

Choice Literature.

LORD OF HIMSELF

CHAPTER IV.

Whose soul is still prepared for death.

This man is freed from servile bands
Of hope to rise or fear to fall,
Lord of himself, though not of lands,
And having nothing, yet have all. — *Wotton.*

"I dreamed of some strange country, Dick," said Mrs. Reeves—"a strange country with wide, still rivers and dense jungles and mighty palms. I had been thinking of the ayah, you see, and wondering whether her heart was not sick for her own land."

"I dare say one longs much for one's own country when one is out of it," observed Dick.

Mrs. Reeves noticed the last clause of her son's sentence, and suppressed a little sigh, for she knew that her boy had often wished to travel, and while it had always cut her mother's heart to think of parting from him, it now cut it again to feel that his sense of duty to her and the other restrictions of his lot had him, as it were, tied by the leg, to the suppression of his innocent desires and cravings.

A tall shadow darkened the cottage window. It had passed almost before Dick had time to look up from his work. But he said to his mother:

"I do believe that is the gentleman I saw the other day at the Priory."

They never dreamed that he could be coming to see them, and when presently a quick, resolute rap sounded against the door, they only thought it was one of the neighbours, and, without rising from their seats, they cried, "Come in."

But when the door opened there stood the tall, bronzed gentleman, with a sort of good-humoured laugh in his gray eyes and about his bearded lips.

"Is this Reeves' place?" he asked. "I think you are Reeves, are you not? And you are Mrs. Reeves? Reeves, will you come outside, and have a little talk with me?"

Mrs. Reeves protested. There was the hearth and comfortable chairs standing by, and as for her, she was just going away to the other end of the house about some household duty. Would they rather not stay indoors? No; the gentleman was firm. He persisted that he should take a turn on the road. He looked curiously at Mrs. Reeves as he spoke. Dick thought to himself, "He will know mother again." And yet, when they had gone outside, he did not seem to have anything to say at first. Dick walked by his side in silence, and ever afterward he could bring up that familiar scene, with the lights and shadows falling just as they did, then, the sunshine bringing out the vivid moss-green of the bare branches, though it was not yet strong enough to have melted the frost which powdered the grass.

Suddenly the gentleman spoke. "You seem a queer kind of fellow," he said.

Dick did not know how to answer; so he smiled humbly. "Tell me what sort of fellow you are in little ways," pursued the stranger; "that is, if you don't mind. Can you make a bed?"

"Rather!" said Dick, with a significant smile.

"And darn a stocking, or set a stitch in a coat, as well as make a shoe?"

"Yes, after a fashion; not quite so well, perhaps."

"That'll do. Can you light a fire? Would you have to starve, if there was nobody to do your cooking for you?"

"No fear!" laughed Dick.

"And you read and write well, of course?"

"I can read, write and sum," said Dick. "And I've read through all the books I've come across, except the dictionary, and that isn't bad reading; either—only disconcerted."

"My word!" said the gentleman, "haven't you been jolly well brought up! It strikes me you are just the fellow I've been looking for, for a long while," he added.

Dick's heart gave a great bound.

"And so you wouldn't make a heathen Chinese sort of boot for my brother's superfluous English wife," observed the gentleman, after a moment's pause.

"I hope the lady was not very angry," said Dick.

"Oh, wasn't she!" answered young Mr. Irvine. "She repeated to me every one of your terribly insolent remarks; and there was our ayah crying to see her lady so cross, and saying that she had done you an ill turn, instead of a good one, in reminding my sister to send for you, and that now you will hate her when you meet her in your next transmigration! So ho! thought I, this Dick Reeves is a queer fellow—just such an one as I want. Do you think you might like to follow me, Dick Reeves, among the mountains and rivers and jungles of India?"

Dick's eyes flashed, but he hesitated in his reply.

"I don't ask you to be what is now understood by the words, 'gentleman's servant,'" went on Mr. Irvine, his manner growing more serious. "I don't want a flunky; I want a friend that will do what I tell him, and help me in any way I require. It won't be help in carrying billets-doux and performing handkerchiefs, I can tell you," he went on. "but in keeping the peace among hostile and suspicious natives, or fording rivers, with unknown tides, or shooting tigers. It must be somebody I can trust; no fool, who, if I died, might think no harm of burning all my papers, if he wanted a fire to scare away a wolf."

"You don't know much of me," said Dick modestly.

"Why, bless you!" cried Mr. Irvine, "I know more of you than I do of anybody I've met since I returned to England two years ago. It isn't the number of times one says 'How do you do?' to a man which makes you know him."

Dick stood still and looked earnestly into his companion's face.

"I should like it of all things," he said, "only—there's mother!"

