

The Storyteller

BETTER ACT A GENTLEMAN.

Some men are born gentlemen, but the number is not large; others, in the process of moral elevation, become gentlemen through a denial and removal of those selfish influences that lead to an utter disregard of others, while a large number merely play the gentleman on such occasions as seem most fitting to advance their interests or minister to their love of the world's good opinion, but are, at all other times, as ungentlemanly in their intercourse as it is possible for them to be. The very fact of playing the gentleman under restraint gives their boorish propensities an increased activity the moment they are free again.

Mr Partridge belonged to and fairly represented the last-named class. He was no gentleman, and yet, to have hunted at the truth would have been to awaken his warmest indignation, for, strange as it may seem, he imagined himself to be every inch a gentleman. Mr Partridge was in business; though not as successful as he might naturally wish to be. Money came in but slowly, while the due-days of notes occurred with a most unpleasant frequency. A note-paying day rarely found Mr Partridge in his best humor, for it did not often occur that on such occasions his bank account showed the required balance. Then he had to bustle around, borrow, force collections, or sacrifice good paper—none of which acts helped in any way to produce an equable state of mind. The man who came into Mr. Partridge's store on one of these note-paying days had to be an excellent customer, or one whose good opinion he had the best of reasons for wishing to retain, to meet with any attentions whatever, or to escape downright insult.

Mr. Partridge, in commencing business, had, like most young men, a fair proportion of up-hill work to perform; for the largest part of his capital lay in his ability and industry. The greatest drawback was in his own character. To a customer who was expected to buy, Partridge was as affable and as polite as a man could be; and the same was the case if the individual who called in at his store was one from whom a present or remote advantage was expected. But, to all others, it came natural to bristle like a porcupine; and the touch of his quills was felt and remembered much oftener than he imagined, or than was at all for his interest to occur. Many a dollar failed to reach his till on this account, that would, otherwise, have reposed there, and many an hour was spent in money hunting on note-paying days that might have been spent at his desk or counter, had he been in heart what he affected to be on certain occasions—a gentleman. But he did not know this; for inordinate self-love, like the poison of a serpent, blinds at certain seasons. One day—it was a 'short day' with the young storekeeper—a man came in and after looking around and making casual examination of goods with the manner of a person who had some other end than that of buying in his mind, approached the desk at which he was standing, and made some remark, in a familiar way, about the weather. From the moment the man came in the eyes of Partridge were upon him, and he soon understood clearly that he had no intention of buying. The way in which he examined his goods annoyed him, and by the time the stranger reached the part of the store where he stood, he was prepared to meet him with a rebuff.

'What did you say, sir?' was the quick, rudely-uttered inquiry of Partridge.

The man looked at him a moment with evident surprise, and then quietly turned away, but still lingered in the store.

'Mr Partridge is not in, I presume,' said he to a clerk, who stood behind one of the counters, at some distance from where the proprietor still lingered moodily at his desk.

'Yes sir, he is,' was the affable reply. 'You were speaking with him a moment ago.'

'Oh!' The man turned and looked at Partridge. In a little while afterward he went away.

'What did that fellow want?' asked Partridge, ill-naturedly, as soon as the man had withdrawn.

'He wished to see you, I believe,' replied the clerk. 'I was here. Why didn't he tell me his business? I wonder what he wanted?'

The incident rather worried the mind of the young storekeeper, for with a knowledge of the fact that the stranger asked for him came the impression that, in treating him rudely, he might have foregone some advantage.

A few hours afterward, a man in the same business with himself said, on meeting him—'Have you seen Bispham?'

'No.' The whole aspect of Partridge changed. 'Is he in town?'

'Yes.'

'Are you certain?'

'I am. He was to see me, this morning.'

'Strange! He wrote me that he would be here about this time.'

'And hasn't he called yet?'

'No.'

'I sold him a pretty good bill.'

'Ah?'

'He'll be along, I suppose,' said Partridge, with affected indifference, and then hurried away to complete

his 'financiering' for the day, and get back to his store as quickly as possible, to wait a call from Bispham; but, when evening came, the expected customer had not arrived.

