

One Boy's Influence

Samuel Moor Shoemaker

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He is just an American boy. He is nineteen and goes to high school. I suppose there are many others like him. But he has had an experience. Let me tell you about it.

One day in August of 1920 I was coming home from Chicago, and changed trains at Harrisburg. On the station platform I noticed a fellow about six feet tall, with a suit-case in one hand and a trench-coat over the other arm. I said to myself, "There is a fellow who probably goes to high school and has a certain amount of influence, and would make a real Christian if something roused him." I thought no more of it until I found that he was coming down the stairs to board the same train as I. While going down those stairs it came to me strongly, as though from outside myself, "You are going to get to know that fellow and make friends with him." There are times when God puts thoughts into the minds of men, if men are listening, and this was one of them.

I went into the day coach and sat in the only vacant seat in the car. My friend went into the smoker which was just ahead. Pretty soon a very fat old woman with five children came into the car where I was seated reading, and there was nothing to do but give her my seat. I saw that I must move into the smoker. So I gathered up my book and my bags and started for the next car. While going it came to me again strongly, "Go up and sit in front of him." Which I did, I was reading a book on Constantine, and I greatly preferred being left alone with my book. I supposed my friend wanted to be left alone with his magazine and his cigarettes. Why shouldn't I leave him alone Why should I intrude?

Then I began to think. Was it possible that some-thing important was at stake that this urge kept driving me to speak to him? Perhaps he was not a Christian, perhaps his becoming one depended on me. Somebody outside myself seemed to be telling me so. I thought of an old story of a man who asked if he were his brother's keeper, when he knew that he was. The more I read and tried to forget it, the more what had been a hazy intimation at first became a clear and powerful conviction; I must get to know that boy, or else be false to what I now knew was a spiritual command.

Of course, I did not begin by asking him, "Are you a Christian?" That would not have been good manners, and therefore not Christian, and therefore not wise. But we had to get into conversation. The day was hot – that was one topic. And the train was late – that was another. They did not last long, and they were not very exciting subjects anyway. "Where do you live, may I ask?"

"My home is in --."

"I take it that you are at school there."

"Yes, at high school."

"Have you been long up in this part of the country?"

"No -- just paying a visit to --, where I expect to go to college."

"Do you play football?" Yes, he did.

"I used to know a fellow at -- who played football, as I suppose you will when you get there. He was a rounder up there, one of their interesting sinners. He knew the dives and inhere liquor might be had. He was a good athlete and a college sport. Its rather interesting about him, by the way. A friend of mine got hold of him, and the upshot of it is that he has been a missionary for some time in China."

"That is unusual," observed my friend laconically. I had not made a dent so far. "Well, perhaps there is more of that sort of thing than you'd think," I told him, and then gave him another story of a man who had been living a loose sort of life in college, and had been won to Christ by a friend. I gave him the story in sufficient detail for him to see that something quite out of the ordinary had been brought to bear upon him, and he said, "That must be very interesting work." He pricked up his ears a bit, and showed more signs eyes were a bit foggy. His eyelids hung lower than they should: he looked dissipated. He was dissipated, though he was a long way from being a complete degenerate in the gutter. He was just a boy on the way, at a dead run, for ruin. He was living entirely for himself, was without much sense of purpose in his own life, and was living for what he could get out of life. I found lack of discipline along many lines.

We discussed the matter of relationships with other people in connection with Christ's standard of absolute love. \Ye talked of grudges, bad blood, school jealousies, criticism. Just then into the car came a parcel of black, cornfield darkies. It was a hot Saturday afternoon in August: they had come from their fields reeking with perspiration, and picked up some grog on their way which smelled like raw alcohol. When they came into the car, they sat themselves right opposite us and began to sing and to talk so noisily that we could scarcely hear ourselves across the back of my seat. My friend stood it as long as he could, and then he exploded, "Gosh, I do hate niggers!" His southern blood boiled. I said, "Old fellow, that is just what I mean. What do you think about a remark like that, in connection with what we have just been saying?" He said, "I see. I suppose Jesus would not have said that, would He?" I said that I did not think He would.

