

only my fun—don't be huffy. You and I are friends already. Give me your hand."

I gave him my hand, but did not feel particularly friendly in doing so. He was a merry-looking young fellow, perhaps three years older than I, and dressed fashionably; but although he was so unceremonious in his manner, there was an air of friendliness about him that prevented me from resenting his patronage.

This happened at a quarter to nine on a Monday morning, in the office of Barron and Company, Mincing Lane, London, and was in fact my first introduction to business.

Most fellows have a choice in life as to their business or profession. I had none! I had my tastes, though, and they were towards the sea. I was continually cutting out boats and rigging them. My library was chiefly composed of nautical adventures. I am sure my dear old mother looked to me, I know, as the hope of the family. There were five of us, but I was the only boy. My father had been an invalid for many years, and my mother had to do the work of two in consequence. We were a poor family, but I can most honestly say we never felt poor. That mother of mine would have made a beggar proud—proud that he was not in debt, and that there were so many friends to help him in his need.

She kept me at Deneworth School until I was seventeen, and then used her influence in getting me a place in the office of Messrs. Barron and Co., which brings me round again to Mincing Lane, and my new acquaintance Beech.

At nine o'clock the rest of the clerks came in, and I was regularly installed in the course of the morning. My duties were very simple. I was placed close to Harry Beech, and was occupied in docketing letters and keeping a record of the immense correspondence under his superintendence.

In spite of his free-and-easy manner we soon became friends. He showed me real sympathy at a time when I felt lonely and miserable, and I think he did it out of genuine kindness.

After a time we lodged together, and then his influence carried me completely with him in his amusements and follies. I began to smoke cheap cigars, to talk fast, and think myself generally a very fine fellow.

One thing I was saved. My mother had extracted a vow from me that I would never gamble or play at cards. At the time, I promised lightly enough, not knowing fully what the pledge meant. Harry played, and the young fellows who came into our rooms on wet autumn evenings played constantly.

Once it happened that Harry and two friends were playing late into the night, and I dropped off to sleep by the fire. I awoke with a start. The three friends were on their feet talking loudly and angrily. Their faces were livid and almost inhuman. They were accusing Harry of cheating, and he was denouncing them. I interposed in time to save a fight, and after much difficulty prevailed on them to separate. The scene awoke my moral nature too. I took the cards and flung them into the fire.

Harry laughed uncomfortably.

"The fault is not in them," he said, "but in those who cheat."

He never had his friends to see him again, but he sometimes went out without me.

Much to my delight, I had been able to make arrangements for spending a week at home at Christmas. The very thought of it made my heart beat high. True, I could not boast of having accomplished much during my eight months in London, but I was well liked by the partners, and kindly treated by all. It was no easy

matter to make both ends meet on the small salary that I had to start with. Much as I liked Harry Beech's company, I had to cry off many a time when he was going to expensive places of amusement. It was well enough for him, with rich relatives, perhaps, to assist him, but I had nobody, and could not afford these luxuries. Besides, I wanted to take something, however little, home with me. I knew that though small the gift it would seem like the earnest of more, and would cheer my mother's heart. Our lodgings were not by any means expensive, but I could not help feeling that in a thousand little things Harry Beech was more extravagant than I could afford to be. I spoke to him about it once, when I was so anxious as to the money I would have at Christmas.

"Why did you not mention this before?" he said. "Of course you can't afford these luxuries, but you must not pay for them in the future. You don't suppose I would have them if I could not pay for them! If you should want a few sovereigns at Christmas just tell me: it will be no trouble for me to lend you a trifle."

What could I say after that? It was his generous spirit, I know; for though he sometimes was very flush of money, yet there were times when he seemed to be very much pressed himself.

But it was not right to live on him in that way, sharing his meats and drinks, but bearing none of the expense, and I made up my mind to look for a room elsewhere. He would not listen to the proposition. If I went he would be so miserable that he didn't know what would become of him. Besides, he looked on me now as a sort of mentor, he said. I was so much more steady-going than he, and he compared me to a drag on a down-hill wheel. The end of it all was that I stayed, on the understanding, however, that after Christmas I was to look out for other lodgings.

When Christmas was approaching I made up my small accounts, and found that the utmost I could hope to have after paying my landlady would only be sufficient to take me home and back, and would leave nothing for incidental expenses or for my mother. I could hardly do otherwise than ask Harry to lend me two pounds. It had been his own suggestion, and I knew how thoroughly generous he was. Besides, it was only a loan for a few weeks. I was fully decided in my own mind to retrench when I returned, and it would have been particularly hard to have gone home without a sovereign in my pocket. I opened my heart to Harry so completely that he told me in his cheery way to think no more about the money, he would see to that, and if I never paid him it would not very much matter. At the same time, and in proof of his good nature, I know he was troubled about his own account with the landlady. She was pressing him for money. He had not been regular of late, and she was very poor, and grew rather anxious for her little bills. I asked him if it was not so.

"Oh, she makes a great fuss about a few shillings, poor soul, but it will be all right as soon as I get my next remittance. It won't hinder me from letting you have those two sovereigns, Spot," he said, playfully calling me, as he always did, by that abridged edition of my name. He spent his evenings from home more than ever, and remained out later. He was growing thin and pale and troubled. I knew there was something wrong, but dared not speak, for he was quick to resent intrusion in such matters.

But my time came, and with it the promised help.

"There, old boy!" he exclaimed, as he threw the two gold pieces on the table: "go and enjoy your Christmas. I wish I was going too."

"I wish you were, with all my heart; wouldn't we have fun! It's too late to talk of your coming now, but