

Choice Literature.

LORD OF HIMSELF.

CHAPTER I.

Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his only skill. —Wotton.

An expanse of clear sky stretched over a gentle undulating country. In the west, the sun had just gone to rest, and his light was still shining through his curtains of cloud, though it was swiftly softening from pure vermilion and gold to tender roseate hue, which brought into sharp contrast the fainter tints that gradually faded into dead gray on the eastern horizon. The faint odours of decay were upon the air, for it was late autumn, and the fields lay reaped and bare, brown or yellow, while between them ran the straggling white line of a rough road, bounded on either side by a rude stone dyke, whose grim outline was only here and there softened by the neighbourhood of a few stunted trees, whose last red and yellow leaves the light evening breeze was drifting, one by one, to the ground.

There had been rain lately, and as the road was ploughed into deep ruts by heavy cart-wheels, it was full of clear puddles, reflecting back the glories of the sky above. But two elderly men, driving slowly along in a clumsy little conveyance, could be scarcely expected to observe the subtle beauty of that which covered them with uncomfortable splashes.

"Heugh!" groaned one, "what must this be in winter time? I can't think how people can make up their minds to live in such places—at the very back of civilization, as it were."

"It's a good thing that some of them know no better," chuckled the other, "for after all the town could not get on without the country."

"If poor Tom had followed my advice at the first, and had set up his shop in some growing town, he would have made his fortune," said the first speaker, evidently resuming some subject of previous conversation, "for certainly he was a good workman."

"He charged a fair price for his work, though," said the other.

"He would soon have got into town ways, Mr. Buyers," returned the other, a Mr. Dodds. "Tom did what pleased his country customers—gave them a stout article which would scarcely wear out. That's all well enough for folks who have plenty in kind and can take care of their things, but are slow of getting in cash. Now town folks are always getting in cash, and they want showy articles that look well while they last, and they don't want them to last too long, because fashions change, and servants and such like are so careless and dishonest that there's no use in trying to keep things. If poor Tom knew how to suit one market, he'd have found out how to suit the other."

"I'm not sure it was a matter of suiting his market with your cousin, Mr. Dodds," said the other. "He was a queer fellow, and you musn't mind me saying so. I remember his observing once that there might be as much conscience in making shoes as in preaching a sermon. When people get that way of thinking, I'm not sure that they are fit for business. He might have starved in a town. Perhaps he was wise to stay where he could make a decent living."

"A decent living!" echoed Mr. Dodds, pointing with his whip to a lowly roof in the little hamlet of Mildens, as it rose upon their horizon. "Look! d'ye see that house beside the finger-post? That's where my cousin, Tom Reeves, lived and died. And is that a house for a man with such a head as his to live and die in—when there's Hare, the bootmaker in Caddiford, employing nigh a hundred hands in brisk seasons, and keeping up his villa and his pony-trap? It's really hard when one's relations have no ambition," and Mr. Dodds looked aggrieved.

"People will have their own fancies, I suppose," said the philosophic Mr. Buyers. "But they ought to take care that other people, not holding the like, don't have to pay for them at the last. I expect your cousin has not left his wife and boy very well provided for."

"Provided for!" cried Mr. Dodds, with an alacrity produced by the liveliest apprehensions of troubles to come. "Provided for, Mr. Buyers! You can't imagine how low down they've lived. If he has left enough to pay for his own funeral, I shall be pleasantly surprised."

"Was he ill long?" asked Mr. Buyers.

"I don't know," returned Mr. Dodds rather curtly, "I had not heard of him for months till his death was announced."

"You'll have to do something for them," said Mr. Buyers carelessly. "It might hurt you in your business if you didn't. People don't inquire into the rights and wrongs of things. Many a drunkard and an idler gets maintenance out of their relatives' sense of their own self-interest. These things are expected of people when they are in a certain position. As I say, when men are agitating about capital drawing so much more profit than labour—'See how much more is expected of us capitalists—nobody thinks anything of working people's children going to charity schools, and their old folks into the almshouse, but we have to do something for all the kinsfolk who prefer preying on us to doing for themselves. It is all very fine for my tailors to say I don't pay them enough to keep soul and body together, but look how I have to keep my nieces sitting idle, with nothing to do but look after their own dress and grumble that I don't allow them more for it. It's not all gilt on a capitalist's gingerbread.' And then people who ought to know better are getting queer ideas. What I've just been saying to you, I said to our minister the other day, and didn't he answer that I'd better divide the work and all the money between my nieces and the tailors, and it might be better for everybody? And when I said I could not have my own flesh and blood in a common workshop, didn't he say there ought not to be a workshop so kept and managed as not to be fit for anybody's flesh and blood? It's ridiculous!"

