

A Life Ruined Among Saving Influences

by William T.S. Deavor, 1896

To the readers of the *Pennsylvania Methodist*:¹ I wish to describe a tragedy of human life amid saving influences. The theater of action is a college² in one of our Middle States, and the hero is Jim³, my bosom friend.

Lest I be called unkind and untrue, I will preface these lines by saying that I still love my hero as much as the day we parted company. I can never criticize him unjustly. My solicitude for my readers forbids me saying a word that would deceive or mislead. As I write I pray that this story may save my readers from the snares that ruined my friend.

Jim was a favorite son in a pious family in southern Pennsylvania. His parents were accustomed to toil, and although they gained a livelihood they never amassed a fortune. Like all good, true parents, they desired their children to start well in life, and to this end planned for Jim a brilliant career.

He had spent his apprenticeship of eighteen years on his father's farm, fixing forever the principles of character – and acquiring, as we would suppose, many a habit necessary to a useful and honorable life. Before he reached the age of eighteen, he gave evidence of his future calling – showing by his mental, moral and physical powers that with proper culture he was destined to attain eminence in the highest calling of life. The hearts of his dear parents throbbed with gratitude as they noted his lofty ideals and watched the upward tendency of his aspirations.

When they became aware of his marked capabilities, a plan was devised for his careful training. Not only did his parents sacrifice their comforts and life-long savings, but a number of friends stood ready with money and influence to assist and encourage. The great Church which he promised to serve laid money at his feet. With so much in his favor, his success now depended upon how he would use his opportunities.

The time came all too soon for him to leave home and pursue his scholastic training in college halls. No doubt everyone is greatly impressed with the new and untried conditions of college life. To me it was a new world, a new society, a miniature commonwealth. When one enters this new sphere he finds his unchanged self amid changed relations, and under new and increased obligations. As in a large family, there are so many whose rights we must respect and whose interests we must serve.

In more respect than one, this college was a model. It was co-educational. We met in chapel, recited together, and sat opposite each other at the table, besides many other social privileges. The halls echoed with the merry laughter of

the brightest and purest girls of all that country. I have graduated from three institutions, and where have I seen a school where the incentives to virtue and the restraint against vice were stronger. The day you enter it you feel the strength of these contending forces. The college is controlled by a leading church, and a high and healthy moral tone usually prevails. One of the essential requirements for admission is a good moral character. At this time the college had the largest attendance and strongest faculty in its history. Every teacher and all the students but four were Christians. Better conditions for moral and intellectual improvement could scarcely be found.

As Jim was preparing for the ministry, his welcome was most cordial. Being attractive in appearance and affable in manner, he soon adjusted himself to his new surroundings, sharing the confidence and respect of all his associates.

He was preeminently a social character – a quality in itself useful and harmless, but which to him proved a fatal tendency. Jim had a bright mind and readily elicited truth. His memory seemed perfect, his voice was deep, strong, and musical – and as an elocutionist and orator he had no superior in the school. I never saw a young man with a finer physique. Being robust and capable of hard mental work, he at once took and held high rank in all his classes.

In view of these apparent virtues, the President⁴ of the college made him “night watchman” – the gravest trust ever committed to a student in that institution. He was not above work, desiring rather to pay his own way than to depend upon charity. This duty paid one-half of all his expenses. This, with the voluntary help of his friends, raised him above financial embarrassment. Good reader, will you agree with me that his lot was a favored one. That he could do this extra work, lead his class, preach on Sunday, and not break down, showed beyond a doubt that great success had met him more than half way.

But since the most decisive test of any man is prosperity coupled with responsibility, so it is proved in this case. The trial of prosperity was too severe. For selfish ends he soon began to lick the dust of compromise with evil, and sell his conscience to sin. His strongest tendencies were no longer held in abeyance – but fostered, they soon developed into controlling habits. For a time no one knew his schemes but God and those implicated; but motives were soon clothed in actions – and plans secretly devised were openly executed.

His downward march to ruin began when trust was betrayed and duty was slighted. The watch was omitted while he sported in the city at late hours; the night key was given to students who went and came at leisure; plots were devised for the unlawful mingling of students, and he was privy to their schemes; and the kitchen was robbed of eatables for his comfort. Rules which he pledged to obey and defend were broken under his notice, and he made no report. For months his life was a lie – a silent acquiescence with evil under the garb of integrity, stultifying his conscience by the fallacy that it was no sin to violate law so long as

nobody knew it. But no one can afford to forget these words: “Be sure your sin will find you out.” This is a law as unvarying as the motion of the planets.

