

THE YOUTH'S PAGE



MODESTY.

'What hundred books are best, think you?' I said, Addressing one devoted to the pen. He thought a moment, then he raised his head, 'I hardly know. I've only written ten.'

ATTACHING TARLIBERRY.



At eight o'clock, breakfast at quarter-past, to the office at half-past, work all the forenoon, luncheon at one, back again to the office at two, work all the afternoon, home at quarter to six, study all the evening, bed at ten. And begin all over again to-morrow.

And all over again the next day, for this was the way Henry Manson passed every week-day in the year, excepting the fortnight's vacation which he took whenever nobody else cared to take his, so that it either came so early as to resemble a dinner which stops short at soup, or so late that it seemed like getting into church just in time to hear the benediction.

Henry was junior clerk for Pettigrew, Pitts, Pepper and Co., wholesale grocers, who occupied a dark, coffee-scented, granite warehouse in a dark, coffee-scented, granite street, where the rattway roared with enormous trucks, and the sidewalk rattled and banged beneath contrary currents of boxes, barrels and puncheons in a continual state of violent transmission from cart to store or from store to cart.

Inside were more boxes barrels and puncheons piled as high as the ceiling all over the broad floor. In one corner was the office, and in one corner of that was a desk at which Henry was almost always to be found, writing away at bills and invoices, from morning till night.

It was weary, monotonous work in itself, and worse, promised no future. Henry might continue to write at that desk for years, and then be no further advanced than now: for in the great city were hundreds and thousands of young men anxious for employment, who could do his task as well as he could, and he had never had any opportunity to show himself capable of better things.

Notwithstanding, he cruised faithfully on every day, in the hope that his chance would yet come, and toiled every evening over books which would fit him to take advantage of it whenever it might be offered.

The chance came, as chances generally do, quite unexpectedly, and in a way totally different from any Henry had ever imagined.

It had been a hard day in the office. Two of the clerks were absent, and two more were out on special work, throwing so much more labour on the rest; while the book-keeper, who thought it due to the dignity of his position never to be in a good humour, was in an uncommonly bad one, even for him, and everybody seemed overworked, irritable, and discontented.

Henry felt particularly despondent, for he was behind-hand with his own duties, and having made several blunders in performing the unfamiliar tasks of the absentees, had been severely scolded by the book-keeper.

'It's no use,' thought Henry. 'I might as well give up and try an easier business like coal-heaving, or a better-paid one like car driving, or a more dignified one such as canvassing or distributing samples of soap.'

The poor fellow, who was half-tired out, and wholly discouraged, attempted to smile at his own easiness, but abandoned the effort before he had fairly begun.

'Manson!' called Brierty, the bookkeeper, at that moment. 'This way!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Mr Pepper wants you,' continued Brierty, surlily. 'He's in his private room. Come, don't keep him waiting!'

Henry went out, greatly wondering what could be the matter. Neither Mr Pepper nor any other member of the firm had much intercourse with the subordinate clerks, and a summons to the private room was exceptional.

'Probably I'm to be discharged,' said Henry to himself. He tapped lightly the door of the little inner room and then entered, with a great effort to look unembarrassed and as if it were a perfectly common thing for him to be there.

Mr Pepper, a stout, dark man with glittering black eyes, and speech so concise that all his remarks seemed intended for ten-word telegrams, turned around in his swivel chair to face the junior clerk.

'Saw you studying a commercial law treatise,' said he, without the slightest preface. 'Yes, sir,' answered Henry, puzzled at this peculiar beginning of the interview. 'But not in three hours.'

'Been through it?'
'Yes, sir.'
'Understand it?'
'Fairly well, sir.'
'Know about attachment process?'
'I think I do.'
'Good. You're the only man in the office who does, then. Brierty doesn't—just asked him. Well! I want you to go to Damas. Now. The train starts in twenty-seven minutes. Have to look alive.'