Now, among other things, my friend was smoking like a chimney. He was talking about pretty intimate things with a person he did not yet know very well: he did not quite know what to make of me yet, though there had been no "comeback"

on anything I had said to him – he had to grant it. But he was a bit nervous, as I knew, and he was taking it out in smoking. He had begun on a new pack, and was going through them, lighting one with the butt of the last. His hands were stained with nicotine. I inclined to think that his drinking was in part an effort to quiet the nicotine poison in him, and I know that liquor helped to loosen his attitude towards women. I do not say, mind you, that cigarettes were the cause of his immorality: I say they may have been the entering wedge. I asked him what he thought of cigarettes. Well, he thought they were mighty good, and did no harm "in moderation." He wanted to know what I thought. I told him that I was not a crank about tobacco; I thought men had a lot worse enemies than that, but for myself I viewed it this way. No one will say that there is any harm in having a chocolate soda, will they? No. But suppose a man in training goes into drug stores and fills himself full of ice-cream and candy during training season, is that wrong? Yes. Why? Because it lessens his efficiency in playing the game. Precisely. Now I am in training for a game that is much bigger than football. It is the game of trying to live a Christian life,

"Do you think sin has a good deal to do with our being out of touch with God?" He said that he did.

I asked, "How far do you think you would have to come yourself before you could ask B – to come all the way? Let's make this a bit more specific if you really mean business."

"All right, I am game," he said.

"Well, one of the things that will have to go is any sort of dishonesty, isn't it? Ever crib a bit in classes?" Sometimes but not often, he told me.

"Christ had four absolute standards which He never transgressed – absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. Most fellows have a pretty tough battle with impurity. How about it, have you got it where you want it, or has it got you?" We found that there were often thoughts that were rotten, and when he could he went the whole pace. I told him very naturally and honestly about my own battles and temptations at his age, and we discussed the matter sensibly and fully. It was the first time he had ever talked of it seriously. There was much of the simple hygiene of it which he did not know, and he knew nothing of ways to conquer spiritually. Happily I could tell him of not a few men who had won out, and how they had found in Christ a source of hitherto undiscovered power.

Anything that lessens my efficiency even a little, I ought to cut it out, on the same principle as the man who cuts sodas during football training season, shouldn't I? Admitted. All right. Now I have found a few fellows for whom smoking definitely led to worse things, and for whose health it was plainly injurious. Anybody seeing them would admit they ought to slow down, at any rate, and not smoke so much. But there are a lot of fellows who, if they smoke at all, will smoke a great deal: there isn't any will power there, and it's a question of

cutting it altogether, or not cutting it at all. They can't cut it down, unless they cut it out. Now when I am talking to those fellows, I can't sit there and blow smoke in their faces, and tell them that I can smoke, but they can't. I don't know why that is so, but it is so. The same applies to drink; I can't drink, however moderately, and make anyone else stop entirely. For myself it is worth while to keep in spiritual training, so that when I run into a fellow like that I am not handicapped by even a little compromise in my own life. St. Paul laid down the most sensitive ethical touchstone in the world when he said, "if meat cause my brother to offend, I will eat no meat while the world stands." He was talking of meat offered to idols, which he could eat without harm, but it would have been a scandal and a danger for simpler-minded early Christians to touch it, when for them it was so closely associated.

on that level? Some problems look differently when viewed from that standpoint. Some which you never thought "moral questions" before become moral questions when rung on this touchstone.

My friend thought this was a good argument – good enough for giving up his "weed," for, remember, he wanted to win B –, and he could not be completely won so long as he was smoking too much.

Then I said something like this: "Wouldn't all these things be included if we said that once for all we were going to give ourselves to Christ – to surrender entirely to Him?"

He said that this was a good deal to ask a man to do all at once, especially when he had not thought of it before.

"But," I went on, "you have thought of it before, I believe. At some time or other you have made up your mind to cut loose and have done with all this compromise and live a full-out Christian life. But nothing has pushed you to do it. The thought has not been acted upon, and so it has died out of your mind. Occasionally it flits back, but again being denied it finally has been given up as impracticable." He granted this.

"Now I am really saying something to you which tallies exactly with your own conscience. And when are you really going to begin?"

He thought a brief moment, and said, "I will do my best."

Now there are times when one cannot accept such a reply as that. It is too indefinite. It came too easily to mean very much, and I told him so. When he said he would "do his best," he meant some general resolution, like hundreds he had made and broken. So I said, "My friend, just remember this one thing: when you say that you are not saying it to me. Count me out. Forget me entirely. You are saying it to God. And unless you mean it, do not say it. Better think it over a while longer."