When the President knew of his dissipation, the facts were withheld from the students and every chance to redeem himself was given. After time and effort had failed to produce a reformation, his work was taken from him and given to one more worthy in hope that it would humble his pride and save him – but it only proved another step in his moral descent.

It now seemed impossible for him to rise to the plane from which he had fallen while under the influence that hastened his downfall. At the same time that the faculty decided that he must leave the institution, he had decided to leave and enter another school. Never shall I forget the day when the President in his grave and thoughtful way said to me, “Unless Jim changes his ways very soon, he is sure to come to the penitentiary or the gallows.” Those words chilled me because they were spoken by one who knew wither Jim was drifting and loved him too much to say an unkind word. Then, too, the expression of his face spoke louder than the words. The lines of his countenance told me that there was a burden on his heart, and that for Jim he had the deepest solicitude.

Fortunately, his dismissal did not obtain. A senior of the college had been assigned to a parish in March and, not knowing the facts in Jim’s case, had chosen him to supply the work till June.⁵ Like a rope to a drowning man, Jim seized the opportunity and entered this new field with a firm resolve that a new leaf should be turned and that once more he would be a man. During these three months his work was never more faithfully performed, and he won more than a local reputation as a public speaker.

Had he carried out his resolutions and paid his vows, his former errors would have been forgiven and confidence again restored. But the seeds of character sown in you and nurtured in college soon began to germinate into a harvest of shame and sorrow – fulfilling the Scripture “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

Egotism now played a more prominent part than ever before. His work often merited praise, but his nature could not stand a favorable criticism. Selfishness became his God, and friendly comment inspired his worship.

About this time he came under new influence. Having won the affections of an amiable and wealthy young lady, to gain her became an end and all else was made a means. For once in his life he felt the need of money. To succeed in his pursuit, all semblance of poverty had to be avoided. Money he must have at any cost. Ways and means were soon devised. From this point, his descent was very rapid. His university and theological education was abandoned,⁶ horses were sold and traded, the voluntary contributions from his parish were looked upon as a paltry sum, and soon the pulpit was exchanged for secular work.

As usual in these cases, he entered business and finally became a pawn broker. Much is made in this business, and more is lost. To meet the ever-growing demand for capital, money was obtained under false pretenses and forgery against his best friend summoned him as a criminal in the public gaze before the court of justice. This step put him beyond the help of his friends. The penalty must follow the offense. Saddest of all was that day when, with manacled hands, he bade farewell to his young bride for whom he had so recently sacrificed everything and departed to serve his sentence in the Eastern Penitentiary.⁷

The train that carried him so often to preach the gospel now bore him to his cell. It never gave forth a more doleful whistle than on that sad day. The prophecy of the college President was fulfilled. He did not change his ways, and he did fill a prisoner's cell.

This sad incident has grieved a thousand hearts, and I have grave apprehensions for anyone who fails to learn a lesson from its history. To those whose steps lead to college, it should be a beacon light of warning. To me it is indescribably sad – for I was his bosom friend and often sated him in his way to evil. It was not until he reached a precipitous moment that in my thought and in my bitter reflections I have tried to assign a cause to this awful failure. Aside from his own nature and the influence of his parental training, three parties must share the responsibility of his downfall.

First of all, I impeach his teachers. They may feign innocence, but guilt will surely stain their conscience. Teaching is both a science and an art. The former consists of imparting knowledge, the latter in training the powers. In the one they succeeded, in the other they failed. Education is not one-sided, but the fullest development of all our powers. Once the mind was trained at the expense of the body; now the body is trained at the expense of the higher faculties. Under these circumstances the religious and aesthetic nature lies dormant, and the moral and social nature becoming subservient to the emotions, a ruined life is too often the result.

There is rapidly developing an individuality which is an enemy of social culture. People crowd closer together in cities, but get farther apart socially. The same spirit has entered our colleges. The teacher and the student are getting farther apart. Dormitories are going out of fashion, and the association of teacher and student is limited to official relations of the classroom. In a sense, the art of teaching has failed, and the culture of the student is self-directed.