"A noble mother must have bred so brave a son,"

quoted Mr. Irvine. "Besides—I know I heard something of her in Caddisford—but never mind! I respect your feeling. It would not be right for you to leave her, unless you could still take care of her while you do so. I have money of my own, Dick Reeves, and if you'll tell me how much it takes to keep you both comfortably in that pretty cottage of yours, I'll make my man of business pay your mother that sum of money every year until I bring you back safe and sound. And if you find a grave in a wilderness—there is always that possibility, remember—then, whether I live or die, it shall be secure to her for the rest of her days."

And so it was settled. Mrs. Reeves was eager in pressing Dick to accept this offer. He knew well enough that this was not because the pain of parting was not before her eyes; but those who love truly cannot bear that love for them should stand in the way of their beloved. As for himself, now that life had thus opened before him, in the way he had always dreamed (as he had thought in vain), he felt that the one part in his dream's fulfilment which had no pang in it was the consciousness that it enabled him to provide for his mother with a certainty and a comfort which he could not otherwise have secured.

"Mrs. Reeves knows the whole duty of woman," decided Mr. Irvine in his quaint way. "Half of which is to know when to hold her tongue, and the second half is to know when to get out of the way." But as he spoke the jocular words there came a light on his eager young face, which showed that some deep feeling was stirring in his heart.

So the miracle was wrought which was to lift Dick from his old groove into a larger sphere. And it was wrought by his own patient continuance in well-doing.

It chanced that Mrs. Saunders and Mr. Dodds were both at Caddisford railway station when Mr. Irvine and Dick started for the first stage of their long journey. Mrs. Saunders had at last made a pilgrimage to Caddisford concerning some money matters of hers, and the course of business had thrown her in Mr. Dodds' way.

"I don't wonder the poor lad's glad to get away," she groaned. "It will be livelier even to be eaten by wild beasts than to live at home doing maid servant's work. But if I had had an only son, I should not like him to be so glad to get away from me."

"I always thought there was a good deal of humbug in his professing he could not leave his mother, when I wanted him to come up here and make himself useful to me," said Mr. Dodds. "And now I know I was right. It's sad to find one generally is right when one thinks ill of people."

"What! did Dick do that?" cried Mrs. Saunders. "I thought he turned rather sulky when I told him how thankful he ought to be to have such a friend as you. But if some folks can get kindness without giving any return for it they will, and I expect he felt he and his mother could always reckon on your goodness of heart, however ungrateful they were. Eh! it's a wicked world! There they go." And as she saw some other people waving handkerchiefs, Mrs. Saunders waved hers too.

But as the train moved slowly out of the station, Dick saw nothing but one slight, motionless figure at the extreme end of the platform, with a background of the trees and hedgerows skirting the level lanes which stretched back to the old village. And the mother would have to go home alone!

The scene is changed to an arid Indian plain guarded on all sides by dreary hills. In the midst of the plain, the white minarets of a town peep up among a few gloomy trees. It was a besieged city, for it was the terrible time of the great mutiny. Round about, within the circle of the hills, lay the camp of a fierce and subtle foe. Within it were wounds and sickness and despondency, fast changing into despair, for the relief which was looked for tarried much longer, it must come too late.

The little garrison contained soldiers and women, and European strangers of all sorts, gathered together to make a common stand against a common enemy. Among the last to take refuge had been an English scientific gentleman and his attendant, Mr. Irvine and our friend Dick. They had come through the passes of the hill, retracing the way they had travelled a little while before easily and happy enough, but now with almost incredible dangers and difficulties, for an accident had crippled the master, and fever was threatening to prostrate him. They could never have attained even to this brief breathing-time of rest within the garrison, but for the help and comraderie of friendly natives; soft-hearted women had pleaded for the sick man and his servant, using the specious argument that letting them pass into the city was not allowing them to escape; it was only sparing them a solitary doom to leave them to a common fate. Others had saved them from detention, and one native had actually gone into garrison with them.

Day by day, Mr. Irvine was wearing away, and so were the English women round him, whose weary, watching faces stung Dick's heart with a memory of his mother's countenance as it hung over its father's deathbed. Day by day, some invalid succumbed, or some little child was buried. Oh, if the help that was coming could but be hastened, could but be led on by the paths least exposed to hazard and delay! Those within the garrison, with their recent experiences of flight thither, knew so much which the advancing general could not know. Could information be carried to him? But who could carry it? The leaders could not leave their posts. They had no right to summon any subordinate to a duty demanding exceptional qualities of coolness and courage, and leading almost certainly to the cruellest death.

Dick heard their consultations and their wishes. And he looked at Mr. Irvine's wasted countenance, and at the wan faces of the women and children, and without confiding his purpose to a soul, he sought the commander's presence and said simply:

"I am ready to carry your orders. Send me."

