

LITERATURE, &c.

The British Magazines.

From the Family Economist.

THE FOUR CLERKS.

A TRUE TALE.

Chapter II.

DURING Franklin's absence, Louis had charge of closing after the departure of the work-people. One evening, while thus engaged, he was surprised and startled by the appearance of Richard.

'What can have brought you here so late? Is anything the matter?'

'Nothing at all, my good fellow, only I want to speak to you. Go on with your work, I shall not hinder you, I will wait a few minutes.' 'Not here, Richard. It is quite time for all to be locked up. I must finish what I am about, and then we can walk together to my mother's.'

'Yes; or there is a tavern near at hand where I sometimes call with young Stephenson. In fact, I should not wonder if he is there now. We can go in and take a glass of negus with him, or a bowl of punch. He is a good natured fellow, and will readily treat us.'

'No, thank you, I do not venture into taverns.'

'What, I suppose mother does not approve of it?'

'She does not.'

'Well, I won't tempt you to displease her. According to poor Frank's account, she is a good sort of body, only rather over-strict. Come, get on. Let me help you;—where do you put those books?'

'I am sorry if you think me rude,' answered Louis, 'but I must beg you to leave the place. My orders are to put away, and look round after every person has left the premises.'

'Well, keep to orders, that is quite right, then you can't be blamed; I am the last that would persuade you to do otherwise. I shall wait for you in the street.'

The interruption was by no means agreeable. Louis felt afraid of being thrown off his guard, and neglecting something that he ought to attend to: but having looked round with double care, he closed the last lock, extinguished the last light, delivered in the keys at the dwelling house, and joined Richard at the door.

'Louis,' said Richard, familiarly thrusting his arm within that of his companion, 'I want to ask a favor of you. It is more, though, to oblige young Stephenson than myself. We want to borrow a few pounds just for a week or two. Will you help us out?'

'It is not in my power to do it. The little that I have saved is invented.'

'Oh, you rich careful fellow! able to invest property before you are out of your time! Why, you will die a miser!'

'I hope not. I should be sorry to desire property, except for its real use and enjoyment.'

'Well, we don't want you to sell out for our little affair. Surely you could accommodate us for a few days, now you are in such a confidential post. Have you not the care of the cash-box? You might easily oblige us without any one being the wiser. We shall be able to return it before old Franklin comes back, and make you a handsome present for the use of it.'

'I cannot do it, Richard. Whatever is entrusted to my charge, I must have ready to give up at a moment's notice. I dare not make free with a fraction of it for my own use, or for the dearest friend I have in the world.'

'That's being very particular, when you are so certain of having it returned in good time, and that it would never be known beyond ourselves.'

'Right is right—and to deviate from it would be wrong, whether or not any immediate disgrace or inconvenience resulted.'

'Very true, Louis; I don't blame you for your strictness; you are a right trusty fellow, and I value your friendship more than ever. Indeed, this is all a mere joke. We don't want your money. Young Stephenson has always plenty at command, and I am not badly off; you need not suppose that we are obliged to borrow money. If you had agreed to lend it, we should not have taken it. But to tell you the truth, there is a wager depending on the sturdiness of your resolution, and you have come off with honor. I shall not tell who is the loser; but you must come in and take one glass with us, just as a pledge that you can take a joke, and are not offended.'

'No, Richard, you must excuse me. Into a tavern I will not go. I would wish to bear a joke with good humour, but to my thinking all wagers are foolish things; and no circumstances can justify one person in tempting another to do wrong, even in jest.'

'Well, just say you are not offended, and that you will not make mischief out of it, I own it was a foolish affair, and am sorry for it.'

'That is enough. I have no intention of mentioning it. Good night.'

Louis hastened home with more than common speed. He felt as a bird that has escaped from the snare of the fowler, and though he tried to believe Richard's assurance that the temptation was but a foolish joke, a gloomy misgiving would sometimes cross his mind when the affair occurred to his recollection. On Frank's return, he discovered no inclination to go into company, but Louis could not help noticing that his watch did not make its appearance, and that he was more than once engaged in close conversation with Richard, which appeared not altogether of a friendly cast.

