

## *A Friend in Need*

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They used to make fun of him at the office. He was a queer old fellow, with a solemn face, and, what we thought, ridiculously polite ways. He would take off his hat when he came in, and say:

“Good morning, gentlemen. I trust I see you all in good health this fine day.”

And some of the boys would nod—and some wouldn’t do anything; but I never could help standing up and bowing, perhaps because I knew that my mother would have said I ought to do it.

To be sure he was only on salary like ourselves, but he had been at R— & B—’s twenty-five years, and young fellows had come and gone, and there he was.

And, you see, it was gentlemanly of him, I said; and if he was a little creature, with a queer little wig, why he looked something like a gentleman, too, I said once to Merrivale, next desk to mine; but—well—I didn’t try it again.

You see, Merrivale was up to everything, dressed elegantly, sneered at everything almost, and I’d come from a country town and he was a city man.

Nobody was down on “Old Dumps” as he was, especially after he made us that speech about our conduct to the ladies.

Dumps made a speech, you know; and it was Merrivale who had said the lady only came in to look at him.

I’m sure she really wanted to know the way to the street she asked for; and how she colored and hurried out!

And Dumps with his brown wig, looked to me like the gentleman that day; and Merrivale with his fine curling hair and black moustache and broad shoulders, like a puppy.

“The man who calls a blush to the cheek of a good woman by look to tone must have forgotten his own mother,” said Old Dumps.

“When the lady asked you a civil question, she relied on her belief that you were a gentleman, Mr. Merrivale. When you answered her as you did, and spoke of her as you did, any one could read you insulting thoughts, Mr. Merrivale; and you did not even rise from your seat, sir. You proved that she was very much mistaken.”

“Mean to say I am no gentleman?” said Merrivale.

“In this instance, sir,” said Old Dumps, “you certainly have not conducted yourself as one should.”

Merrivale pulled his coat half off, and pulled it on again.

“Pshaw,” said he, “he knows he’s safe. There’d be no fun in knocking down an old bag of bones like that. I could do it with my little finger, But you attend to your own business, will you, Old Dumps, I can behave myself without your advice, and that ain’t the first woman that’s come in just for a sort of flirtation. I’m used to that sort of thing. I am.”

“Mr. Dumps is right this time,” said I.

“Bah!” said Merrivale. “You’re from the country.”

“Thank Heaven for it, then my young friend,” said Dumps, and sat down.

After that Merrivale was never even half way civil to Dumps, and the boys followed Merrivale’s lead, But I like the old fellow. When we met in the street I’d take off my hat and shake hands, and say some of those polite things that mother used to say. And I wrote of him to mother, and she said she was glad that her boy knew what was due to a good old gentleman. But after all, in the office, you know what the boys thought and said had its influence.

Who were the boys? Why, there was Merrivale, with his daring airs, and his way of letting you know he was a favorite with the women.

And Canberry, who didn’t care about style, and knew the city.

And Stover, who used to come with red eyes and headaches, and boast that he had been making a night of it.

It was lonely enough in the great city, and I should have liked to have joined the company with Dumps and walk home with him from church sometimes, but I was afraid of meeting one of the boys, and I never did. But I would bow to him, and we took our hats off to each other always.

Sometimes, when I lived at Haredale with my mother, I’ve seen the sky beautiful and bright and blue one hour, and the next black with the clouds of a thunder storm. Just that way my trouble came to me—an awful trouble—such as I could not have dreamed of.

I had written to my mother that I was doing well and liked my business, and would be down to see her on Sunday, when I was sent for to go into the inner office; and there—I can’t go through with it—I can’t even remember details! But I was charged with being a thief.

You’d have to understand our particular business, as well as book-keeping, to know how I was supposed to have done it; but they believed I had robbed them of one hundred pounds.

They urged me to confess. I was innocent, and I said so. Then they told me that they did not wish to be hard on me. I was young. The city was a bad place for boys. They would be merciful, and only dismiss me without a recommendation! All I could say had no effect. They proved me

guilty before they accused me they said; and at last I staggered out into the office. The boys were getting ready to go home. I saw they knew what had happened.