He settled back into his seat, and was quiet for about fifteen minutes. He fought as he had never fought before in his life. I was busy praying for him, and keeping sympathetic to every sign he gave; waiting interestingly but not anxiously, asking God to help him over the Great Divide. Pretty soon up came his big hand over the back of the seat, and he said, "I am coming across."

"All the way?" I asked. Yes, all the way.

We shook hands, and I smiled at him and told him it was great. Then I said, "Now what do you feel like doing right at this time?"

He said, "I think we ought to pray." So did I, and we did.

Now there are a great many better places to pray together than on a Pennsylvania Railroad train in full motion, with all the windows open, and a lot of darkies chattering like monkeys across the aisle. But it was the only place we happened to have with us at the time, and we couldn't get off very conveniently, so we prayed right there. His prayer was not long, came right out of his heart, and asked for what he needed most; first he gave himself to Christ, and then he asked for strength to keep going, and then he asked for help to win B -. When he looked up (it had been the first time he had prayed in many a day) he said, "Gosh, that helps." I said, "Of course it helps. That's what it was meant to do, and that's what it will keep on doing if you will let it."

Then I shifted my seat, and sat down beside him. I found out his name, and by mutual agreement we began calling each other by our first names. I told him that going through this great experience always made me feel mighty close to a man, and he has been "Jack" to me from that day to this, and one of the very closest friends I have.

He had taken a mighty step. He was feeling the glow of it, the importance of it, the power and responsibility of it. The thing for me to do was to be very understanding, and make him realize fully the greatness of this step, and yet let him see that it was only a start and he must become fixed in practices which would make the experience permanent.

He asked me how to "keep going." I told him that broadly there were two directions in which a man's mind must continually be traveling if he was to be successful and useful as a Christian - one was up towards God, the other was out towards men.

One was primarily maintained by prayer and Bible study, the other by personal work and service.

First we talked about the Morning Watch. Strong Christians in every generation

have found that the first hour of the day is the freshest, and that if they give part of it to God, their day will be stronger and better. I suggested that he take twenty minutes or so for Bible study, and begin by immersing himself in the heart of it, the Gospels, and steeping himself in the personality of Christ. Then take five or ten minutes in prayer; ask God for what he really needed, keeping a list of those for whom he wanted to pray most, in the fly-leaf of his Bible – the family, the school, the men he most wanted to win to Christ – and then that he listen for God's direction, as well as tell Him a lot of things.

We talked then of the right sort of books to read. Most of us are ignorant of the plain facts of Christianity. I gave him a brief bibliography which would help him in his search. He ordered the seven books I suggested the moment he got home.

He was already a nominal church member, but saw at once that he must renew his loyalty to the church, and give and get all that he could in it. We spoke of the need for companionship with live, contagious Christians, who have enough religion to give away, and don't use it all up going to church.

Then we got to the question of getting religion across to the other fellow. Of course he was keen.

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to reach B –, but there were many others in the school who needed help also. I told him that the only way to keep religion is to give it away. He must begin to function as soon as he could. Give what you can right away; it will increase as you give it. Other men are apt to be a good deal like yourself, up against temptations that are too strong for them, defeated, selfish, unhappy. Strike deep, talk honestly about sin, aim for complete surrender, and make them in turn winners of others. They come to you a field: they ought to go away a force. He wanted to know about this type and that type, and what you say when a man asks you this or that. He wanted a complete cross-section of all that I knew in a brief time. Much of it he could only learn by experience, but we talked about it for some time. When we got off the train, he thanked me, and said it was the greatest afternoon of his life. I told him the best was yet to be. He chanced to be staying in a city near my home for a week, and the following Thursday I went in to town and saw him for a couple of hours. He had been keeping his Morning Watch faithfully every day, said he found temptations still present but much easier to conquer. So far so good. He went back to his home the next day. I did not see him face to face for eleven months. It was only a week till the opening of training season for football, so he was soon back at school

again. Before long I had a letter from him containing this: "Perhaps you would care to hear how I am progressing. I think that I can say finely, I have had several hard battles, but at the time I was about to break, something in me seemed to help to put it down. I thought it was your prayer for me. Any-way I have conquered myself, and am just about ready to start my crusade.... My next letter will have some news for you." In less than a week came this: "I couldn't wait for an answer to my letter. I have some wonderful news. I have just about in hand my first convert, considered the toughest man on the squad. I have gotten him to try the morning prayer and Bible reading. He has just about come clean: it will be a matter of only a few days. To tell you frankly I didn't think I could do it. But after getting myself in hand it was much easier. I have gone this far without smoking and I believe the worst is over. I have received the set of books which I ordered. Have been writing my uncle in I really believe if I could see him I could win him.... You can't imagine how the world and living has changed, since I came across. There is more in life than I ever imagined. I know you still pray for me for when in the greatest moments of temptation, something seems to come in and give me renewed courage and the desire leaves me. And I earnestly hope you will continue to pray for me. Every evening and morning I offer a prayer for YOU.

