

In the opening scene, Frank, who had had no previous theatrical experience, created quite a diversion. He had been listening for some time, with ill-concealed indignation, to Scrooge's remarks; but when that hard-handed, griping, business-machine said with great disdain: "Christmas!—Humbug!" Frank could restrain himself no longer.

Mounting his chair, he stamped his foot, and angrily shook his diminutive fist at the brutal miser.

"It's a lie, you old Scrooge! And you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You're a wicked—"

The rest of the sentence was cut short by the energetic action of Tom, who, catching the indignant orator's feet, brought him down rather suddenly.

Amidst the roar that greeted this diversion, Tom and Percy explained to Frank the nature and object of plays in general; which so cleared that young gentleman's mind that he presently expressed himself satisfied, and implied that he had no objections to the performances going on.

In the dormitory that night, Frank, before retiring to rest, knelt down after the manner of his friends, and, placing before him the picture of the Nativity, clasped his hands in prayer. An hour later, Mr. Middleton, noticing that the child manifested no disposition to retire, thought it well to put an end to these lengthy devotions. On advancing to Frank's side, however, he found that the kneeling lad, worn out with the pleasures and emotions of the day, was peacefully sleeping, his lips pressed upon the picture of the "Infant Who loved little children."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE RAILROAD-TRACK.

IT would be a long task to describe in detail the varied amusements of Christmas week. Skating, dancing, the nightly play, in-door games and out-door sport, caused these days to pass on the wings of happiness and mirth.

With all this, little Frank contrived to "get religion" in time and out of time. Just six days after his arrival, he was reduced to tears, and, I regret to state, made quite a show of temper, when his peremptory request that the president should baptize him on the spot was denied. But he soon regained his calmness of demeanor, and, under favor of the president's promise that he should be baptized, once he knew his catechism well by heart, he set to work at the study of this little book with such ardor that Percy could scarcely persuade him to come out skating.

Frank very effectually prevented Mr. Kane and Mr. Middleton from becoming lonesome. No sooner did either of these worthy prefects put in an appearance in the yard than he bore down upon him and played the part of an animated interrogation-point. Like the gentlemen of the courtroom, Frank wanted "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

He was especially hard upon Mr. Middleton.

"Prove it!" he would calmly say when Mr. Middleton had advanced some simple statement which any other boy living would have taken for granted.

But beyond all doubt, he *did* master his catechism. Only as a matter of prudence was his reception into the Church delayed. Meanwhile Percy picked up so rapidly in skating that his professor could gracefully allow his pupil to shift for himself. Percy was still awkward upon the ice; but that defect, like youthfulness, is something which time alone can correct.

On the last day of the old year, an event occurred which exercised a strong influence upon Percy's character.

Shortly after breakfast, the boys went to "the lakes" for a day's skating. Early in the afternoon, Percy, feeling unwell, obtained permission from the presiding prefect to return to college. Frank wished to serve as his companion, but Percy would not hear of this.

"No, you stay, Frank. You need a little more out-door exercise. You're wearing your little brains out with that catechism. I think Tom had better come with me."

This choice of Tom had, most probably, an important bearing on after-events. They walked along the railroad-track for over a mile without meeting with any one. But just as they were about to pass over a trestle-work bridge (intended only for engine and cars) above a deep ravine, a man, who had been hidden from their sight by the steep bank, arose and, taking his station on the track, awaited their advance. He was gaunt, and haggard of face. His beard, of several days' growth,

imparted to his features a weird aspect. His eyes, deep-sunk, glittered with a dreadful light. The clothes upon him were tattered, scanty—too few, God knows, for such bitter weather. His shoes scarcely protected his feet at all. Standing there on the railroad-track, with his pinched features, shining eyes, and wretched attire, he was the picture of misery and woe.

"Oh, Tom," Percy exclaimed in a whisper, as he caught Tom's arm, "let's turn back; that man looks like a wolf. He's a stick in his hand, too. Perhaps he may attack us."

