

Choice Literature.

LORD OF HIMSELF.

CHAPTER III.

"Who envies none that chance doth raise,
Whose conscience is his strong retreat."—*Wotton.*

The request which Dick heard was one which had often enough been preferred over that threshold.

"I want to know whether you have a little pair of shoes."

But she who uttered these words was not quite an every-day person there, and she formed one of a still less common-place group. She was a young lady with a delicate, haughty face, and she wore rich garments, though Dick noted nothing then, except a gleaming diamond on the jewelled hand holding the latch. Behind her stood a dusky attendant draped from head to foot in thin bright-hued Oriental textures, and she held in her dark bangled arms what Dick presently perceived to be a little fair-haired child. Beside her stood a tall, and rather showily liveried footman; and beyond all was drawn up a handsome carriage, with a dashing pair of grays, who by their prancing and pawing seemed impatient to resume their journey.

"I want a very small pair of shoes for my little girl," the lady repeated. "May we come in?"

"Oh, please," said Dick, recovering from his astonishment. And Mrs. Reeves set seats for them all, but only the lady took one.

"We have had quite a long journey to-day," she said. "We have driven all the way from Seamount"—that was a port many miles distant—"and we have still to drive to the Priory"—that was a country seat a little farther on, which had once been a religious house. "We only landed in England yesterday," she added, "after a voyage from India."

Dick listened, secretly wondering what had induced the lady to diverge fully half a mile from her direct road to seek out his humble workshop. How had she even known of its existence? And she might well have made this strange pilgrimage for nothing, since it was seldom, indeed, that a village shoemaker would have in stock anything small or dainty enough to suit the little lady. As it was, there was the pair of shoes on which he had been at work all day. But he started to hear her proceed.

"You are making a little pair of shoes! Are they finished? And can you let me have them? Even if they are bespoken, perhaps the customer will wait another day to oblige a stranger who has met with a mishap."

How could she know anything about that pair of shoes? Was she a witch? Dick murmured that the shoes were not bespoken—that they were at her service, and that if they were fit for little miss a very few stitches would quite finish them off.

"Thank you, we will wait," said the lady. "If they will go on to Mina's feet they will do. She is not yet a belle and fastidious," she laughed, "but I cannot take her to the Priory with no shoes at all. There are no children there from whom we could borrow any, and they would think us terrible barbarians if they should see how easily we could do without shoes while we waited for some from town." Here she spoke some words in an unknown tongue to the Indian woman, whom she called "ayah." When we come back to the West, we must do as the West does," she resumed. "Besides, the weather is certainly getting cold."

Dick was busily stitching away, wondering to himself the while. The lady took the little girl from her dark nurse's arms, and placed her on her own knee.

"Mina has been very restless all day," she narrated. "She was always wanting to get out of the carriage to seize hold of some of the strange things she saw. It was because I indulged her once that she lost her shoes. We got out by the great mill which stands on the roadside about six miles below this, and while we were all scrambling about, gathering wild flowers which our little empress admired, it came into her head to throw something into the milldam, and the first we knew of it was, 'Splash!' 'Splash!' and the two little shoes were gone."

She laughed gaily as in admiration of her girl's performance, and the child, who was quite old enough to understand all that was going on, laughed too, and clapped her hands with pride and delight. Mrs. Reeves looked grave, for these were not her ideas of a good up-bringing.

"I wondered what we should do," the lady went on, "but there was a poor old beggar woman down by the water's edge, washing some miserable rags, and when she saw what had happened, she came to me and said I should find a shoemaker's not very far off my road, and she knew he had a nice little pair of shoes ready, for she had been in his shop that morning, and had seen him making them. I was very much obliged to her, and gave her the little reward in the hope of which, doubtless, she had so eagerly tendered the information."

So that must have been the old tramp woman to whom Dick had given a drink early in the morning, and who had departed without even the "May heaven reward you," usually tendered as thanks for such slight hospitalities. It did not occur to Dick to wonder whether her desire to oblige might not have arisen as much from a kindly wish to do him a good turn as from any mercenary design on the lady's purse; but he did vaguely feel that there was something in the lady's tone and manner that he did not like—a something implying that the world and all that was in it was made for her and hers, and lay at their command and power.

The spoiled child turned restive again, and must needs have the ayah's bangles and rings to play with. The woman gave them up unhesitatingly. Presently they were dropped one by one, and rolled far and wide over the floor. Dick, who knew its many chinks and crevices, felt uneasy, and instantly stopped his work to look for them. The first glance did not bring them all to light, and it was only after a prolonged search that one was found half sunken in a wide crack beside the hearthstone. Dick noted the anxious look

of the ayah while this was missing, and the delighted flash of her dark eyes when it was found.

