

LITERATURE, &c.

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THE FOUR CLERKS.

A TRUE TALE.

Chapter I.

NEARLY at the same time, four youths entered a manufacturing and mercantile establishment in London. It was that of Messrs. Samuel and James Stephenson. These gentlemen were cousins, placed together by circumstances, rather than by congeniality of disposition and habit. The concern had been established by three brothers, one of whom died unmarried; each of the others left one only son, who became joint proprietors of the whole property. The characters of these gentlemen were very dissimilar. Mr Samuel Stephenson was distinguished by high-toned principle, sound practical wisdom, and persevering energy. He was a first-rate man of business. His cousin was indolent, weak and vacillating—much given to luxurious living, and pleasure-taking. He was not indifferent to the success of the business. His expensive habits rendered it most important to him that it should be prosperous and productive. But he placed an unfair reliance on the activity and prudence of his partner, and satisfied himself in his own neglect of business, by the consideration, that his cousin would be sure to attend to it, and so he certainly did; and he made a more than candid allowance for the different tastes and habits of the other party; submitting to the unfair burden as a matter of course.

The family of Mr Samuel Stephenson consisted of daughters only. Mr James Stephenson had one son. His introduction to the business was looked upon as a regular step towards his being, at some future time, admitted to the partnership. He was one of the four youths above referred to. A second, was Richard Hart, who, also, was brought in by the same interest. His father, a medical man, was on terms of intimate companionship with the father of James, who, little efficient as were his services in the business, was not backward in claiming his full share of influence when he had a friend or crony whom he wished to oblige. The next lad was Frank Marsom, the son of a prosperous country tradesman, who had long had business transactions with the Messrs. Stephensons, and, cherishing the very common ambition of placing his son a step higher than himself in the commercial world, in order thereto, sought his admission into a house of such long-established respectability. The fourth, Louis Chaumier, was the son of a widow in somewhat straitened circumstances. Her husband had embarked the whole of their property in an expensive, but promising, concern, and died almost before he had begun to reap any advantage from it. She was a woman of principle and energy, and immediately devoted herself to the task of filling up the place of both parents. Few besides herself, were at all aware of the exertions, the struggles, and the sacrifices by which she was enabled to keep up respectability of appearance, to bring up her little boy in comfort, and to bestow upon him a good education. Her deceased husband had been much respected by the gentlemen of the Stephenson firm, and her own praiseworthy efforts had secured their continued esteem, and had led to the offer of receiving her son into their employ; at the same time an arrangement was made for young Marsom to board in her house.

The different dispositions of the lads, and the results of various courses of early training, were not long in manifesting themselves. James was often late in coming to business, and negligent and careless in performing the tasks assigned him. This brought him into collision with Franklin, the general superintendent-overseer, or, as he was called in those days, 'the foreman.' A kinder man than John Franklin never lived, nor one who was more disposed to befriend the young. But he was, also, a man of high principle, and strict punctuality; and he justly considered himself bound by regard to the interest of the youths placed under his control, as well as to that of his employers, to require the regular performance of their several duties. Now the native indolence of Master James, rendered him averse to business, and his pride was hostile to subordination. 'Why should he?' was his frequent appeal. 'Why should he toil and drudge like a parish apprentice? Why should he be dictated to by a servant, when he was (or shortly would be) master of the business?'

'Well, sir,' Franklin would quietly reply, 'I hope you may live to be a good master, no one would be better pleased than myself to see it, but that does not come by birth, sir. The only safe way to the top of the ladder, is to go right up the rounds. Look at our Mr Stephenson; Mr Samuel, I mean, he and I were lads together in this business; he was the son of the principal, but his father would have him learn every thing, and do every thing, just the same as I did, who was only a poor boy. And now see what a master he makes, and what great improvements he has carried out in this business! All that would not have been, if he had thought himself too much of a gentleman to learn when he was young. It is not likely that I shall live to see it, but I would wish you to learn your business as well as he, and be as much respected in the house and of it. At any rate, I should not like you to have to say, when I am dead and gone, 'I should have known better how to manage my business if that old Franklin had not neglected to teach me.' James was not an ill-tem-