The officers took council together. Dick's honest face and quiet manner commanded their respect, and while one knew his energy and capacity, another reported that he had a wonderful way of getting on with the natives. Suppose he carried out the attempt, then the garrison was saved and

much life nobly spared. Suppose he perished in the attempt, then he did but perish in brave endeavour, instead of in gnawing inaction. They stated the case to him, and did not disguise their fears as to how it would end.

"A man can but die once, gentlemen," Dick said calmly; "and I doubt if I'll ever find a better time."

Dick's plan was to go forth dressed as a native. He felt that he knew one or two people in the plains whom he could trust to harbour and further him in that disguise. He carried no despatches or letter with him, nothing that could fix suspicion, even if it was aroused.

Dick took a last look at his master, who lay sleeping, quite unconscious of the desperate attempt about to be made. The colonel himself saw the last of Dick before he stole forth.

"If you never come back, my man," he said, his voice shaking with emotion, "still, if any one of this garrison survive, England shall know of your heroism, and will remember any whom you may leave behind you."

"My master has taken care of that already, sir," said Dick simply.

And then he was off.

What can be told about his forced marches, his hours of hunger and thirst, his feverish slumber snatched at the peril of his life? Sometimes even his brave heart nearly fainted with a sickening dread of detection and defeat, but then he would only push forward with renewed zeal.

"And," he said to himself, "I don't suppose I can feel much more lonesome in this wilderness than mother did in the whole world, when father died." And he thought of Ilagar and Ishmael in the desert, and of Elijah under the juniper-tree, and of Christ Jesus in the wilderness, and he found the riches that lie in the depths of those old stories, as they always do who look at them in the light of new action.

He accomplished his task at last, reaching the party on succour, so wasted and worn that he could only tell his tale, urge haste, and deliver his hints, and then he fell into a dead slumber, so like the swoon of death that the great general said, as he passed beside his bed, ere he left him in a place of safety, before the relief party started for the beleaguered garrison:

"We shall save it, but if Richard Reeves dies, the occasion will have sacrificed its hero."

"Did he die?"

"No."

We can end our story with an extract from the *Caddisford Times*, of three months later date:

"Our town was thrown into a state of excitement and festivity yesterday by the return of our two Indian heroes, Mr. Irvine, and his friend and assistant, Mr. Richard Reeves, who was indeed the hero of the day, as Mr. Irvine himself made manifest, by raising his own hat and joining in the cheers which greeted the young civilian who had proved himself bravest among brave warriors. Both gentlemen looked aged and bronzed by their terrible experiences, but they seemed in good health and in the best of spirits. The family from the Priory were conspicuous on the railway platform, and came in for many manifestations of neighbourly feeling, but the public sympathy and interest were most strongly evoked by the appearance of Mrs. Reeves, the hero's mother whose pale face, set in a silvery frame of short curls, was a striking exemplification of the staid beauty possible to old age. An address of congratulation to Mr. Reeves, from the freemen of his county town, was presented to him by his relative, our highly respected townsman, Mr. Dodds, and a beautiful bouquet was handed to him by an elderly matron, from his own village, whose name was understood to be Saunders. It is anticipated that Mr. Reeves gallantry will shortly receive some due recognition from the Crown."

THE END.

THE HINDU WIDOW.

The formal period of mourning for a widow in Bengal lasts for one month with the Kayasths, the most numerous and influential class in that part of India—the Brahmins keeping only ten days. During this time she has to prepare her own food, confining herself to a single meal a day, which consists of boiled coarse rice, simplest vegetables, ghee or clarified butter, and milk; she can on no account touch meat, fish, eggs or any delicacy at all. She is forbidden to do up her hair and to put any scent or oil on her body. She must put on the same cotton sari day and night, even when it is wet, and must eschew the pleasure of a bed and lie down on bare ground, or perhaps on a coarse blanket spread on it; in some cases she cannot even have her hair dried in the sun after her daily morning ablution, which she must go through before she can put a particle of food in her mouth. The old women say that the soul of a man after his death ascends to heaven quickly and pleasantly in proportion to the bodily afflictions which his wife can undergo in the month after the death of her husband. Consequently the new-made widow, if for no other reason, at least for the benefit of the soul of her departed husband, must submit to continuous abstinence and excruciating self-inflictions. A whole month passes in this state of semi-starvation, the funeral ceremonies, which drag on till the end of that period, are all performed, and the rigid observances of the widow are a little relaxed, if it may be so termed, since the only relaxation allowed to her is that she need not prepare the food with her own hands, and that she can change her clothes, but always using only plain cotton saris. The real misery of the widow, however, begins after the first month. It is not enough that she is quite heartbroken for her deceased husband, and that she undergoes all the above mentioned bodily privations; she must also continually bear the most galling indignities and the most humiliating self-sacrifices. She cannot take an active part in any religious or social ceremony. If there be a wedding in the house the widow must not touch or in any way interfere with the articles that are used to keep the curious marriage customs. During the *swagata*, or religious