'Yes, sir,' said Henry, who, completely taken aback by the suddenness of this extraordinary commission, was all at sea as to what he might be expected to do. He soon learned. Mr Pepper, using about one-third the number of words any other man would have required for the same purpose, explained that Jonas Tarliberry, who kept a general store at Damas, and who owed the firm a considerable amount of goods bought on credit, was on the point of failure.

Now, since Tarliberry's stock was but just sufficient to satisfy his indebtedness to Pettigrew, Pitts, Pepper and Co., and certain other houses were also his creditors, it was necessary to use all dispatch in order to put a first attachment upon his goods. None of the firm chanced to be able to go; and time being wanting to procure an attorney's services, the first available man must be sent.

'You're the one,' snapped Mr Pepper. 'Know what to do? Yes? Then do it! Here's a signed blank writ—fill it up yourself. Don't let anybody get ahead of you. Don't spare money. Here's some. Now, off you go!'

Henry found himself half-way to the railroad station before he fairly came to a clear understanding of what had happened, and of the swift change in his situation brought about within the past few minutes.

'This is my chance, and I'm going to improve it! So, in high spirits he dashed into the station and up to the ticket window. Two men were already there.

'One to Damas,' said the first.

'One to Damas,' echoed the second.

'Halloa!' thought Henry, surprised. 'Travel up there seems lively to-day.'

His turn coming, he stepped to the window, saying, 'One to Damas, please.'

The two men turned around on hearing this request, and



appearing to recognise him, exchanged a glance. Henry at once understood that his errand would not be accomplished without opposition, for he, too, had recognised them.

One was Browning, of Mace, Natt and Co., the other Cutter, of Nash and Cutter, both rival grocery houses, and beyond doubt, likewise creditors of Jonas Tarliberry. They were certainly bound upon the same mission as he.

Browning and Cutter did not speak, but hurried away to the train. They went into the smoker, while Henry, entering another car, sat down to think what he should do.

'Those two seemed to have joined forces,' mused he. 'Of course, then, their claims are not so large but that there will be enough to satisfy both, and they mean to help each other. And both will unite to fight me, for if I get in my demand first there will be nothing left for either of them. Well, we'll see.'

With a stylographic pen he proceeded to fill in the blank writ Mr Pepper had given him, which was already signed by the judge, as in sometimes done. The amount of the claim was nearly six hundred pounds and Henry knew that if he saved such a sum to the firm his future fortune would be bright, while the failure to secure it would forever end all his hopes of advancement.

'But I won't fail,' he declared. 'I'll get there first if anybody gets there at all.'

He examined the roll of bank-bills which had been given him, to ascertain what his resources might be. To his astonishment he found that he had forty pounds.

'Gracious!' ejaculated he. 'I'm really not to spare money, sure enough. And it means, too, that Mr Pepper thinks I'd have trouble. Very likely he knew that the other houses would have the same information he had.'

Clearly, the first thing to do was to find out all about Damas, and the conductor was evidently the man to ask. Henry found that Tarliberry's store was four miles from the station at a place called Mosher's Mills, and that there was no regular means of conveyance between the two villages.

'You'll be lucky if you find a conveyance as Damas is a little bit of a village, and why we stop there I never could see. Sometimes you can get a man to drive you over to the Mills, and sometimes you can't—more can't than can, generally speaking.'

'But what shall I do if there isn't a conveyance?'
'Walk, I suppose,' replied the conductor, indifferently. 'You'll have companions in misery, anyway. There are two men in the smoker who've been asking the same question. The three of you might keep one another company—if you happen to fancy it.'

The conductor walked off winking. The 'two men in the smoker' had manifestly given him some idea of the situation of affairs.

Henry sat through the rest of the journey in an unpleasantly nervous frame of mind, longing to do something, and yet it was quite obvious that he could at present only wait to see what might turn up.

If his rivals obtained the only conveyance, what was to become of him? And if there were no conveyance at all, what then?

