

A Morning with Gamblers

by Rev. John McClintock, D. D.

In the earlier years of my ministry, I formed a special fellowship with a very intelligent and pious family. The father and mother were of the vigorous Scotch-Irish stock; clear-headed and sound hearted people. The children inheriting strong health of mind and body, and were all quick-witted and lively. I loved them all dearly, and came at last to make their family destinies their joys and sorrows, my own.

One of the sons, Edward, was a fine, young fellow of eighteen, exuberant in both life and strength, but full of sweetness and good humor. Young as he was, he showed great talent for business, and was already a trusted clerk in a large mercantile house, with a liberal salary for those times.

I was called out of bed, one morning, at about four o'clock, to see this young man. He was in great distress, and could hardly tell his story; but it came out at last, and was bad enough when it came.

“I have been spending the night at different faro tables, and have lost about three hundred and fifty dollars.”

“Whose money was it?”

“It belonged to my employer. I must go to the office this morning and account for it. What SHALL I do?”

I found on questioning him, that he had been gambling for two or three months. He had begun by learning to play cards of a fellow clerk; played at first, merely for the pleasure of it, but soon found that a ‘small stake was necessary to give interest to the game.’ In short, he had gone the road which thousands have trod before him. From innocent card playing, to betting at whist, and from the whist table to the faro-bank. Of course, I was very angry with the boy. But I was sorry, too, as I looked into that fair young face, agonized with fear and shame—sorry for him, and still more sorry for the proud father and fond mother, who must soon know of their dishonor.

But I had to brush away these emotions and answer the practical question.

“What shall I do?”

It was plain that the first thing to be done was to get the money back, if possible. I dressed rapidly, went to the house of a legal friend, and woke him up. His advice was soon given.

Don't try law with these people. Go to them yourself, alone, and demand the money on the ground that they won it from a minor.” I decided to try.

I confess that this decision made me nervous. I had never handled a card, had never been in a gambling house, nor spoken with a professed gambler. Moreover, it was not yet six o'clock in the morning. I went home, swallowed a cup of coffee, and set out on my strange errand.

Edward had lost seventy dollars at Franklin's gambling house; one hundred and fifty at Hodgson's and one hundred and thirty at Dufour and Clark's. He gave me each address, street and number; my task was to go to these men, talk with them face to face, and get the money—if I could.

Franklin was my first man. It was seven A. M. when I knocked at his door—there was no bell to pull. A maid admitted me, after some parley, and led the way into a back room, where I found Franklin shaving before a little glass hung at the window. His appearance was not prepossessing, a bullet head covered with a heavy shock of irongrey hair, and set strongly on a pair of brawny shoulders; a bull dog expression of face; the whole figure indicating animal force, brutality and obstinacy.

His gruff "What do you want at this hour of the morning?" did not tend to reassure me. The upshot of my conference with him was a blunt refusal.

"The fellow took his risk and must stand by it."

With this I left him.

Hodgson was my next man. His 'place of business' was shut, but a negro who was hanging about told me where he lived, in a distant part of the city. A carriage soon set me down in front of a grocery store, with the sign "W. B. Hodgson, family Groceries." A decent, even handsome woman, with a good honest face presided at the desk.—The place was in perfect order, with all the air of prosperous trade. She told me that Mr. Hodgson had gone down town on business. "I must see him this morning, Madame, on private business."

The word "private" arrested her; an expression of fear and trouble gathered rapidly over her honest face. It was clear that she was no partner in the gambling trade, except to share its shame. I told my errand plainly.

"You will find my husband at, "HIS place" by this time, and he will give you the money."

I found Hodgson a man of five-and-thirty, or thereabouts, with the look of a well-to-do tradesman, and an open, frank expression. My story was hardly begun when he asked—

"Do you recognize me?"

"No."

"Well," said he, "you paid me my wages many a day, when I worked in the Methodist Book Concern, and you were then cashier."

“He told me the steps of his fall, hoped some day to give up this part of his business,” and bore the lecture I gave him with the best possible feeling.

“As for poor Edward,” said he, “I have often warned the boy not to come into this or any other such place. Here is the money,” handing me out one hundred and fifty dollars.

I told him of my failure with Franklin.

“Go first to Dufour & Clark’s—you will get your money there; they have no principle, but they are both arrant cowards; then tell Franklin that both Hodgson and Dufour have paid up, and say from me that HE HAD BETTER.

There was an emphasis on the HAD BETTER which was full of meaning.

In five minutes I had reached Dufour’s. He was not at home, but I would find him at 22 Jones street.

“Whose place is that?”

“O, it’s a house where many of the gambling fraternity gather of a morning.”

To Jones street, therefore, I went and found No. 23, a smart, three-story, brick house. The front entry was open, but the way was soon stopped by a green baize door. At my rap, it was opened a little.

“Is Mr. Dufour here?”

“Yes; upstairs.”

I could see that the ground-floor room was nearly full of men; the second story contained a similar lot; and I confess to a little tremor when I was told to go a story higher. Here, again, the baize door, stopped the way; but the door-keeper called Dufour out.

“Well, what do you want with me?” he asked.

“Come down stairs; I will tell you my business below.”

A little to my surprise, he put on his hat and came quietly down to the front door. Here he stopped, and demanded my errand.

“Walk on with me,” said I.

“Not a step until you tell me what you want!”

“He was a young man, apparently about twenty five, of good person and manners. I put my arm within his and said:

“Now, if you will walk quietly with me, like a gentlemen, towards your place. I will tell my errand as we go; if not, I will call the police.”

My grip on his arm was pretty firm.—He looked at me for a moment, and submitted.

At first he scouted my demand for a return of Edward’s money, but by-and-by he softened and told me his own history. It was the old story of temptation and weakness, with the old excuse and palliations. He gave me a half promise to reform, but would not fix a time to begin. We reached the door of his den in the second story of a very good house. Without rapping he walked in; and I followed. A stout, ruddy man, of thirty or so, sat at a table writing or casting up accounts.

“Well, Clark,” said Dufour, “we must shell out freely for last night’s work.”

Clark looked up from his desk, and saw me behind Dufour, and in a sudden access of cowardly fright, ran out of the door and hurried down the stairs. In a moment more, I saw him sealing the fence of the back-yard. Dufour burst into a hearty laugh.

“He’s off! He took you for a judge or a policeman, to say the least. But that won’t stop our settlement.”

He drew out a drawer of the desk, and counted the money in gold, and handed it over.

“Tell your young friend never to enter this place or any other of the sort again.”

“And let me tell you,” I replied, “that the place is just as bad and will be just as fatal for you as for him.”

The poor fellow seemed softened and saddened as he bade me good bye.

It only remained to see Franklin again. I told him that the other two had disgorged “What is that to me? You will get nothing here.”

“Mr. Franklin,” said I, “Hodgson says that you HAD BETTER pay up.”

He looked at me for a moment, opened his pocket book, and counted out seventy dollars.

By ten o’clock in the morning the money was in Edward’s hands, and he was spared the shame of acknowledging himself a defaulter. But I made it a condition that the facts should be made known to his parents, and to his employer, with strong promises for the future. One would think such a lesson as this might have saved him. Alas! The poison was in his veins; in a few months he was a ‘bankrupt in purse and character,’ and he has never risen again.

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