

The Slavery of Civilization

Lizzie M. Holmes

1907

Daniel Henderson sat luxuriously before his grate fire, with decanter, glass and box of fine cigars on a small stand at his elbow, and his feet in velvet slippers resting on a table in front of him. It was storming outside, making the warmth and cosiness of his room seem doubly inviting. He had had a very busy day and was now taking a rest he believed he had well earned.

"I am deuced glad I didn't go out this evening—this beats all the club dinners, balls, theaters and receptions the city can afford," he mused as he lighted a fresh cigar. "I've got everything in good shape at the factory, 'and need not worry about that any more. Those new machines will do the work like magic. I can dismiss from the-pay roll all of fifty men; for small boys and girls can attend to the machines all right, and I can get them cheap. It won't hurt them—it's light work—and they'll be glad of the chance to earn a little to jiclp their fathers out."

He sat for some time in a pleasant reverie, and then reached for a new magazine that lay on the table. He opened at an article on reincarnation and was soon deeply absorbed in the subject.

He read it through and lay back in his comfortable reclining chair.

"Strange," he mused, "that we cannot remember any of our past lives if this theory is true."

Suddenly he thought he saw a tall, slender figure in filmy white standing at his side. He heard a fine, high, tiny voice, saying:

"One does remember. In instants of intense feeling, or in moments of great significance, scenes of the past flash before us like a glimpse of a highly illumined picture. Turn your thoughts inward and make an effort to remember."

Suddenly it seemed to him that his mind was turning backward, on and on for ages, and that finally, in some far remote period, he found himself standing in a wild forest with a number of rude creatures who were partially clothed in the dried skins of animals. They all carried clubs of various sizes and as he looked down at himself he saw that he was very like his companions. They seemed to be waiting for something. Presently a great crashing through the bushes and a shrill yelling announced the approach of a band of some kind of men. They came on tearing through the brushwood like wild animals, and soon they appeared, a ferocious looking set of wild men flourishing huge clubs. Then a terrible fight ensued. He thought he and his comrades fought as long as they were able, but the bigger creatures with their bigger clubs were too much for them, and in a little while nearly all of their number were killed. A few of them lay upon the ground bruised and broken and unable to strike another blow. The most savage of their enemies, when they saw there was yet' life in the bodies on the ground rushed upon them furiously to dispatch

them at once. But one who seemed to be a leader stopped them. Then they seemed to be disputing about something in short guttural sounds that perhaps was a sort of primitive language, and at length an agreement seemed to have been reached, and the faint survivors were dragged into the shade of the trees, given some water and allowed to lie still and rest. Later on when their wounds felt better, some food was brought to them, and they wondered much at the unlocked for kindness.

But when they began to grow strong again they soon found that they had been saved to do the hard work of the tribe. Whenever the company moved from one place to another the prisoners were loaded down with clubs, skins, dressed animals, rocks shaped into crude tools, and other articles, and made to walk under the burdens as long as they could stand. Sometimes they were beaten with clubs to keep them at their tasks, and if any died on the march they were kicked to one side and left there. Sometimes they were made to carry their conquerors on rude hammocks formed of the boughs of trees. They were meagerly fed, and at times their lives were almost unendurable. They were tied at night to the trees by ropes of dried skins, and knew no shelter except such as the trees afforded. But later, when there was not so much danger of the prisoners getting away, as they knew of no place to go, and when the tribes were at rest, they were allowed to lounge about and take their ease except when waiting on their masters. Once the tribe was attacked and the chief tried to force the prisoners to fight, but as he was afraid to have their bonds removed, he found that he could not make much use of them as defenders. At last, one day, our hero angered his chief in some way and the great muscular creature picked up a rock and struck him on the head. This seemed to end this phase of his existence, for afterward he experienced a long blank in life, feeling and thought. When he came to a sense of conscious life again he was standing with a host of other men, wearing a rude armor and carrying bows and arrows; they seemed to be awaiting some command. It came presently, and then they rushed along a wide road and shot their arrows at a large body of men which was coming toward them. A fierce battle took place and a great many of his fellows fell dead around him. But he was conscious of fighting a long time. At last his side was victorious and they took a great many prisoners. These were made slaves, but were not placed on the same footing as themselves. He realized that he was practically a slave, but he felt that his bondage was achieved through some hold his masters had over his mind. He felt a sort of dog like attachment to his masters and if for a moment he ever dreamed of deserting them a feeling of shame at his disloyalty came over him. He found that a faith dwelt somewhere in his bosom that he would go to a place of ineffable bliss when he died if he remained true to his masters and kept his honor with them. While these feelings and beliefs ruled his mind there was no need of bonds and shackles—his master always found him at hand and eagerly obedient.

One day a rival of his master came to visit him. 'They were boasting to one another of the loyalty and obedience of their soldiers and subjects. Our dreamer was called up with two others, to the top of a great cliff.

"You three men cast yourselves from this cliff to the bottom below." commanded their master. They immediately approached the edge, and with a prayer to some god whom they expected to lead them to a place of happiness, they threw themselves over the edge.

Another long blank followed and then Daniel found himself in a wide field, with a rude agricultural implement in his hands, and a group of other men, working as he was working. An overseer followed them closely and he seemed to know that disobedience would result in floggings or being chained up in some dreary hole underground.

