

CHAPTER XXIV.

*IN WHICH TOM MEETS TWO YOUNG GENTLEMEN WHOM
HE IS NOT AT ALL ANXIOUS TO SEE.*

MEANTIME Tom was on his way villageward. For fully a mile his sturdy little legs bore him bravely along. The weather was cold, the air keen; Tom was strong as to chest and limbs; the exercise, to one of his endurance, was refreshing. His breath came and went with the steadiness and fulness of a professional sprint-runner. With his hat well down over the eyes, head erect, chest inflated, his elbows pressed tightly to his side, his fists doubled, he formed a pleasant picture to all lovers of athletics. None were there, indeed, as he sped onwards at a sturdy, unfaltering pace.

Very soon he came in sight of the village.

"Brace up, old fellow!" he whispered to himself. "Come on, now, for all you're worth. It's a good mile off yet, but you must make it under eight minutes or you're no good."

"Yes," he added presently, "I'll be there in six minutes, sure."

But there's many a slip. Hardly had he finished addressing himself the remark just set down, when he perceived in the distance two figures advancing along the railroad-track. They were both human beings and of the masculine gender; that he could

make out. But whether they were men or boys, his eyesight failed to reveal.

"Wonder who they are!" he muttered. "Well, I hope they're friends in need. Anyhow, I'll know soon, as they're walking towards me."

Presently he descried a small wicker basket dependent on an arm of one, and three or four skates linked together by a strap in the hands of the other. The bearer of the skates was much the smaller of the two, and clearly a boy.

As Tom drew within the range of accurate eye-shot, he gave a low, prolonged whistle. Both were boys, and boys, too, that he desired to see least of all the boys dwelling at that moment upon the round earth. The larger he easily recognized as Donnel's village gladiator—the famous Buck; the smaller lad, as Tom rightly inferred, was George Keenan's whilom opponent.

They, in turn, seemed to recognize Tom as a pupil of St. Maure's College (the village youth had an unerring instinct when it came to making out a college-boy), for they at once so altered their proceedings as to give a strong and unequivocal hint of coming trouble. The smaller hero—Buck's young satellite—at once threw down his skates beside the railroad-track, and, unmindful of the sharp weather, proceeded to pull off his coat in such wise as to leave no doubt in Tom's mind concerning the smaller hero's intentions; while the adolescent Buck carefully deposited his basket on the bare earth, and composed his rugged features into a malignant scowl.

"Here's a how-d'ye-do!" muttered Tom to himself. "I'm in for it now and no mistake. I'd give

two cents for a base-ball bat. And besides, I'm in no humor for fussing just now, anyhow."

He stopped running a few yards in front of the two belligerents, and was taking a few slow breaths of air preparatory to speaking, when Buck saved him that office by opening the conversation himself.

"See here, you mean little college-chap," began the gloomy-browed Buck with fierce earnestness, "we're looking for fellows like you."

"Come on, you college dandy, and fight!" vociferated Buck's young friend, in a tone of far less dignity, but of equal earnestness. He had already rolled back his shirt-sleeves to the elbow, revealing two very well-developed forearms; and, as he spoke, was executing a novel and ludicrous war-dance, consisting mainly of a hop forward, a hop backward, and a wild brandishing of fists; with an occasional leap into the air by way of interlude. In the midst of these sprightly movements, he took occasion to dash his ragged hat upon the ground with a high disdain of all damages to that valuable bit of wearing apparel.

Buck, putting his arms akimbo, watched these terpsichorean proceedings with gloomy approval.

The dancer continued his speech:

"I can lick any boy my size in that dude school. Come on, will you? I'll black your eyes for you, I'll bloody your nose, and I'll warm your ears. Come on, won't you? Come on, I say."

As Tom, standing stock still in front of his new acquaintances, listened to this strain of rough, hearty, unscholared eloquence, and gazed upon its dancing author, he forgot, for a moment, his sacred mission.

A merry twinkle shot from his eyes, and the muscles of his face so twitched that he could hardly refrain, to use his own subsequent expression, from "letting his smiles loose." The twinkle of the eye escaped the attention of the pugnacious orator; but he observed the facial twitching, and inferred, rashly enough, that Tom was frightened. Hereupon he became more eloquent; there was even a touch of pathos in his tones.

"Come on, you bantam!" he implored. "Come on, you blow-hard! I'll fight fair, and just paralyze you. Come on, now. Come on, will you?" Here his dance became more impassioned. "I'll whop you so's your own mother won't know you."

But all these allurements only served to introduce new twitches into Tom's face, and to intensify those already there. Suddenly, however, he sobered. The snow had just begun to fall, and the memory of Percy and the dying man—both exposed to the inclemency of the season—shot back through his mind in all its vividness.