Mr. Dodds had not given very close attention to Mr. Buyers' tirade, having been thinking over a subject nearer home, and which had engrossed much of his attention since his Cousin Reeves' death. He had scarcely heard what Mr. Buyers had said, so he answered vaguely:

"There are two sides to most questions. But I don't mean to stand strictly on my duty. I had a real respect for poor Tom in spite of his queerness. I know there's a little fund for destitute widows, natives of Strathcarn, in the north, where Tom's wife comes from. I've written about that for her already. I took upon myself to do that, and it's well I did, for I've got answer that she'll be in time for the next nomination—which comes off next month. It is likely she would not have thought of that for herself. And then she can live where she likes, and if she's wise, nobody need know where her money comes from. Then there's the boy—"

Mr. Dodds hesitated for one moment and resumed.

"I think I'll take him into my place. He must be nigh sixteen. If he has learned anything of his father's trade he would not be able to make much of it for himself, and he'd soon pick up mine. I don't think I'd set him to work, at least not more than to show him how things ought to be done. I'd train him as a kind of general assistant. I'm beginning to want somebody that I can trust, as business grows too big for my own eye. My eldest boy doesn't take to it; he likes it well enough to get money out of, but he thinks it beneath him. And journeymen are not what they used to be; it's mostly eye-service nowadays. And I'll engage Tom has brought up his boy well: that's the sort of thing Tom knew how to do. So he might save me a great deal of trouble and money too—ever so much more than he'd cost. For he cannot expect much wages. The start in life is what many would pay for."

Mr. Buyers said nothing, but chirruped to the pony.

"It's a great burden to think over other people's affairs," observed Mr. Dodds, plaintively. "And I know it's a great responsibility that I am taking on myself, and I may be bitterly disappointed. But I can't believe Tom's son will not turn out well."

"Is this he?" asked Mr. Buyers, as a lad, seeming to have heard the sound approaching of wheels, stepped from the cottage which Mr. Dodds had indicated, and stood awaiting them. "What is his name? Tom, like his father?"

"No," answered Mr. Dodds, "it's Richard, after his grandfather. Tom always called him Dick." He spoke in an undertone, for Mr. Buyers had drawn in the reins, and the boy's hand was already on the pony's bridle.

"It's very kind of you to come, sir," he said, in a pleasant, though subdued voice. Dick Reeves had seen Mr. Dodds once or twice, and had somehow got an impression of him which made him rather wonder at this expression of regard for the dead and sympathy for the mourners. Perhaps, after all, he ought to have been invited to the father's funeral. But then there had been such very good reasons why nobody should be invited.

"You see you are not left without friends, Dick," said Mr. Dodds, descending.

"I'm quite sure of that, sir," Dick answered fervently. "I'll drive on to the inn, Dodds," said Mr. Buyers, who had kept his seat.

"All right," returned Mr. Dodds. "I'll join you there by-and-by." The Reeveses' cottage did not promise any of the comforts which Mr. Dodds required to make life tolerable. He did not invite his friend to enter. Buyers had always been impressed that the dead Tom Reeves was a man who had thrown away chances which he had possessed, and Mr. Dodds preferred that he should keep this impression, which the primitive, contented, always-has-been-so poverty of the Reeveses' domicile might have removed.

But surely the place was bare now that it had been as Mr. Dodds previously remembered it. There was the same strip of brown druggot before the fire, but it was much darned now—the same blue curtains at the little window, but the washings of years had made them dim and thin. But what had become of the carved cuckoo clock and of the oak corner cupboard?

His cousin's widow came forward to meet him—a slight woman, who looked almost as if the light shone through her. She, too, was changed from her own laughing, blooming self. The hair, which he remembered in thick jet curls, now lay in soft pure silver under her plain white cap. But what Mr. Dodds noticed most was that, except that cap, she had no ordinary sign of mourning! Her dress was sombre enough—a dark blue serge—and as his eyes became used to the dusk, he could see a black band sewn round the sleeve of the left arm, just above the elbow. Doubtless that might be some sign of mourning in that far Scotch parish of Strathcarn, whence she came, and where destitute widows seemed not entirely unknown. But what would genteel Caddiford say to it? Why, there he had known a drunken charwoman pawn her children's bed to put crape on her gown when her husband died in gaol! What right had this cousin's widow to disgrace her respectable kinsfolk by such a manifold omission as this?

When Mr. Dodds saw the simple viands put before him—oaten cake and apples from the trees outside the cottage—he was glad to remember that Mr. Buyers was awaiting him at the inn, and that there they could indulge in the highly seasoned meats and spirituous liquors which they regarded as the necessities of life. However, he sat down and made a feint of enjoying the Reeveses' homely and wholesome fare.

A few inquiries served to discover that his late cousin's illness, though not very long, had been of a most trying and costly kind.

"We sold some things among the neighbours," the widow said; "that paid the fee of the surgeon whom our own doctor had brought up from Caddiford."