The ornaments had scarcely been restored to their proper place before Mina cried for them again. This time the ayah showed a little reluctance, but the mother instantly bade her comply with the child's demand, adding carelessly, "And if you let Mina drop them this time you must look for them yourself. We must not hinder the young man with his work, for I am tired of waiting."

Dick saw a soft moisture gather in the ayah's eyes as she obeyed. One by one she tried to retain her ornaments, but the imperious little mistress would exact them all. What might not those jewels be to the poor foreign woman—as dear, perhaps, as his mother's wedding ring was to her? Dick must come to the rescue.

He laid down his work. The lady watched him, but did not protest. He went to an old bureau and opened a drawer. She thought he was looking for some necessary tool. He produced a toy parrot, made of soft, bright wools—a parrot which it seemed a luxury to hug, and which when hugged emitted from the mysteries of its interior shrill cries, which childish fancy could develop into "Pretty Poll," and "What's o'clock?"

He held it before the little girl. Her attention was instantly arrested, and down went one bangle, but the ayah deftly caught it.

"Little missy shall have this smart bird to play with," said Dick, "directly she has given back to nurse all her finery. There—gently, gently!" for she was slipping back the bracelets with rather ungentle alacrity.

That parrot was the solitary "bought" toy of Dick's early childhood, when his best-beloved and familiar playthings had been bits of leather and chips of wood. It had been the gift of an old friend, and happy memories of the long-ago birthday when it arrived had now made it something of a relic. Little missy's reckless fingers would do it more damage in ten minutes than it had ever yet received since it was made. What matter? things must get used up some time. And the homely toy had never been made for a higher use than to spare a pang to a lonely and exiled heart. "What's the use of giving money to make Christians of the heathen far away unless we act like Christians to the heathen when they are near at hand?" was Dick's pertinent reflection.

As Dick resumed his work, he heard the ayah say something to her lady in a low, earnest tone. The lady laughed lightly. Dick looked up and met her eyes.

"Ayah is paying you what she thinks a wonderful compliment," she explained. "She is a Buddhist, and believes in the transmigration of souls from one existence to another; and so she tells me now that the moment she set eyes on you she liked you, and felt that in some previous life you had been good to her, or to some of her people. Perhaps you were a cat and she was a mouse, and you ate her mercifully, without first teasing her, you know. Is it not ridiculous? She adds now, that when she meets you in yet another stage she is sure she will know you again. I hope you will be proud of the acquaintance."

"Yes, I shall," said Dick stoutly. "It is always something to have earned a kind recognition somehow."

The lady laughed lightly. The little shoes were fitted now, and the party prepared to leave. The lady put a piece of gold into Dick's hand, and told him he need not trouble about change. She dare say he would not have enough money to give it, it could not be every day that such a piece of luck came to his door. Some day, perhaps, she might send for him to do something for her at the Priory. If he got a message from a Mrs. Irvine, that was she. And then she and little missy, and the ayah, all got into the carriage and were driven away.

"Is this to be the beginning of your fortune, Dick?" observed his mother.

"Where does it begin, then, mother?" Dick asked with a smile. "With the lady coming here, or with the poor beggar woman sending her here?" But he could not help recalling the strange feeling which had flashed over him as he opened the door to the unexpected arrivals. It was in pursuance of this reflection that he said:

"I'm not sure whether I like that lady. Does the quality of a fortune depend on the person who begins it, I wonder? I'm not sure whether I would not rather reckon more from that poor heathen ayah than from her. But, mother, if I am to have such strokes of good luck as this, and such prospects of work, what a pity it is that you sold your hair?"

"I'm sure it was the right thing to do at the time, and that can never become wrong afterwards," answered Mrs. Reeves.

And then some days went by—days of steady, plodding work, which sufficed for each day's need, and did not break upon that evening's golden windfall, and yet did not increase it. It had served to give Dick a taste of the sweetness of prosperity. At first, after his father's death, it had seemed too much to hope to be out of debt; now it did not seem quite enough unless one could be saving a little. He did not say anything to his mother, but to himself he often wondered whether the lady would be as good as her word and send him a message from the Priory.

It came at last. On an exquisite morning—one of those when early winter seems to vie with summer, and the sun tries whether he cannot make faded leaves look as bright as fresh flowers—the gay footman came down with a summons from Mrs. Irvine to the young shoemaker. She was going to let him try his skill on a pair of boots for herself.

Dick knew what was the full significance of such a commission. It would possibly secure for him orders from the halls and mansions around—orders which had hitherto been sent to Caddiford for execution.

"It was our ayah who kept the mistress up to her promise," said the footman.