"See here, boys," he said in all seriousness, "I'm in no humor for fighting just now. There's a man down—"

"None of your lies," broke in Buck. "We don't care whether you feel like fighting or not. But if you don't go to work, and fight Dick like a man, I'll thrash you till you'll wish you were in Chiny."

During this speech of the great leader, Dick was still "leading the dance," and, in a steady flow of cordial eloquence, adjuring Tom to "come on."

But Tom was clinging earnestly to the memory of the dying scene he had left at his back.

"I won't fight," he said decisively.

"You won't!" exclaimed Buck. "I knew you was a coward. Go for him, Dick! Make him fight anyhow."

At the word of command, Dick advanced, and made a savage drive at Tom, who at once put up his hands. The blow was but partially warded off, however. Its force was diminished; yet, for all that, it brought out an ugly mark on Tom's cheek.

Tom was by no means an over-passionate boy, nor, on the other hand, was he an angel in temper. We find that even the meekest of mortals fly into a passion on being struck. Tom was not the meekest of mortals. He flushed angrily,—for the second time the memory of his mission was driven out of his head,—doubled his fists and flashed back a blow at his assailant. The blow was well directed. It struck Dick squarely on the face, and sent him staggering backwards. Tom might have followed up his advantage with ease, and indeed was on the point of doing so when suddenly his memory asserted itself. There again he saw the dying man, the exposed child, the soul—the precious, immortal soul—in the balance. He breathed a prayer for courage. Grace came down upon him, soft and radiant as the gentle snow-flakes now thickening the air. He threw down his hands.

"Come on," he said, "both of you: you can go ahead and beat me till you're tired. I ask you only one favor. There's a man—a poor starving man—dying, up the track. When you're through with me, for God's sake go to his help! I'm not going to fight with a man's life on my hands. And, Dick, I ask your pardon honestly for striking you."

During these words, one of Tom's hands had

gone into his jacket. Doubtless it was clasp-
ing that old, old scapular of the Sacred Heart
which he had once shown to Percy. He was thus
seeking help to bear manfully the savage revenge
of these two boys. His cheeks had blanched; but
his eye was steady.

However, he was not called upon for a great trial
of endurance. His words must have been the
echoes of whispered voices of grace, for no speech
could have had a more impressive effect.

Dick blushed—actually blushed. He appeared
to be thoroughly ashamed of himself, and hastily
began to pull down his sleeves. Buck's face re-
laxed from its gloomy sternness; it softened visi-
bly, and became almost tender in its expression.

"A poor man dying of starvation!" he ex-
claimed. "Why didn't you say so before? We
wouldn't have hindered you none if we'd known
that. If it'll be any help to you, I've got a bot-
tle of wine with me in that basket. It ain't much,
I know; but you're welcome to it."

"You have!" cried Tom with animation. "Just
the thing! It may save him. But there's no time
to lose; we've got to hurry up. He's not much
more than a mile off."

"Come on, then," said Buck, catching up the
basket. "We'll get there on a run."

"Say," put in Dick, hurriedly, "can't I be of any
help?"

These words were addressed to Tom; and in
such tone were they rendered that Tom felt he
had received full forgiveness.

"Yes, Dick my friend," answered Tom, gravely.
"You can be of great help. Run to the village

as fast as you can, and get a wagon or something. We are friends, are we not?"

As Tom spoke, he slipped a silver dollar into Dick's hand. The poor lad with his patched garments, and lacking an overcoat, looked indeed as if he needed the money.

He tried to say something in return for this kindness; but he was unskilled, poor fellow, in the expression of the gentler emotions, and his voice stuck in his throat. He passed a tattered sleeve across his eyes and hurried away.

Even for the expression of gratitude, silence may be golden.

Without further words, Tom and Buck took to the railroad. During their long run, neither spoke. But for all that, every step strengthened between them the friendly feelings so oddly awakened. It was the "touch of nature"—a poor, deserted, dying outcast—that made them kin.

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The snow falling almost blindingly. A man lying on the white-robed earth, his face touched and softened by the last prayer for mercy; his features made beautiful by the all-composing hand.

Beside him a kneeling boy absorbed in prayer—heedless of snow and cold, heedless of time and exposure. No words were needed to explain the turn of events to Tom and his rude companion. For one instant they gazed upon the pathetic sight; then, by a common instinct, fell upon their knees beside the dead. And in prayer they all became one.

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When the wagon arrived, and the dead man had been sheltered under its canvas cover, Buck turned to Percy.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

Percy looked at him, and, with a sad smile, nodded his head.

"Would you mind shaking hands?"

Their hands clasped: they were friends from that hour.