"Oh, I guess not," said Tom, coolly. "But if he starts to attack, it will be time enough to run away then."

So Tom, with Percy timidly clinging to his arm, walked boldly on.

"Good-evening," he said, as they arrived within a few feet of the wretch who was evidently awaiting them.

The man scanned them hungrily; then fastened his eyes on Percy. Percy shivered.

"Boy," he said, "what time is it?"

Percy with trembling fingers took out his watch.

"Half-past two, sir."

The man advanced a step on them. Tom drew Percy back.

"Keep off, will you?" Tom exclaimed. "I reckon you're near enough."

Upon seeing Percy's handsome gold watch, the man's features had, if possible, taken on a yet hungrier appearance.

"Hand me that watch, young fellow, and I'll let you both go."

"We've got to run," whispered Tom, quickly; and he and Percy, both thoroughly frightened, turned and dashed back towards the lakes. At once the man was after them, and the sound of his footfalls at their back inspired both boys to tremendous exertions.

"Quicker—quicker yet!" panted Tom as they sped on, not even daring to look around at their pursuer, lest they should lose ground. "I think he's gaining on us."

They made forward for some time in silence, not a sound upon the stillness save their own labored breathing and the ominous footfall behind.

Presently Tom, judging from the sound of the pursuer's feet that it would be safe, ventured to turn his head.

"Cheer up, Percy," he said. "He's falling back. At first I think he gained on us, but now he's losing awfully."

A minute passed.

Tom took another look.

"He's almost out of the race. He can't run worth a cent."

Presently he added:

"Why, he has stopped. Hold on; we're all right, Percy. He's at least two hundred feet off. Let's take a rest too."

Both turned, and, feeling that they were out of danger, took a full look at their defeated pursuer. An exclamation of surprise broke from the lips of Percy. The man's actions were certainly strange. Not only had he stopped; he had taken a seat on a railroad-tie.

"Well, I declare!" said Tom. "He doesn't take much interest in gold watches after all. Holloa!"

This exclamation was evoked by the man's lying down across the track.

"Oh, my God!" cried Percy in dismay.

"Is he out of his mind?" queried Tom.

"No," answered Percy. "I am beginning to see now. That man must be sick. Do you remember the look of his thin face, and his hollow eye? Tom, we must go to him."

Percy was now as resolute as he had before been timid.

"All right," Tom agreed. "But to make sure, I'll get something to protect ourselves with."

He quickly secured a stout stick, which he happened to perceive lying near by, and armed with this, he and Percy advanced towards their pursuer.

"Say," exclaimed Tom, when they had come within a few yards of the motionless form, "get up off the track. There may be a train along here any minute."

At these words, the man raised his head and stared at them listlessly.

"Are you sick?" pursued Tom.

"*I'm dying.*"

There was a dread solemnity about those two words which, were Percy and Tom to live into the centuries, they will never forget.

"Oh, my God!" cried Percy, clasping his hands.

Tom's tone and feelings were at once changed.

"Can we help you, my poor fellow?" he asked; and throwing aside his stick, he advanced with Percy.

The man paused, then answered slowly:

"I'm past help, I think."

Percy had been gazing at him intently.

"Oh, Tom, Tom! he's *starving!*" And Percy sobbed.

The man looked up with a bewildered air.

"*I am* starving, boy," he said.

Tom happened to have a cake in his pocket. He drew it forth and handed it to the poor creature.

"Try to eat it," he said gently and tenderly. "It's the only thing I've got, my friend."

The man accepted the gift, and made an attempt to eat. In the very act, a sudden fit of coughing came upon him, and he spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Thank you, my boy," he said feebly. "I'm past the need of bread."

"Shall we take you off the track, sir?" asked Tom.

The poor fellow, who had raised himself upon his skinny arm to receive the cake, in lieu of answer to this question fell back helplessly.

Tom, throwing off his overcoat and jacket, spread them on a patch of soft earth just beside the railroad-track.