When the day's work was done he found himself wending his way to a rude cabin where a woman and two children awaited his coming. They seemed familiar and dear to him in some way, and they served him and placed his supper before him. After he had eaten others came in and they sat around the open fire in the middle of the hut, and in a dull, brute like fashion they were happy.

But the next day they were hurried away to their hard labor again; he was conscious of feeling a bitterness that nearly all the results of their toil went to the lord who owned all the land. They were only allowed barely enough to eat, their rude shelters and a few coarse pieces of cloth for raiment. He seemed to know that the lord could command his time and services whenever he saw fit; that if he wished him to follow him to battle he must go; and if he wanted his wife or his daughter to come to his castle and serve him, he had no redress—he must let them go. He felt rebellious, and yet that he was wicked in so feeling. He felt it inborn in his nature that the laws and institutions of his country made it right for him to belong to the estate of his master; he was only a bad, unruly subject that he felt like rebelling; they were but filling their proper position in obeying their lord, and it was unmanly to 'repine. When there was plenty they forgot their troubles in orgies of eating and drinking; and when there was a scarcity they starved, for the lords and their wives and children must not go without. It seemed to him once that he went without food a long, long time, and gave the little he could obtain to the women and the children. Then one day he fell down exhausted and another long blank followed.

He seemed to catch glimpses of a brighter, more selfish life, as though his memory was flitting hastily over parts of his existence not pertinent to the lesson on hand. Then full consciousness came again.

He was on board a large ship, but huddled in a small part with a great many other human beings; they were almost suffocated, their sufferings were awful, and many died. He wondered that any of them continued to live. But at last the terrible voyage seemed to come to an end, and they were landed on a great wharf where the wealth of nations seemed to be brought for sale and exchange. He was sold, it appeared to him, for a big sum of money, and started with a train of other slaves and well laden camels across a burning desert to a beautiful land where the air was fragrant and spicy and the growth of vegetation most luxuriant.

They were set to work under a scorching sun cultivating the vines and fruit trees, and at the close of each day they fell down from exhaustion. But they were compelled to go to work each morning early and for a long time there was no break in the dreary monotony of toil and heat, and hunger and thirst. At last he determined to run away, and one day when the guards lagged in their watchfulness, he succeeded in making his escape, and then in reaching the desert by crawling on the ground and hiding behind clumps of bushes and piles of sand. He suffered greatly during the day, but the calm, beautiful starlit nights revived him, and in the morning a train of camels and men passed by and he crept in among them. And then it seemed to him that some unusual knowledge that he possessed won his freedom for him and from that time on he caught glimpses of himself as a servant of the king, a man of power, useful, feared, protected withal, because of some mysterious wisdom vested in him.

From a chaos of broken remembrances, vague pauses, and flitting gleams of an existence of splendor and power, he at last came to full consciousness again, as a child.

He was a child and the world had grown older. Civilization had spread over the lands where wild, free tribes had roamed, lived close to nature and grown near to the Great Spirit. This meant that factory chimneys were darkening the skies that were once so fair and blue, that machines

were heard buzzing and tearing away in every city. It meant that men were paid so little for their toil that they could not procure the comforts of civilization. and the privileges of barbarism had been taken from them. It meant that little children must take their places beside the new machines and keep pace with them day after day. because "Profit." the Great Mogul of civilization, demanded it.

The child knew that his natural supporter was receiving but seventy cents a day and that a family of five must live on that. He and his little brother, who liao. before wandered off to the woods and meadows, or followed the streams for fish, or spent a few hours a day in school, must now give up all the sweet freedom of natural childhood and go to the factory. Books were closed to them, music and things of beauty were to them now as though they had never been.

All day long the child watched the machines, ready to spring if a single atom went astray; he felt that if anything were broken great values would be lost, and though he gained nothing by it, he was ever on the alert. Only the white child, the descendant of a long line of reasoning workers, can be depended on to so strain every nerve that the property of his master shall be saved. How the nerves tingled and jerked before the day was over! How the tender muscles ached and how the little brain whirled! The child staggered home, to fall asleep over his poor supper, and then to his hard bed undressed. He sank into a deep stupor during the fore part of the night, then dozed and wandered in his mind and worried about the machinery until morning. Then he was awakened, but his limbs at first refused to bear up his body; someone dashed a cup of cold water in his face and at last he was sufficiently aroused to eat a little of his unsatisfactory breakfast and hurry away to the factory again.

The child realized before long that his life was dwindling, that his vitality was being sapped day by day and that he would never grow to be a strong man. He staggered one day along the way between the machines, where there was a knee in the floor. He did not see it and fell headlong. He seemed to be drawn into a horrible, grinding crash of wheels, and then came darkness—and, an awakening. He was still Daniel Henderson and he was sitting before his fire, which had burned very low. But his dream or strange experience was very vivid in his mind.

"I have been all kinds of a slave in my time, haven't I?" he queried, as he reclined in his chair pondering over what it seemed he had passed through. "But I believe the hst is a little the worst. In the old days there was this excuse for slavery, in that it made possible a few well developed, splendid fellows. But it has remained for our fierce commercialism to invent a slavery that endangers the whole human race. No child is safe, for the rich may become poor. And it not only Crushes the slave itself, but it threatens to bring about a stunted, impoverished set of human beings, for the future time. We are borrowing from the nation's future supply of strong, healthy citizens and giving it to a few greedy profit-makers. I don't believe in it. It is wrong. Tomorrow I will hire men to run my machines!"

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La Veta, Colo.

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