A few weeks afterwards, Louis, on being sent to the banker's with a foreign bill of exchange, was informed that one of the same set had already been presented and paid. Franklin, one of the least perturbable of mortals, on receiving this unpleasant information, changed colour, paused, groaned, cleared his voice, and fixing on Louis a sad and scrutinizing, yet benevolent eye, said,

'Louis, have I ever sent you to present a bill the duplicate of this?'

'No, sir, never.'

'Are you aware of any other person being sent to the banker's during my absence in the country?'

'No, sir.'

'Did you go to the banker's every day?'

'Every day, sir.'

'From whom did you receive your orders?'

'Always from Mr Stephenson, sir.'

'Did you ever lay down the books and papers between receiving and giving them up?'

'Never—I always received them from Mr Stephenson the moment before leaving this house—went directly to the banker's, and on my return, never laid out of my own hands what I brought back, until I gave them up to Mr Stephenson, and always waited till he had examined them, and found them all right.'

'Well, Chaumier, your testimony is very clear, and I hope it will prove all right.'

'I hope so, sir.'

Shortly afterwards, Chaumier was summoned to the inner counting-house, where both the partners and Franklin were in consultation.

'Chaumier,' said the elder partner, 'what was your charge during Mr Franklin's absence?'

Louis enumerated his several duties, among which were the receiving and transmitting of all letters, depositing the books in their proper places at night, and taking them out in the morning, extinguishing the lights, locking up all desks and doors, and delivering the keys and cash-box to the senior partner.

'Had you any particular instructions as to the manner of doing these things?'

'Mr Franklin told me, sir, to deliver every thing into the hands of one of the partners; to see all the people out of the premises before I began locking up; and to answer no questions that might be asked me about any matters entrusted to my care.'

'Did you at all times strictly observe these directions?'

'Yes, sir.'

'To whom did you deliver the letters on receiving them?'

'Always to you, sir, as soon as you came to business, excepting one morning, when Mr James Stephenson was here early, and took the letters of me.' 'What, my son?' inquired Mr J. S., rather sharply.

'No, sir. Master J. was with you, but you took the letters yourself. You met me on the stairs, and desired me to open the counting-house directly, as you were in haste to read a letter.'

'True, true; I recollect. It was the day I started for Brighton. That is all right enough, but it throws no light on this awkward business.'

'Was any other person in the counting-house after my cousin left it, and before I came?' inquired the senior.

'No, sir. Richard Hart spoke to Mr Stephenson in the counting-house, but did not remain there after him. Mr Stephenson, Master James, and Richard, all left the counting-house together; and you, sir, immediately entered it from the other.'

'Oh, was Richard there?'

'Yes, sir; Mr Stephenson desired me to send him up.'

'Did any person ever look over you as you put away the books and other things?'

'No one, sir. I always did it quite alone.' The unwelcome visit of Richard flashed across the mind of Louis; still more vividly when Mr S. proceeded to say, 'Were you ever asked any questions as to where they were kept?'

'Richard came in one evening, just as I was going to clear away, and he slightly asked me where the books were kept. I did not answer his question, but begged him to leave the house, before I began putting away—which he did.'

'What was his object in coming at so late an hour?'

'He wished to speak to me, sir, and as I was engaged, he waited for me in the street, and walked with me part of the way to my mother's.'

'Have you any objection to mention the subject of your conversation?'

'I had rather not, sir; it was merely a joke on me, which perhaps made me more angry than it should have done; but it was fully apologised for, and I should be sorry to repeat it.'

'He said nothing that in any way connected itself with this transaction?'

'Certainly not, sir.'

'Do you recollect whether that evening was before or after the day of the letters being given to Mr James Stephenson?'

'Before, sir. It was on Tuesday night; that was on Thursday morning.'

'That is enough, Louis; you may go for the present.'

Louis withdrew, full of painful and perplexing thoughts. In the course of the day, he was again summoned into Franklin's room, and asked if he could recall the number of letters received on the morning already referred to. 'I do not recollect it, sir; but I have not destroyed the rough memorandum of accounts kept during your absence; and by that I can ascertain the number of letters received each day, and to whom directed.'

'That is well, Chaumier,' said Mr Stephenson; a regular account is often of great use in eliciting truth, and clearing up mistakes. Let us see your memoranda; I dare say you have no objection?'