"We must catch hold of him, and place him there, Percy," he said gravely.

They carried the poor fellow with little trouble—he was light enough—to this spot. Then Percy drew off his coat and wrapped it around their patient.

Tom would have restrained him.

"You're sick yourself, Percy," he said; "you'll risk injuring yourself."

"This is a time for risks, Tom."

The man's fierce aspect had softened.

"You're good boys—good boys," he panted. "I'm sorry. I should have asked you for help, instead of trying to rob you."

There was a moment's pause. Tom was in a brown study. Save the labored breathing of the dying wretch, there was a deathly stillness.

"Percy," said Tom at length, "are you afraid to stay alone with this poor man?"

"Oh no."

"I think he *is* dying. And it seems to me one of us should go for assistance."

"I'll stay, Tom. You are the better runner."

"Very well. I'll run to St. Maure's and try to get a wagon or something."

And Tom, at his highest speed, started across the trestle-work bridge, heedless of the danger. Danger! was there not a life in question?

So there stood Percy alone with the sick man.

"Cheer up, sir," he said presently. "Tom has run on to get assistance."

"It's too late."

"Do you really think you're going to die?"

"Yes."

Percy breathed a prayer to the Blessed Virgin.

Then he again spoke.

"Well, if you're going to die, sir, hadn't you better think of the other world?"

The man's face, thus far apathetic, became troubled.

"I'm going to hell," he said. "For the last two years I've been leading a very wicked life."

Percy dwelt upon these words.

"But you weren't always wicked?" he at length said.

"No; once I was happy and contented. Then I wasn't so bad." As he spoke, fresh life seemed to infuse itself into the man. "I was happy in a dear wife and an only child—a boy." Here the narrator raised himself on his arm, and continued with more animation. "I was what they call a 'skilled mechanic,' and received very good wages. But troubles came on between some of the men and the bosses. There was a strike. I was a member of an association, and had to go out with the rest. The strike passed away; but my work never came back. I saw my wife's cheeks grow paler day by day. I saw her face grow thinner and thinner. Then I offered myself for any kind of work. But even with the poor work and poor pay I got, it was too late. When she smiled upon me for the last time, and died of want, I gave up God."

"Oh, poor fellow!" Percy exclaimed, the tears arising to his eyes. "It was hard; but you should have prayed the more. Here—it is hard for you to rest on your hand; put your head on my knees."

Percy seated himself, and placed the man in this easier position.

"You are a good boy. I would like to say 'God bless you;' but it would mean nothing from me. As I was saying, my boy was left me—and how I loved him! and I worked, worked, worked at anything to provide for him. But the times grew worse; he died of fever. Then I cursed God."

A visible shudder passed over Percy; and while he said nothing aloud, his lips moved in prayer.

"I was almost crazed with grief," continued the man. "From that hour I hated the wealthy; I hated law; I hated order. It was wrong, I knew; but I was determined to live wicked. From that hour I became a tramp, a thief, a companion of villains and murderers. And now you ask me to think of another life? I have no hope."

"But God will forgive you if you repent."

The man considered. Percy, whose whole soul was bent in bringing his companion to repentance, noticed, even as he watched the haggard countenance, that snow was beginning to fall, silent and soft.

"I cannot hope it; no, I've lived bad, and I'll die bad."

"But think of Jesus dying on the cross," urged Percy, his face kindling with earnestness. "He shed every drop of His blood for you."

"Yes," came the groaning answer, "and I've spurned it."

In the agitation of the moment, Percy prayed aloud.

"O my God, my God! what shall I say to bring this creature to Thee?—My friend, my dear friend, on that cross, and while He was suffering so bitterly, Christ forgave a thief who had been leading a whole life of sin. Now Christ is no longer in bitter pain; He is happy. Speak to Him, my friend. You have sinned, but He will forgive you. It is impossible for you to go to confession, but do make your peace with God. You have but one soul."