And so I hold that had the teachers studied the inner life of my friend, the cause of his actions rather than the results, and developed his moral and social nature in their logical order, his weakness would have been discovered and a proper corrective applied in time to save him.

Secondly, the students must bear the weight of their responsibility. If true to their feelings, few would plead innocence. It is a sad comment to say that mutual helpfulness in building and training Christian character in many colleges is at a discount. As a student and as a teacher in college, I have watched the decline of this saving force.

Morality was once required, but it is now elective in most colleges. Apart from theological students, few go to college for moral training. As a result, students do not perceive the relations they sustain to each other and therefore feel little sense of obligation for their fellow students. This promotes selfishness. In our homes, the strong stand as a defense for the weak. In more ways than one the college is like the home, and the same laws might be applied with profit. Hasten the day when every student shall realize that he is his brother's keeper, and every life shall be a saving force.

Just now the physical man is the exponent of greatness – and to attain this physical man, higher and eternal interests are often sacrificed. But a new spirit will yet direct education; then much that now claims our time and energy will be looked upon as filthy rags.

Often do I find my conscience questioning me, “Did you do your best? Did he fall because you failed to do your duty?” Of one thing I am confident: I did the best I knew at that time, and I further believe that those helped to ruin him could have saved him “as by fire.”

Jim was younger than I, and he always took my advice – until he became jealous of my standing and promotion, and then he treated me as a spy and sought to defeat me, though I never did so with him. Poor Jim, how gladly would I have given you my empty renown had it been the means of saving you! Sin worked its ruin. He proved the proverb, “He was caught in the snare which he had set for his friend.”

Thirdly, the man is self-condemned. His first and last study should have been his own nature. The facts in the case prove that he could have bettered his own nature. The facts in the case prove that he could have eliminated his evil tendencies or held them in abeyance. Even when he left college he showed ability to reform; but again his energy was wasted and power misdirected.

Dear reader, learn a lesson. Our modern College is not a reformatory. It is free life in its most intense form. Here, like germs in a hot-house, our tendencies are rapidly developed and habits fixed forever. College influences project themselves indefinitely into the future and mold destiny. He only is the true student and graduate who builds character for eternity by cultivating the good and eliminating the evil tendencies of his nature. Aim under all conditions to be a lady or gentleman, and never recede from this lofty position. It is only the

difference of level that makes Niagara a cataract. So it is with character. It is the difference in moral rectitude that makes one man a gentleman and another a fiend.

¹ The *Pennsylvania Methodist* was the name used by the Conference's weekly newspaper from October 1893 to about 1916. It is unclear whether W.T.S. Deavor was a regular contributor, or whether this article ever appeared in print. It is, however, consistent in tone with some of the articles printed during those years while the publication was managed by Silas Comfort Swallow. In truth, the *Pennsylvania Methodist* did not belong to the Conference, but was controlled by a group of stockholders.

² The college is Williamsport Dickinson Seminary, the Methodist Episcopal preparatory school that is now Lycoming College.

³ "Jim" is George B. Cooper, whom the college records identify as being from Williamsburg PA.

⁴ The president of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary was Edward James Gray, who served in that capacity 1874-1905 – longer than anyone else in the history of the institution. He was highly respected by the Conference and the students, and he was known for his personal concern for each one of his students – as evidenced by the paragraphs that follow.

⁵ The senior who chose George Cooper to supply the work until June was the writer himself, William T.S. Deavor, and the charge was Schloyerville – between Nescopeck and Wapwallopen. Beginning in June, Cooper supplied the work at nearby Nescopeck – which was in its last year attached to Berwick and ready to get its first full-time pastor in March 1889. He is listed in conference journal only once, in 1888, as an approved local pastor.

⁶ George Cooper did not return for the fall 1888 term at Williamsport Dickinson Seminary and never graduated from the institution. He did enter Wyoming Seminary for one year in the fall of 1889, listed as a senior, but he did not graduate from that institution either.

⁷ Eastern penitentiary opened in 1829 as part of a controversial movement to rehabilitate inmates through "confinement in solitude with labor." Designed by John Haviland, its wagon-wheel radial design was copied by over 300 prisons world-wide. It was a model facility with state-of-the-art plumbing, sewage systems, and 450 centrally-heated cells. After 142 years of continuous use, and such notable residents as Wee Willie Sutton and Al Capone, the facility was abandoned in 1971 and is now a museum and educational center for prison-related studies.