Dick looked at his mother. Yes, the good fortune, of which he had felt such a queer premonition, was really coming, and it was coming, too, by the very agency he had said he should prefer. As he smartened up his appearance, before following the supercilious flunkey, he looked round the cottage and thought how many things he would soon be able to get which had hitherto seemed quite beyond his

reach. An easy chair for the mother; yes, and a set of tea china. And, first of all, they must coax the friendly neighbours, who had bought the corner cupboard and the clock, to resell them. Oh, how sweet is the first taste of prosperity! Alas, that the tempting cup is often drunk so greedily, and with so little care about the ingredients which compose it, that it does not continue so sweet as it goes on, and has a bitter taste at the bottom!

Dick trod the soft carpets and wide staircases of the Priory, and felt almost as much a stranger in a strange country as could the poor ayah herself, who beamed one of her brown and white smiles upon him as he entered Mrs. Irvine's boudoir.

Mrs. Irvine herself had no kindly smile, no genial greeting. She was all herself now—or rather not herself—a cold, haughty fine lady; and Dick liked her far less here than in his own cottage, when she had been humanized by the excitement of her returning journey, and by the novelty of her surroundings.

He bent to take her measure, while she issued her mandates. The heels of her boots were to be so high, and a model pair was produced, which to the astonished Dick looked like a pair of miniature stilts; and the boots must not exceed such a measurement, and the heels must be pointed—just so.

Dick stood up. His tone was profoundly respectful. "Madam," he said, "I cannot make a pair of boots like that."

Mrs. Irvine gave a smile, which was almost a sneer. "I do not expect it," she answered; "that pair comes from a famous Parisian shop. But do your best, and I will submit to the result. We prepare for sacrifices when we try to do our duty to local interests."

"But, madam," Dick explained, "I cannot try to make boots like those. It is not right. It would be a sin."

"Is the man mad?" asked Mrs. Irvine, looking round her in dismay.

"No, indeed, madam," Dick pleaded; "but boots like these are against all the laws of nature. They fetter free action; they make motion perilous, and produce deformity and disease. My father told me all about it. He never made such boots as these in his life."

"Probably nobody asked them from him," said the lady sharply.

"He did not settle where he was likely to be asked for them, madam," answered Dick.

"Young man," said Mrs. Irvine sharply, "have I not a perfect right to wear boots made as I please?"

Dick looked at her with his mild, clear eyes. "I don't know about that, madam," he replied; "but I, being a shoemaker, have no more right to make you boots that I know will be bad for you, than a doctor would have to give you a poison because you asked for it."

"These are very fine ideas," said Mrs. Irvine, "gathered, I presume, from some of your new upsetting books. You will find you have your living to get."

"If a man can't live except by doing or making wrong things, then it is God's time for him to die," Dick answered; "but I don't think it often comes to that."

"I ought not to condescend to argue with you," pursued the lady; "but you struck me as a deserving and industrious young man, and I am sorry to see you sacrificing your interests quite fruitlessly. If you will not execute my orders, and show yourself a skilful and docile workman, whom I can recommend, of course you will not change my determination. I shall simply get it carried out at Caddiford. You might as well do at once what others will not think twice about doing."

"Madam," said Dick, "it would be an awful world if we all did every wrong thing which we know somebody else does quite readily."

"Wrong!" echoed the lady with scorn. "What wrong can there be in the fashion of shoes? You speak as solemnly as a parson might of his sermons, or a statesman of his laws."

"My father," said Dick, "always said that for a shoemaker right and wrong began in shoes, and for a baker in bread, and for a tailor in cloth and stitches."

It flashed into Dick's mind at that moment that it would not have been so easy for him to be resolute if his mother's sacrifice had not already removed the burden of debt—so small in itself, yet so hopeless to them.

There was a pause.

"Well," said the lady presently, "you may go. You need not expect me to send for you again. Insolence and ingratitude are all one ever gets for taking an interest in the common people."

"Good morning, madam," said Dick.

He turned with a smile to the ayah before he left the apartment, and she returned his smile faintly and doubtfully, for, though she had understood few of the words which had passed, she saw that Dick had given displeasure, and that he was going off without a commission.

As he passed from the room, a tall young gentleman with a bronzed face passed in, and Dick heard little missy give a delighted cry of "Uncle." Dick closed the door behind him and went away, and the fancy came into his head,—

"My fortune seemed to come with an opening door, and now it goes with a closing one."

The sunshine had departed; the sky was a dull, leaden gray; some drops of rain were falling. When Dick re-entered his cottage, he seemed to see the ghosts of the arm-chair and the clock and the corner cupboard standing where he had hoped to put them, and for the first time there seemed a spice of mockery in the starling's cry, "There's a good time coming!"

Before he told his mother a word of his adventures, he drew her to him and kissed her, saying,—

"Thank God, mother, that the debts are paid. If I opened my door to let in my fortune, I've had to shut it again behind it."

"Well, Dick," said Mrs. Reeves, when she had heard all, "we can manage to get on from day to day, and that's the way that life is given out to us. God knows what is best for us, and guides us to that by writing over every path 'right' or 'wrong.'"