In two weeks more he sent me this:

"B has come clean, I left it up to him three days and then asked him. He was ready. Now we are working together and I have a stubborn one this time. It will take time, I can see, but I'll get him.... My worst battles are over, I truly think they are. With God's help and your prayers, I will be O.K. It is great work. I have not committed any act of impurity since I came across that day, but I have had my battles.... As you say, 'They all want it,' only it takes confidences to do it."

Then I failed to hear for some weeks. I continued to write about once a week, giving him constant guidance and suggestion, and sharing with him other experiences of mine which had been happening. I was a little alarmed at not hearing from him, and feared he might have backslid and did not want to tell me of it. Happily my doubts inhere unfounded. They did not cause me to cease praying for him or writing to him. After about six weeks came a letter saying:

"I have been having just a bit of tough luck. I was at the -- convention in -- some time ago, contracted a cold, and as I have had the flu it turned to pneumonia. I was surely in bad shape. It's just been in the past few days that I have been about again.... There was something that hap-

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Several letters from him miscarried in the post, and it was not until January that I had word again. It ran thus:

"B -- and I are going strong. We have each taken over another fellow. In fact the spirit has the inhale school. The students hold chapel every morning. We read a chapter of the Bible and then one of us prays. It is remarkable to see them. In fact little did I think I could accomplish so much, although it is only through God's help and your prayers.... I seem to be a different person altogether, I'm so free, no restraint in my heart. My only regret is that I didn't find it sooner.... As soon as I can arrange the necessary money details I am going to get a club room. Dad has promised me the funds. He is very much pleased. He is coming across too. He is a man that does not show his feelings, but I know, and I hope it may be soon.... I am a happier person: I have no heavy feeling in my breast as of old. But this all did not come without a struggle. I have had many of them and hard ones, too: so has B --. We have prayed and they have been answered. Impurity has bothered me lately, but so far I have conquered it. Pray for me. I need it and so does B --." Within a few weeks he reported further progress: "The fellows are working fast. We are four now. Several want to come across but they can't give up some things. I told them they couldn't come clean while that was so. But they will in time, and I keep at them at all times.... It is a wonderful thing. How glad I am you found me! But I am not entirely free from bad habits: that is, I have to fight them often. I still need your prayers." In March he wrote me as follows: "I went to -- for a few days. Saw Dad, but did not win him as yet. He had a hard battle, and I prayed for him, but he did not come through. I am not discouraged nor am I going to give up the battle. In fact it only leads me to redouble my efforts.... This is the greatest game I have ever played -- so interesting and so fascinating, and the reward -- it seems as if a burden is lifted from my soul. In fact the feeling is indescribable. And I owe this all to you. How shall I ever thank you? I shall not try for it will be useless. To say the least, I was pretty far gone. I

had been leading a fast life, as you know. Dissipation had its hold on me.... But now, it's too good to be true!... The club is doing nicely. The fellows are coming across. B -, my right hand man, the one I thought hardest and almost unconquerable, is working nothing short of marvelous. In fact it keeps me humping to keep pace with him. Some of the fellows in the club joined only for curiosity, but you can rest assured I give them no easel The most remarkable part is, mothers and fathers come to me, thanking me for what I have done for their sons. It makes me thrill. They even offer to help support the club, a thing I do not want until it is absolutely necessary. Dad helped out nobly for the club."

Later, in May, this came from him: "The fellows I spoke of, we are still after: but I think it wise for them to think it out. But nevertheless we will keep after them until ice get them. . It is all wonderful.... Not long ago on the . ball field, a fellow who had not been converted was having bad luck in his batting. A bunch of us were talking about how much better we were becoming, and he, knowing just what we were connected with, said that if praying would help his batting, he'd come across. He said it insolently. But we prayed right there for him. It was just before a game.