On the next day he heard of him in various quarters; and the invariable story was that he had been buying, and cashing his bills. Partridge couldn't understand it. During the past year he had received many orders from Bispham, who lived in Pittsburg, all of which he had promptly filled, and, as far as he could judge from letters, to the customer's satisfaction. Why he had passed his store, now that he was in the city, and made bills at other establishments, was more than he could divine.

On the third day Partridge saw the stranger before referred to enter his store again, and linger around as before. After a while he came up to the desk where the young man stood, as on the previous occasion, and said to him—'I believe I have a small bill on your books, which might as well be settled. Bispham is my name.'

'Mr Bispham!' exclaimed Partridge, a sudden light breaking on his countenance. 'How do you do? I'm glad to see you. When did you arrive in our city?' And as this was said he reached out his hand and shook that of the customer warmly.

'I've been here for several days,' was the reply of Bispham; but there was no correspondent enthusiasm in his manner.

'Indeed! Why haven't you called before?'

'I was in on the first day of my arrival,' replied the merchant; 'but was so disgusted with the rudeness of one of your clerks or some other person about your establishment, that I didn't care to come again.'

The countenance of Partridge fell.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured, in a low voice, while a guilty confusion was on his face. 'But I'm sure, Mr Bispham, that no rudeness was intended.'

'Perhaps not,' said the customer; 'but I'm rather sensitive on such matters. I always make it a point to be civil to friends or strangers, and expect as much for myself. If I don't find civility in anyone, I don't feel bound to have any intercourse with him either as a business man or a friend.'

A silence highly embarrassing to Partridge succeeded.

'If you will draw off my account, I will settle it,' said the merchant. 'I must leave for New York this afternoon.'

Partridge turned to his ledger and made out the bill.

'It's a small matter, Mr Bispham. There's no need of settling it just now,' said Partridge.

'I like to pay off these small matters,' replied Bispham, as he drew out his pocket-book. 'Put a receipt on it, please.'

The bill was receipted, and the money paid.

'If you should want anything more in my line, I hope you will send on your orders,' said Partridge. 'I shall always be happy to furnish you with goods in my line, at the lowest market rates.'

'Thank you,' replied Bispham, 'but I've made arrangements with Murdock to do all my business here in future.'

Then bowing with distant politeness, the merchant retired, leaving Partridge to his own reflections, which were not of the most agreeable character.

A lesson like this, it might be supposed, would do much for the improvement of our hero's manners; but what is 'bred in the bone' is hard to come out of the flesh. Unless a man, from impulse or long-confirmed habit, acts the gentleman on all occasions, he will be very apt to forget himself at times, when it would be much to his interest and reputation to play his part in the most agreeable manner.

When Bispham went to Pittsburg he described to a man in the same business, who was dealing pretty extensively with Partridge, the manner of his reception.

'I guess I'll give the gentleman a trial also,' said the man. 'I'm to Philadelphia next week.'

He did so. On arriving in the city he called at the store of Partridge. Not being a man of very remarkable presence, he did not receive any particular attention. This was all natural enough; but it did not stop there. In approaching Partridge, which he did with some casual question, he was treated with such indifference, and even rudeness, that he turned on his heel and left the store. As in the previous case, Partridge remembered him when he called to settle his bill; and, when it was too late to retrieve his error, found that he had, in his boorishness, insulted one of his best customers.

After that for some weeks he assumed a better exterior, and was particularly pleasant to everyone who came into his store, but, not turning up angels in disguise, he became discouraged, and fell back into his old habit, that, like a long-worn garment, fitted him more easily.

A very natural thing, in the case of Partridge, was his falling in love. The object of his attachment was a young lady of good family, every member of which was as remarkable for true gentlemanly and ladylike conduct on all occasions, as Partridge was remarkable for the opposite when there was nothing to be gained by assuming a virtue to which he had no real title. The name of the young lady was Emily Weston. Besides her social standing, accomplishments, beauty, and sweetness of disposition, Emily possessed another attraction to which the young man was by no means indifferent—and that was money. We will not say that this was her strongest attraction, so far as Partridge was concerned; but it had its due influence in determining his favorable impression of the young lady.