"Tom should have gone into the hospital," said Mr. Dodds curtly. "Not, perhaps, the hospital at Caddiford, but he might have gone to London, where he would have had the best advice possible."

The widow shook her head. "Tom liked to be nursed at home," she observed.

"And while it could be done we had a right to do it," chimed in her son Dick.

"Tom often said it was a blessing to feel that if the worst came to the worst there was the hospital, provided by good people," said the widow. "But he said while he could keep out of it he must, to leave room for one who could not."

"Tuts!" explained Mr. Dodds impatiently. "People who are a great deal better off than Tom think nothing of going in. I've known people to do so who had ever so much money of their own."

"What could they be saving their money for?" asked Dick simply. "I thought one only saved it for use at such times."

Mr. Dodds took no notice of this remark. He changed the subject.

"And now, Dick," he said, "I suppose you are beginning to think of how you are to make your fortune."

"I'm beginning to think how I am to keep mother and myself," Dick replied.

"Ah, I suspect it's a good thing you have got a wiser head than your own to think for you," pursued Mr. Dodds, "for it's wonderful what people miss by not knowing what they might get. Mrs. Reeves," he went on, turning to the widow, "do you know that you are eligible for the Strathcarn widows' fund?"

"But Dick and I think we may manage very well," she said simply.

"To have to think of you will be a terrible burden on Dick's start in life," remarked Mr. Dodds.

The mother did not answer. Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't know what life would be worth if I had not to care about mother," observed Dick.

"Of course you should care about her," answered Mr. Dodds. "But you need not carry unnecessary burdens. There is a fund for destitute widows: and I suppose your mother is destitute enough."

"She is not destitute while she has me," said Dick modestly.

"But she has not a penny," urged Mr. Dodds.

"Other widows may be as poor, and have no son," returned Dick.

"You'll think differently when you begin to want to get married," said Mr. Dodds.

Dick laughed—an incredulous, boyish laugh. But he said:—

"I hope I will get a wife who will like to help me to help mother."

Mr. Dodds changed his tactics. He reflected that this ignorant lad did not really know what might await him in the outer world; he was rejecting what he did not understand.

"Well, Dick," he said, "I had got a nice little plan laid, and I expect you will acknowledge that when you hear all about it. Your mother was to get this fund, and then she could live wherever she liked—I dare say she'd like to go back among her own relations and friends. And I meant to take you back to town with me and put you into my warehouse. I dare say you might even live in my house, Dick; that would give you an idea of how things ought to be, and of what getting on in the world means."

Dick looked at his mother. Her tearful eyes did not meet his. "People do have to leave each other for a while, even for each other's sake, mother," said Dick sorrowfully.

Mr. Dodds felt afraid that one-half of his tempting prospect was being entered upon without the other, and so felt forced to explain.

"But you wouldn't be able to earn any wages for a long time, Dick. So that you can't come, unless your mother gets upon that fund."

"Oh, then that settles it," said Dick. "I must say I didn't like leaving her quite alone, just after father's death. No, no. If we keep together here, we can live."

"Did your father teach you his trade?" asked Mr. Dodds, pursing his lip.

"I've helped him ever since I was so high." And Dick measured a very small distance from the floor. "He made it a sort of play for me. His own work always seemed like play to him. I mean he took to it jollily, as men go to quoits and cricket. I can't work yet like he did; but I'll do my best, and the neighbours will give me a chance."

"My word!" cried Mr. Dodds, "you seem to take life easy down here. Fancy Caddiford people reckoning on others giving them a chance!"

"Could not they, sir?" asked Dick. "Then it must be a dreadful place. But I can't believe it."

"You won't get enough work to make a living," asserted Mr. Dodds.

"I can't expect it at first," assented Dick, quite prepared. "But mother knits. And at spare times I make pine-cone baskets and so forth, against the fairs. Perhaps you may know of somebody in Caddiford who would take some. I think we'll manage. Besides we can live on so little!"

"It is not living—it's vegetating—it's starving!" said Mr. Dodds.

Dick shook his head. "Nobody here has ever starved," he said. "That's one thing which always frightens me about Caddiford. I'm always reading in the papers of somebody starving there."

"But think of the many who make their fortune," urged Mr. Dodds. "Don't you want to make yours?"

Dick laughed. "If I can," he said. "But what's the use of a fortune made at last if you've not done right in the making of it? That's misery all along, and misery after all. You've got your father's fine ideas," said Mr. Dodds impatiently, "and what did they do for him? Left him to live poor and die in debt."

"Our parson says father was the happiest man he ever knew," returned Dick, "and as for his debts, I'm going to pay them. We did not run in debt a penny without first asking the people if they were willing to wait for their money."

Mr. Dodds groaned. How would ways like these work in Caddiford? He felt thoroughly annoyed that his plan