pered youth. He would generally take the remarks of the honest foreman in good part, and, for a short time, would set himself to do better. But it was not lasting; he soon relapsed into his habitual indolence and carelessness. Unhappily his bad habits were not counteracted by the influence of his father; whose tastes, in fact, he had imbibed, and whose example he had too closely followed. If the youth, by whom application to business was deemed a hardship and burden, was seen brooding over his work with moody, discontented countenance, or hard to complain bitterly of being 'bothered to death' with some perplexing account, his father, instead of encouraging him to resolution and perseverance, would say, 'Well, you must get Chaumier to do it for you, he is a poor lad, and will be glad to earn half-a-crown; or there is Dick Hart, he is a clever fellow, and good-natured, he will do it for nothing.' Such suggestions were always accompanied by the means of carrying out the proposed substitution; and, as no portion of the money so bestowed, ever found its way to the pocket of Louis, it only went in aid of an already too lavish allowance of pocket money, to engender habits of reckless extravagance. Scarcely a week of business passed without some interruption in the shape of pleasure. A day's fishing at Lea Bridge or Waltham Abbey—a day's pleasure in Epping Forest, or at White Conduit House, or Brompton Spa, or even Greenwich Fair, or Bartholomew Fair—for, at that time, those scenes of vulgar resort were not quite exploded by the higher classes of citizens. Failing any of these special attractions, there was sure to be a dinner party at home or abroad, at which the company of Master James, as well as that of his father, was particularly desired; or if a whole day's absence was not claimed, there would be slipping away at an early hour, to join a party for Vauxhall, or Ranelagh, or the Play; anything would serve as an excuse to break away from the drudgery of business, and resort to some more agreeable pastime. When messages arrived, with these excuses for absence, old Franklin groaned outright, or muttered, 'Tis well the old heads of the firm are not here to see it.' Mr Stephenson (senior) shook his head and sighed, but said little. What could he say, when his equal partner, not merely granted leave of absence to the youth, but himself set the pleasure-loving example, and formed one of the party?

Richard Hart, was an active and clever lad, quick in acquiring knowledge, and capable of making himself useful, in a degree not common in proportion to the time he had been engaged in the business. His proficiency was noticed with pleasure and approbation, and, both by the senior principal, and the faithful foreman, he was regarded as a promising youth. That he was sometimes known to help Master James over his difficulties, was put to the score of good-nature in one party, and passed over in silence, from the hopelessness of effecting a radical improvement, in the other. The instructions which, on his admission to the warehouse, Richard Hart received from his father, were to the following effect:—'Now, my boy, if you mind your Ps and Qs, this will be the making of you for life. Mind you keep good friends with young Stephenson, give way to him in everything—help him out of his scrapes, and never laugh at his stupidity or his blunders. Be sure you keep in favor with old Franklin; for depend upon it, the principals see through his eyes. And always pay profound respect to the senior partner; he is a shrewd old gentleman, but if he thinks well of you, he will be a firm friend. To gain this, you must stick to business. It will not do for you to be hunting after pleasure like young Stephenson; your position is different from his; you must mind the main chance, and be content with what pleasure you can get when business is over; but you may generally contrive to get in with him for the evening, and you know he is able to stand treat.' The youth understood the hints of his sagacious father. He shaped his course accordingly, and, in so doing, gained credit with the senior in the concern, for diligence and propriety; and favor with the junior, as being his willing fag in matters of business, and a pleasant companion in those of pleasure.

Frank was a good-tempered, well-disposed lad—not so clever as Hart—but by no means deficient in ability or activity, and remarkable for willingness to oblige—he was a general favorite. Circumstances, however, led him into a greater degree of intimacy with Louis, than with either of the other youths. Having the same home, their leisure time was spent in each other's company; and no efforts were spared on the part of Mr Chaumier to render their home comfortable and attractive. The lads became cordially attached to each other. Their pursuits and pleasures were innocent, rational, and inexpensive, and they were uniformly cheerful and satisfied, without having recourse to the amusements which seemed so essential to their young associates; but, in fact, they had not much intercourse with the other lads, except in the hours of business.

James was too indolent, and too much engrossed by self-indulgence to take the trouble of forming an acquaintance which he had no immediate occasion to employ in subservience to his own gratification. Louis, too, he regarded as a poor boy, and, therefore, not a fit companion for him. Frank might have been admitted on a more equal footing, but he seemed to have paired off with Louis, and no particular motive existed for seeking his friendship, as Richard was at all times ready to do or bear anything for or from his patron; not, however, without a constant eye to his own interest. It may be supposed, that his

influence went rather against an intimacy being formed with the other lads, from the apprehension of either proving a rival or a spy. It was customary for all the youths, once a year, to spend a day at the country house of each of the partners, and, excepting on these occasions, they had scarcely met as companions.