It seemed to him that he would staidly sacrifice a year's salary for the monopoly of any sort of vehicle which would get him to Mosher's Mills half an hour ahead of that pair in the smoker. His first work at the Mills would be to find a constable to serve the attachment, and this might take more time than he could spare.

Before long the engine whistled, and a look at his watch told him that this must be Damas. He rushed out of the car, and standing on the lowermost step, made ready to swing off the moment he could safely do so.

Yet, quick and prompt as Henry was, he forgot the very simple, self-evident fact that the first carriage of a train reaches the station before the last carriage does.

When he sprang upon the little platform at Damas he saw Browning and Cutter running across the upper end, and tumbling into a dilapidated old cart, which he instantly perceived to be the only carriage anywhere in sight. He darted toward it, shouting to the driver to wait for him.

'Go on! Go on!' cried Browning.

'Don't stop!' screamed Cutter.

'I'll just hold up a minute and see wut he wants,' answered the driver, coolly. 'F I kin git 'nuther passenger, why, I'm a-goin' t' take him.'

'Never mind. Here's five shillings apiece for these two empty seats inside here. Now, remember, they're ours,' exclaimed Browning. 'No room here, young man,' he continued, laughing. Henry ran up. 'We've a fancy for seclusion and extra seats.'

Henry was very angry. 'Of all the mean, contemptible tricks—' he broke out.

'Don't get excited, my lad!' sneered Cutter, lighting a cigar. 'Haven't you ever learned that all's fair in war and the grocery trade?'

'And that yours isn't the first unfortunate attachment!' added Browning, chuckling.

Henry who had already turned away from them, resolved to act instead of talking. Showing five shillings to the driver, he said:

'If this is the price of seats in this thing, I don't object. There's room in front with you, isn't there?'

'In course!' answered the man, beaming with joy, and seizing the money. 'Up with ye, sonny!'

'Here!' roared Browning and Cutter, both together. 'None of that! We've bought—'

'Ye've bought four seats, but there's a fit' one fur sale, an' it's sold, interrupted the driver, grinning at Henry. 'Naow ye've got what ye paid fur, an' so's he! Git up, Jake!'

He swung his whip, and the horse moved off with its inharmonious load.

The driver, whose name proved to be Elmer Cummings, was not in an unnatural state of exhilaration over a trip which was putting more money into his pocket than he would have earned in a fortnight under ordinary circumstances.

'Sakes alive!' he kept saying. 'Wan't it luck that I happened to be daown t' the station this particular day? Ye see, I don't make no reg'lar business o' kerrying folks t' th' Mills—only when work's light, I jes' hitch up an' come for th' sake o' th' aoutin,' an' pick up anythin' that offers. Now I guess I know what you three's after.'

Henry made no reply.

'Tarliberry, ain't it?' asked Cummings.

Henry nodded absently. To tell the truth, he was much more intent on overhearing whispers passing between the two men inside than on listening to Cummings's idle ramblings. He did not believe that his troubles were over yet.

'That's it, is it? Tachment, likely? Be ye a constable sheriff?'

Henry shook his head. The pair behind appeared to be forming some plan, to judge from the very earnest tones of their repressed voices.

'Ain't, eh?' continued Cummings, slyly. 'Then ye expect to find one at th' Mills?'

'Why, yes. Isn't there one there?'

'Oh, yes, there's one, only—'

At this moment Henry caught one or two words of the talk going on within—enough to understand what the enemy were plotting.

'Very well,' he said to himself. 'If that's their idea, why, I must beat them at their own game.'

The making of this decision prevented him from noticing the queer expression upon Elmer Cummings's hard features, which would otherwise have led him to draw that astute person out a little.

'Do you own this cart?' asked Henry, hastily.

'Sartin.'

'What will you take for it?'

Cummings looked surprised at first, then meditative, then cunning.

'Wal, I hain't never thought o' tradin', he began.

'Quick! Will you take ten pounds?'

'Well—'

'Yes or no?'

'Yes, I s'pose,' admitted Cummings, 'sence ye press me so hard. But p'raps them others—'