The man listened earnestly. With each second the pallor upon his face was increasing; and now

drops of sweat were standing upon his brow. Even at this supreme moment, when the judgment-seat of God seemed to be awaiting an immortal soul, Percy observed that the flakes were falling faster each minute.

"Do you think He might forgive me?"

"Oh, surely! And I think He will pity and love you the more, my friend, for the very reason that you are dying like Him—under the sky, and deserted by all."

"Oh, if I could repent! I fear it is too late."

More slowly, more heavily, he was fetching his breath. The snow was falling thicker and faster. Percy realized with a sense of awe, such as he had never felt before, that a soul was, as it were, in his keeping. Suddenly his face lighted up as with an inspiration. He placed his hand in his pocket, and drew forth a small silver crucifix—a Christmas present from one of his sisters.

"Kiss it, my friend, for the love and the memory of Our Savior, Who died on the cross."

"I'm afraid to dare it," moaned the wretch with a shiver. "Oh, God! I have been so wicked. I am corrupt. Go away from me, boy! I am not even worthy to be near a pure child. I am cursed. Leave me."

In answer to this, Percy raised the dying creature's pallid head and imprinted a kiss on the forehead. "O my God," he murmured in the act, "have pity on him."

The dying man's face softened still more.

"My boy," he said, "if you are so good, God must be good too."

"Yes, yes," said Percy, eagerly; "He is infinitely good."

Every word, every breath on the part of the dying man was now an effort. About that poor creature, struggling for air and life, frolicked the madcap snow.

"But—He—knows"—he paused for a time, through sheer lack of strength, then went on—"all my sins; you don't."

"As God is looking down on us, my friend, I know that He will forgive you and love you, even were your sins a thousand times greater than they are."

A moment's silence, broken by the long-drawn gasps of the dying. He made an attempt to speak. Percy bent nearer to catch the words.

"Crucifix!"—that was what the boy made out. Percy brought the crucifix to the man's lips. He kissed it tenderly.

"Thank God!" murmured Percy. He added aloud: "Now, my dear friend, if you wish to enjoy the company of Jesus forever; if you wish to see your wife and little boy again, you must make an act of perfect contrition for your sins. Do you wish to do so?"

The man nodded his head in assent.

"Well: it is a great grace. You must be sorry for having offended God, Who is infinitely perfect and good. Now pray to God quietly and from your heart for one moment that you may get this grace. I shall pray with you."

There was a period of silence. In the palpable stillness, the snow was falling more and more

quickly. Again the awful silence was broken by the whistle of a train far up the track.

"Come," resumed Percy, as the faint echo of the whistle died away; "are you ready?"

The upturned face signified assent.

"Good. Now repeat the words after me as I speak them. And first of all, kiss the crucifix once more."

As the man complied, the rumble of a distant train came faintly on their ears.

"Now," continued Percy, "repeat after me: 'My Jesus, mercy.'"

Percy bent low to catch the faintest whisper; the rumbling noise was growing more distinct. Percy had read of the death-rattle. Even as he bent over, he heard an ominous sound from the man's throat. Surely there could be no time to lose.

"Oh, my God," he said.

"Oh, my God," repeated the dying man.

"I am most heartily sorry"—

The rumble was now sharpening into a rattle.

"For all my sins."

"And I detest them"—

"From the bottom of my heart."

As Percy stooped to catch these last words, the man broke into a cough; more blood came: and while the train in its magnificence swept by, bearing with it strength and power and wealth, bearing with it mortals whose fattened purses had never opened to aid poverty, to aid distress, bearing with it a multitude sufficient, in united action, to save a million from death and despair,—this outcast of the world, this wretched sport of seeming caprice, went forth in prayer to meet his God.

Let men call him socialist, anarchist, a creature worthy of the halter. Yes, let us punish our anarchists when they violate our most sacred laws. But we shall save prison fare, and more, if we treat the poor and the oppressed as true children of the One Father, Who is in heaven.