It has been said that Louis had a good education. By this phrase is not meant merely that he had been sent to a good school, and had received classical and general instruction; though such was the case. He had, also, been trained to habits of thought and observation, which are of immense use in application to the ordinary business of life. Good principles had been carefully instilled—principles of truth, justice, kindness. By the precept and example of his surviving parent, and by his reminiscences of the departed, so constantly and attractively depicted before his young observation, as to acquire the vividness and vitality of personal observation, the boy was early trained to the love and pursuit of 'Whatever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report.' The principles of his parents were those of the Bible, and that he was taught to regard as the rule and test of his actions. The mother of Louis was as much concerned for his temporal well-doing, as the father of Richard could be, yet he never received from her such precepts as these: 'Honor this person, pay homage to that one, keep in favor with the other.' Interest was not the main object of her solicitude, nor did she wish to make it the principle of conduct to her child. No: she taught him to be diligent and trustworthy in business; to be obedient, faithful and respectful to his employers, and kind and courteous to all with whom he had to do; not that he might be well thought of, trusted and promoted, but because it is right. How simple and straightforward is the course, when this one leading principle is kept constantly in view! and how often does it prove the direct road to eminence and advantages which are anxiously and laboriously sought in vain in the crooked paths of time-serving and craft!

In Louis, there was nothing particularly striking at first sight—nothing that marked him as a lad of genius, if genius be taken in its ordinary acceptation, as a faculty for successfully taking up a pursuit with little or no instruction or application. This faculty Louis did not possess, but he was observant, diligent and pains-taking. It was some time after Richard had been spoken of as a clever lad, that Mr Stephenson observed to Franklin, 'I think that is an honest boy, I mean Louis Chaumier, he can look one in the face, and give a straightforward, modest answer—not a word too little or too much—and he seems to be always minding his own business, and to have nothing to hide.'

'That is quite the case, sir,' replied Franklin; 'I have met with quicker lads, but never with one on whom I could more thoroughly depend. What is given to Chaumier to do, I consider as good as done; he is no eye-servant.'

Louis, though he knew it not, had taken a firm step on the ladder of preferment. About the same time a more visible advancement was conferred on Richard. The place of a superior clerk being vacated, Mr James Stephenson pleaded for the appointment to be given to the son of his friend, and as the ability and character of the youth were satisfactory, his wish was readily acceded to. Those who had the appointment to bestow, concurred in the thinking him fit for the post; and even among his equals no jealous rivalry was felt. All was harmoniously adjusted; and Richard proved fully competent to the business with which he was intrusted; and his post being more confidential than that which he before occupied, left his time more at his own disposal.

Just after Richard's promotion, Mr Samuel Stephenson employed Louis to make out some lists and accounts, and collect monies on behalf of a society of which he was treasurer. The task was faithfully executed, and the accounts fairly rendered, much to the satisfaction of his employer, who made a liberal present in return for what he deemed extra services. The youth had not so considered them, but had performed them with punctuality and good will, as an act of duty; he was however, not insensible to the approbation manifested in his having been thus employed, and the unexpected reward was truly acceptable, as it assisted him in carrying out his honest desire to support himself, without being burthensome to his mother. The same employment and the same recompense was given him half yearly, during the whole term of his engagement. Excepting this which was a private transaction, no direct move was made in the position of Louis, till near the expiration of that term; probably because no vacancy occurred in a higher department of service; but he was frequently employed both by Mr Stephenson and Franklin in confidential matters, and their general manner towards him, proved that they regarded him as a person worthy of trust and confidence.