“None of you believed this of me,” said I. “None of you who know me?”

And Merrivale said:

“Look here, Forrester, you’re very lucky to get off so.”

And Canberry said:

“Now come, we know too much to be fooled. It’s always your sly boots of a good young man that does these sort of things.”

And Grab said:

“I say, Forrester, don’t talk too much; you’ll give yourself away.”

And Stover said:

“Oh, go take a glass of brandy, and don’t go on like a girl about it.”

And with shame, and rage, and grief, I could have died; when out of his dusty corner came little Old Dump, in his little snuff-colored overcoat, and held out his hand.

“Mr. Forrester,” he said. “I’ve watched you ever since you’ve been here. I know what you are. You are incapable of a dishonest act, and what is more I will prove it before I rest. The man who honors his mother will do no dishonorable thing.”

He took my hand in his arm, and, bowing to the others, walked out with me. I heard Grab and Stover and Canberry laugh, but Merrivale gave us a furious look, and stood, white to the lips, looking after us.

“Mr. Dumps,” said I, “I thank you for your confidence in me—I deserve it—in this, at least; but it saved my heart from breaking under this disgrace. How shall I tell my mother?”

“Don’t tell her yet,” said he. “Wait.—Others shall think of you as I do soon.”

Then we went on in silence. He took me to his room, where he kept bachelor’s hall.—He made tea for me, and served me with sliced potted beef and thin bread and butter. The room was a strange, old-fashioned place, enough like a room in a story—and there was a miniature of a young lady in the costume of forty years before, on the wall, over the mantel; and of book shelves, old calf-bound volumes—Fielding’s *Amelia*, Thaddus of Warsaw, *Evelina*—I can’t tell you all of them; and on a stand near the fire, the prayer book, with a book-mark hanging to it.

And it was not until we had done tea that he said to me apologetically, after I had called him Mr. Dumps:

“Mr. Forrester, excuse me; but I am not named Dumps. That is the name by which the young men at the store considered it witty to call me. I confess I could not see the wit, but it rather hurt them more than me. I saw by your manner that you had made a mistake. My name is Adams.”

I was so much ashamed of having used the nick-name, innocently as I did it, I could have cried.

But my friend comforted me. I think that but for his sympathy that night I should have taken my own life. I did not believe he could help me even then.

But he did. I said I could not tell you what they accused me of doing unless you knew the ins and outs of our business. And I can't tell you how I did it for the same reason. But one day he came to me, flushed with triumph, and took both my hands and shook them hard, and said:

“My dear boy, it's all right. I'd watched before and had a clue. Your character is cleared. The firm welcome you back, with regrets that they should have suspected you, and the real culprit is found. The real culprit is Merrivale, and Stover is his accomplice.”

And so it really was. They had doctored my books and meddled with my proofs.—They made me out as a thief as plainly as though I had been one, and they never guessed that “Old Dumps,” with his suspicions aroused, had played detective, and was able to come to my rescue in the hour of need.

I went back to my situation and I've got on well even since; but there's more of my story. Think of my dear Old Dumps turning out to be my uncle—my mother's own brother—and neither of us guessing it.

Long ago other people had quarreled and so separated these two, who were always friends.

Think of the little man in the shabby wig and coat proving to be quite rich, and going down into the country to live with his sister for the rest of his life.

In vacations and holidays I go to see them. They are happy together, and the little tea is set with china, and there is spotted beef and jelly and I'm petted like a child. And in my uncle's room the old miniature of the young lady hangs on the mantel piece as it did in his lodgings.

And once he told me its sweet, sad story, and I knew why the quaint old man in the office had a more true and tender gallantry to women, and was a braver friend and more perfect gentleman than the young fops who grinned at him from the high stools between his desk and the window, and gave him the nickname of Old Dumps.

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