, and begged the sweet Infant Who so loved little children to enrich him with feelings of kindness and good-will towards all his fellow-creatures.

As the students, at the end of the ceremonies, were descending the stairs to the refectory, Percy, catching up with Frank, clapped him on the back.

"Happy Christmas, Frank!"

"Oh, it *is* happy! I never felt so happy in all my life. Percy, your religion is mine. It's all so nice. Say: let's stop here on the stairs a moment. I want to catch Donnel and Keenan, and Harry and Tom."

Percy called these as they were passing.

Schoolboy-like, and Christmas-like, they were all happy and smiling, shaking hands with each other heartily, and speaking from full hearts those pretty words, so fitting to the time, so sweetened by precious memories.

"Boys," said Frank, earnestly, when he had at length secured their attention, "I've been praying at the Infant Jesus; and I want to join your religion. I'll never wish I was dead again; and if Buck were drowning in the river," concluded the little mite, impressively, "I'd jump right in and save him!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL.

IT was a joyful breakfast that Christmas morning. Loud were the exclamations of pleasure and pleased surprise, as each boy, on lifting his plate, found beneath it a pretty Christmas-card.

"It never happened before," remarked Harry Quip, who had been attending St. Maure's for three years. "Mr. Middleton is always getting up some nice surprise. He's a trump!"

"It makes the place so like home," Joe Whyte observed.

"But isn't it a glorious Christmas morning?" exclaimed Willie Ruthers. "The snow is falling so nicely. A Christmas without snow is like a story without an end."

"Or bread without butter," put in Joe.

"Or an angel without wings," added Donnel, who presided over this cheerful table.

"Or a cat without its meow!" chuckled Harry.

All the other tables were accommodating an equally jolly company. Loud praises of Mr. Middleton, merry greetings, jokes and jests flew from mouth to mouth; while above the din could be heard the musical voice of Percy, and the shrill, piercing laugh of Frankie Burdock, for the nonce the lightest heart of all. It was indeed a merry Christmas.