After the elevation of Richard, he seemed more disposed than formerly, to cultivate intercourse with Frank, and even to bring him into the society of James. Richard, when he had a point to carry, was not easily repulsed or discouraged; and Frank was more distinguished by easy good nature, and accessibility than by either penetration or firmness. There was something flattering in the proffered friendship of Richard—a more clever youth than himself—and one standing higher in the establishment—and in the occasional civilities, which even James the prospective master of the concern was induced to render. These were not long plied without producing

their effect. Frank became inclined to accept their invitations, and join their parties. He was sincerely sorry that Louis was left out, and hoped he would not take it unkind, if he now and then consented to go without him. Louis was not indifferent to the ordinary recreations of youth, though he was not like James, wholly given to pleasure. Richard perhaps, had reasons of his own for not wishing to introduce Louis to their familiarity, and he easily persuaded James to keep aloof from him, as a poor boy beneath his notice. Louis did feel the unjust privation and the implied scorn, but the wound was not very deep or lasting. Well has it been said, 'That will break a proud man's heart, that will not break a humble man's sleep.' Louis had no very high notions of his own dignity or deserts, and, therefore, was rather disposed to overlook a slight than to magnify it into an insult. The occasional, and, in time the frequent, absence of Frank from his Society, did not awaken unkind or angry feelings; nor did he give way to dulness or discontent. He never was unemployed, or without an object of pursuit; and the usefully employed are rarely unhappy. Besides, the society of Mrs Chaumier, dear as it had always been to her son, seemed more than ever delightful, when she was his only companion. But a decided though gradual change was taking place in Frank, which could not fail to be observed, and which awakened regret and anxiety, both in the mother and son. On several occasions some act of carelessness or neglect of duty, on the part of Frank, had been observed and rectified by Louis, before it had been noticed by the superiors. These acts of spontaneous kindness were gratefully acknowledged, regret expressed for the failure, and resolutions formed for greater circumspection, care and diligence. But the failures became more and more frequent, so that even the daily care of Louis, to look round and set all to rights, could not always screen his friend from deserved censure. At home, too, Frank was less regular in his habits, and had lost much of his habitual cheerfulness and good humor; he often seemed restless and unhappy. His friends were not hasty to impute evil; in fact, the frequent depression of spirits, and unevenness of temper, so unlike his natural character, were attributed to anxiety on account of his father, whose health was in a precarious, and, indeed declining state. The same circumstance, also, probably withheld Mrs Chaumier from communicating to the family anything like a painful surmise, and she was still more reluctant to utter a word which might injure the youth in the esteem of his employers; she, however, kindly and faithfully endeavored to gain his confidence, and seriously cautioned him against what she feared might be the beginning of evil. Frank owned that he had not gone on so well or been so happy of late as he used to be, before he became so intimate with James and Richard; he did not believe they meant any harm, but he believed it would be better for him to be less in their company, and he resolved to return to his old habits of regularity and order. For a short time he did so, and Louis observed to his mother, with great satisfaction, that Frank was getting quite into favor with Mr Franklin for diligence and attention to business, as well as becoming much more sociable and cheerful at home—he was really like himself. While this improvement lasted, he had not been with the other lads, partly through circumstances, partly through his own conviction and resolution. But a public holiday occurring, a pleasure party was got up, to which Frank received a pressing invitation—he first declined—then hesitated—then complied. He returned home at a late hour of the night, and in a state little fit to attend business in the morning. Whatever might have been the result of this instance of irregularity coming to the knowledge of Frank's employers, was averted by a hasty summons to attend the dying bed of his father. On this melancholy occasion, Frank was absent from business for full a fortnight; during which time he more than once wrote to Louis, expressing, together with the natural feelings of bereaved filial affection, deep regret at his own instability, and his determination on his return to attend more steadily to business, and to keep entirely out of the way of those temptations by which he had been ensnared. In one of these letters, Frank requested Louis to ask Richard for his watch, which he had left with him the night before he was called away from London. This commission, duly attended to by Louis, was met by Richard with evasive replies, and at last he expressed his determination to keep it till Frank's return, affecting to have obtained it in a joke or wager not yet decided. Meanwhile he began to treat Louis with unusual courtesy; he more than once called on him at his mother's house and invited him to make one of a party for Richmond. Unwilling even to spurn at offered kindness, though long withheld, at the same time almost distrusting some sinister motive, Louis hesitated whether to accept or decline the offer. The point was settled for him, by his being appointed for a fortnight to take certain departments of service during the absence of Franklin, who had gone on a confidential journey for his employers. The disappointment felt by Louis was not nearly so great as that expressed by James and Richard; for Louis at all times looked upon pleasure as a secondary consideration—one that should never be allowed to compete with duty. By steadily maintaining this principle, he could cheerfully do his duty, even though it involved a sacrifice of pleasure; and thoroughly enjoy pleasure which brought no reproach of neglected duty.

(To be concluded.)