He did not get a hit that game or the next, but we kept on praying, and in the third game he came through with four hits in five trips to the plate, incidentally winning the game.... He is not across yet, as we told him not to come until he was ready to come clear across. He will in time, I am positive." Notice the way in which this fellow was prevented from making a decision for Christ simply to win a ball game: Jack and his cohorts wanted him to wait until he came through on the major issue, not upon any minor and selfish ones. He concludes that letter: "Opportunities await at every place, do they not?" He wrote again after two weeks: "Your most welcome letter came Monday, and it surely did help to retrieve my spirits, which, I confess, were at a very low ebb. But now, it just seems like an ugly dream. After your letter came I went to my room and prayed. It seems as if God was talking to me and it helped. I was imbued with a new spirit of vim and fight, which) put immediately into effect. That evening I got the boys together and we had a heart-to-heart talk. which I honestly believe did more good to all of us than has been done for a long time.... I am feeling fine and have my old spirit back. O - is coming back, I believe: he has asked to talk privately with me some time, but said he just didn't feel as if he wanted to just now. I thought it best not to push him, but let him battle it out himself.... You asked me whether our thirty-four members in the club are all converted. No, I'm sorry to say, only nineteen have really come across. But the others will in time.... This morning when I see the wonders of God, I pray, thanking Him for all that He has done for me through you. I often look back to my days of unbelieving and sin, and a feel- ing of peace runs through me, knowing that I have accepted God. It is wonderful how restful one seems after accepting Christ, especially after that heavy burden one bears in his soul when he does not follow God's commands. Mere words cannot describe my feelings, it is so wonderful, and all this I owe to you, as God's worker. Probably today, had God not moved you to speak to me on the train that day, I would have been that same sinner.... Really, when I look back to that day, I realize that I was ready and hungry for God. There was a time

when I did not want to do wrong, and thank God I had a mother to teach me of Him. But yet, though I did not want to do wrong, somehow I couldn't help it." I have a rather lonely life, and Christ as I saw him then did not offer much to me. But now it is so different and so wonderful, that 'my only regret is that I did not find Him sooner. ...Write me often and pray for me, that I shall be able to keep this wonderful spirit." After another couple of months he came on to see me, and we had a whole day together. It was a great day. He looked differently. His eyes were clear and wide-open: he seemed keener, kindlier, more quick to respond, more lovable. In his very presence I noticed a change from the boy I had left on the train eleven months before; not less in-teresting but more – not more of a prig, but more of a man. He met me first with a string of defeats behind him; he came back with almost a year of victory behind him. When I saw him last he was a boy without a point of view, as I saw him now he divas growing into a man with a point of view, knowing more about life, about men, about God, that he had ever known before. I wanted him to talk that day, and he did talk. He told me the whole story over again in his own words. I was astonished at what he had learned of dealing with fellows man-to-man, of the motives which move men, of the pointer of the impact of the supernatural on life. I asked him about the battles in his own life. And this is the marvellous testimony which he gave: in these eleven months he had not slipped once in any of his temptations, except that for a time he had gone back to smoking and now had again given it up for good. God had held him up through all. And let me say that Jack was one of the most hotly tempted boys I ever knew: this was of no human doings, his power was coming from without himself, and he knew it.

Then I asked him of how things at the school had gone, and this was what he told me. Fifty-one boys had joined his club, which meant really a desire to associate themselves with the out-and-out Christians of the school: and Jack told me, "Only thirty-one of them are converted." Only thirty-one, in less than a year, the work of a boy of eighteen! 1Yhen we had prayer that day, we thanked God for His marvellous love and for the way He had reached us both, and for the joy of Life in Christ, and for the men whose lives He had used us to win to Him. If he said it once, he said to me a dozen times, "This is positively the greatest thing in the world. 1Why did I not find it sooner?" Here was a happy man, at one with himself, and at peace with God, being powerfully used to influence a whole school indirectly, and more than thirty boys were Christians because of him. We talked of how this message might be brought to the girls, for, he said, there were more full-out Christians among the boys than the girls. He decided that he must be very careful in dealing with those of the other sex, for sometimes it is possible to start in talking religion and wind up talking slush. This is best considered as men's work for men, women's work for women. But Jack is working still to see how it may be gotten across to them, and the way wil! open. I continue to have letters from him saying that he is still winning men and the club is doing splendidly. Do you wonder that I wanted to write about "One Boy's Influence?"