'None at all, sir. Here they are.'

'Very well, Chaumier, very well. Now, then, call over.'

Louis did so; each day's letters were counted on the file by Franklin, and one was found deficient. This led to further discussion as to the means by which the missing letter had disappeared.

'If I recollect right,' said Mr S., 'some of the business letters were opened, and others were not.'

'Yes,' replied Mr James, 'I began looking over them, but found it would hinder me too long to read them all, and there was no occasion, as you were just coming up.'

'Can you tax your memory so far as to say whether one of those you examined contained a bill from Vanderhousen, Voorst & Co.?'

'Can't say for certain; but, I really think there was one of that sort. However, all the letters, opened or otherwise, were left on the desk; and if there was any foal play, it must have been after I left the room, and before you entered it.'

On examination of the paid bill, the endorsement was found to be an imitation of the handwriting of Mr S. S., so exact that he himself would not have disputed it, but from the certainty that he never gave such an instrument out of his hands without entering a record of the transaction. It appeared, also, that the bill was presented and paid early on the Friday morning succeeding the arrival of the missing letter. The clerk who paid it distinctly recollected the transaction, and the appearance and dress of the person applying for it. The description he gave did not at all answer to that of any person employed by the firm. No farther light was thrown on the subject for so long a time, that the innocent began to fear, and the guilty to hope that it would for ever rest in uncertainty. But at length the banker's clerk happened to recognise in the street the man to whom he had paid the money. He traced him home, obtained assistance, and took him into custody. The man proved to be a waiter at the very tavern to which Richard had in vain endeavored to introduce Louis, and to which poor Frank had been too successfully enticed; where he had been led to drinking and gambling, and fleeced of his watch, of large sums of money, and many other valuable articles.

The disclosures were such as led to the summary dismissal of Richard, and might have led much further, but that it appeared that James was in some degree implicated. On this account, the affair was not submitted to legal investigation, but quietly passed over with an engagement on the part of Richard's father that his son should be immediately sent abroad.

A few months more completed the term of the three remaining youths. James, as a matter of course remained in the connexion, Frank Marsom returned to the country, and joined his mother, an active, prudent woman, in managing the business of his late father. This engagement proved very advantageous to the character of Frank. He was fully and responsibly occupied in business of importance, yet not without the guidance of maturer years and wisdom. Louis was retained in the employ of the Messrs. Stephenson, at a liberal salary, and distinguished by frequent tokens of generous approbation.

In the course of time, the mother of Mrs James Stephenson died, and left the bulk of her property to her grandson, now four or five and twenty years of age. On this occasion, Mr James S. ventured to propose that his son should be received into the partnership. Mr Samuel S. readily admitted the reasonableness of the desire expressed by his cousin, that his son, having arrived at a suitable age, and possessing independent capital, should be brought into the concern; and declared that he should not at all oppose it, but at the same time expressed his own intention of withdrawing. This was an unlooked-for blow, and Mr James used all the arguments in his power to induce his partner to alter his determination, but finding him immovable, he said, 'I see how it must be; if you really are determined to leave us, we must give Franklin a small share in the concern, and so secure interest and zeal.' This gentleman could not appreciate the well-principled and disinterested zeal of faithful services which money can never buy, but he could understand the policy of retaining in his service one who knew how to manage affairs and persons in a way of which neither himself nor his son were capable. That Franklin should decline the honor and advantage intended him, never once entered into the calculation. What, then, was his surprise and consternation, when honest Franklin declined to remain in the concern after Mr Samuel S. had left it! His wants, he said, were few. He had no one but himself to provide for, and as his salary had been liberal, and he had always been careful of his property, he possessed amply sufficient to make himself comfortable for the remainder of his days. Again and again the judicious senior partner and the valuable foreman were entreated to revoke this determination, even with the proposed understanding that young Stephenson should take no share in the control, and be merely allowed to employ his capital in the business. But the resolution of each was decidedly taken, and the utmost concession that could be obtained was a consent that for one more year matters should go on as heretofore, to allow ample time for further arrangements. As the twelvemonth drew towards a close, the two principals consulted together, and came to the resolution of

promoting Louis Chaumier to Franklin's place, as no more than a just requital for his long and faithful services. In due time the resolution was carried into effect, and Louis received his appointment as superintendent. Young James, recently married, was to reside in the house which Mr Samuel Stephenson was leaving. But as it was considered indispensable that Louis should be constantly on the premises, a wing of the house was detached for his use, and formed a comfortable residence for himself and his mother. Great hopes were entertained that marriage would do wonders for James. 'He is no worse than other young people,' said his fond parents and comforted themselves with the idea. 'He has had time to sow all his wild oats, and now he will settle down as a steady, prudent man of business. But the hope was unfounded and delusive. Neither family ties, growing years, nor increased business responsibilities prevailed to cure him of indolence, extravagance, and love of pleasure. About five years after the dissolution of partnership, Mr James Stephenson was seized with a severe attack of illness. In fact, though not more than fifty years of age, his constitution was broken by irregularity and self-indulgence. For many weeks he laid in a state of bodily helplessness, yet not entirely disabled from attending to affairs. Whether he anticipated speedy decease or protracted inability to return to business, he desired to see Chaumier, and expressing the highest satisfaction in his faithful and valuable services, offered, and even pressed upon him, a share of the business, more considerably than that which he had proposed to Franklin. But Chaumier, like Franklin, declined the offer. He preferred serving the concern at a stated salary to accepting a more brilliant prospect linked with the risks and responsibilities of a partner so little to be relied on as James. It was well he did so. The elder partner did not long survive the interview; and the junior, on whom the whole devolved, in the course of a few years, by reckless expenditure on the one hand, and rash speculation on the other, brought himself to ruin.

After the downfall of poor James, and when Louis was pondering on the adoption of some new engagement, an overture was made to him by Mr Samuel Stephenson, for his establishment in business, in connexion with his old friend and companion, Frank Marsom. The removal of that young man into the country, had not been merely for his mother's convenience, nor with entire abandonment of the original purpose of establishing him as a London merchant. But Mr Stephenson, observing the yielding temper of Frank, which had already rendered him a prey to the crafty Richard, and would still expose him to danger from the kind of associates left behind recommended his removal with a view entirely to break off the connexion. The measure had been successful: Frank's character, always upright, kind and generous, had greatly improved in firmness. A younger brother was now of sufficient age to join the mother in her business, and it was deemed a suitable time for Frank to carry out the plan of settling in London. Now, too, he received, what he had long before solicited, but which had been suspended on his own propriety of conduct and steady attention to business, the consent of Mr Stephenson to an engagement with his younger daughter. The advice of Mr S. concurring with Frank's high esteem of the character of Louis, and the long cherished friendship subsisting between them, led to the above mentioned proposal, which was taken into consideration and accepted. It was the sterling value of Louis's character that was looked to as the most essential endowment; but it also proved that by diligence and care he had saved what amounted to no despicable share of capital; and good old Franklin, who had all along maintained an affectionate friendship with Louis, generously offered to invest any portion of his property in the concern. Whether or not the offer was accepted the partnership was entered into, and the business for a long series of years well conducted and prosperous. Franklin at his death bequeathed his property to be divided between the two daughters of his honored friend, Mr Stephenson, and the worthy, faithful youth, Louis Chaumier. But as Franklin lived to a good old age, the epithet 'youth' was scarcely applicable to Louis, who had attained the prime of life, and who, moreover came into possession of two shares of the bequest, having some years before married the elder daughter of Samuel Stephenson, Esq.

Now let the young reader, starting in the hope of preferment, consider the words of the wise, and apply them to the characters of these four young men:—

'Ability without upright principle is a snare to the possessor, and a curse to all connected with him.'

'Without firmness and moral courage, the kindest dispositions and best intentions may be productive of evil rather than good.'

'In the scale of morals Integrity holds the first place, Benevolence the second, and Prudence the third. Without the first the latter two cannot exist; and without the last the former two are often rendered useless.'

'The weight of exalted character, will carry it over the want of an exalted station.'

'Nothing will supply the want of prudence; and negligence and irregularity long continued, will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.'

GRAVE YARDS IN LONDON.—The various grave yards in London, and the adjacent counties, comprise 478 acres. It is computed that 50,000 bodies are buried annually, and that a layer of corpses is completely decayed in seven years.