

WHO WAS DR. SILVANUS LITTLE?

A Conspiracy

By

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I. PROLOGUE

In the house of a certain young man in a city not a hundred miles from here, he and a friend were ensconced one evening when it was well to be indoors. They smoked together the pipe of peace and great content and discussed all manner of things with fearless judgment, as is the eternal way of youth.

They played shuttle-cock with Mussolini, Hitler and Company. From this they passed to the religious imbroglio in Germany and the curious situation created there, which had brought Roman Catholic and Protestant almost into one camp in defence of religious liberty. This led to a consideration of the distressing spectacle of various Churches competing with one another *in partibus infidelium* and perplexing the heathen with their divers brands of missionary evangelism. This in turn led to a lively squabble about the exclusive claims which the Christian Faith puts forward to rule the world in the realm of religion. And, before they were well aware, the two friends were launched on the worn and tedious subject of Foreign Missions.

The one delivered himself of several fervid dissertations on behalf of Foreign Missions, so that his pipe went cold the while. The other maintained a hostile attitude, which grew, as he talked, to suspicion, and finally to a frank and indignant enmity—so indignant that the sparks flew from his pipe and burned his breeches, though he knew it not!

“My dear Jack,” said he that was hostile, “‘East is east, and West is west, and never the twain shall meet!’ That’s what old man Kipling said, and so sez I. I object

to our home-grown notion that there is anywhere in the world a unique religion, unique in the way in which we have been taught to regard our own. I hold that each people has in its own particular religious faith the one best suited to its history, genius and temperament. I object also to our people disturbing the settled convictions with which another people's religion has endued their soul. I object also to the political disturbances which missionary zeal has brought about wherever our missionaries have intruded themselves. You must be aware how the civil servants of the Crown, men of culture and breadth of outlook, have complained of that kind of thing; sometimes bitterly complained of it. I object, also, to spending men and money on missionary undertakings abroad, when so much is crying out for attention among the pagan conditions of our own land here at home. And I object to Foreign Missions because we are really getting no return for our money. Everybody knows, who knows anything of Africa or India at all, that the Christianised natives are a poor lot, a regular nuisance. They are spoiled as natives, and they are no good as Christians. Them's my sentiments; and they are the sentiments of a great many more in the Church besides."

To this vociferous speech the other replied, "Them's your sentiments, are they? Well, I seem to have heard something like that before. Will you say it over again to me?"

"Say what over again to you?"

"Say what you have just been saying! I mean, let me have again your tabulated objections to Foreign Missions."

"Well," retorted the other, "you heard me! I thought I had made it pretty plain. I object to Foreign Missions for—let me see . . . yes, six reasons. First, because Christianity is not natural to the Hindu or to the heathen Chinese; Christianity is natural to us, but Hinduism is the proper thing for the Indian, and Confucianism—that's what it is—is the natural religion for the Chink. Second, I object to Foreign Missions because I object to people like ourselves unsettling the fixed religious tenets of foreign peoples like the Hindus or the Mohammedans. Third, I object to the civil and political disturbances Foreign Missions create. Fourth, I object to sending men and money out of the country when so much is waiting to

be done in Home Missions. Fifth, I object because we get no proportionate return for the outlay. And sixth and last I object because converts from so-called heathenism in Africa, India, or anywhere, are a rotten lot."

Upon the conclusion of this conclusive speech his friend was silent for a time. Then, rising from his chair and knocking out the ashes in his pipe, he crossed the room, and opening a desk produced a manuscript. Returning to his place, he unfolded it on his knee and said:

"I wonder if you will allow me to read this story to you? It concerns the positions you have just been taking up in the matter of Foreign Missions. It isn't a long story. It is a brief notice of a missionary chap who more than once has been of help to myself, a certain Silvanus Little—that's his name—who served a long time in the Foreign Mission field, and, as a matter of fact, lost his life as the result of his zeal. Would you like to hear it?"

His companion agreed, without much enthusiasm, it is true, for he had been bored before, as most people have been, by manuscript effusions produced apologetically from the desks of men; and besides, the subject promised him in this one was not of the liveliest. But like a good fellow he sacrificed himself to friendship and settled himself to listen. Thereupon his friend read to him in a quiet voice the following story.

II. THE STORY.

These pages give a very brief and imperfect account of the life work of the Reverend Silvanus Little, D.D., who was brutally done to death some years ago in the midst of the people among whom he laboured for many years as a foreign missionary. His death was lamented by the Missionary Society which had sent him out to the mission field, but the newspapers of the day made little, if anything, of his martyrdom (for such in truth it was) for the cause of Christ among the heathen. The writer of this pamphlet desires to put on record some notes of this worthy man's career and labours.

Dr. Little was born in a provincial town. He was of good family, and in the local school and college gave early signs of possessing in remarkable measure the mental aptitude and *perfervidum ingenium* which characterise his

nation. When he entered the University the promise of his boyhood was more than fulfilled. He quickly attracted the special notice of his professors, and a career of great academic usefulness and brilliance was predicted for him.

At this time the University and the town were in a state of considerable turmoil by reason of the presence and activity of certain revivalists. The youthful Little could not but notice the Revival; it had grown sufficiently to vex the attention of the University authorities themselves. But he treated the whole affair with contempt and joined in several "rags," as they are called, against the revivalists and their followers—disturbances which, on occasion, resulted in tumult and even in bloodshed.

Then a remarkable thing occurred. Little himself became converted to the way of thought and life of the men upon whom he had hitherto showered his loftiest scorn. It came as a thunderbolt to his masters and associates. But to all their entreaties and even to their threats he turned a deaf ear, and, leaving the University, he devoted himself to spiritual study and meditation for many months. At the close of this novitiate he took orders—if such a sect as the one he had joined can be said to possess orders—and began to teach and preach as one of them. Presently he felt a call to dedicate his ministry to the cause of Foreign Missions; and acting without hesitation on the call, he set out to work among the heathen. The Church at home contested his resolve to go abroad. They pled with him to recognise that there was more than enough to be done among his own people at home. But he replied that he could not disobey the command of God, which, as he declared, urged him with this voice, "The World for Christ!"

He sailed therefore to initiate the work abroad he recognised as his own; and for the long period of twenty-nine years he devoted himself with amazing zeal to the task of building up Christ's Church *in partibus infidelium*.

He was a voluminous correspondent; but unfortunately a large number of his letters cannot now be traced. Those that do remain give a fascinating account of the methods of the man, the difficulties he had to meet, the many hostilities he had to contend against, the disappointments that so frequently beset him. But through all that he writes there glows a spirit of amazing confidence in the ultimate triumph of his work, and tokens abound in them

of the striking success which, when all allowances are made, attended his lifelong endeavours.

The character of the people among whom he carried the news of Christ's Kingdom, made his labour as difficult as a missionary's labour can be. They were a proud, imperial race, assured of their pre-eminence in literature and life. They were of a different race from his own; if ever the phrase about east being east and west being west applied, it applied to his contact with them. Their religion was ancient and firmly established. It was woven within their daily customs, their political institutions, and even in their trading undertakings.

In spite of all this Dr. Little never wavered. He had a confident belief that Christ has a meaning for all tribes, whether they be east or west. He was convinced that all the nations of the earth, however they differ from one another in history and genius, have room for the appeal of Christ, either as the foundation of what their life needs, or as the crown and culmination of their philosophies. He avoided a mistake which other missionaries have sometimes been known to make: he never condemned other religions as devoid of a divine revelation. Frequently he used to quote the words in the *Acts of the Apostles* which declare that all men are the offspring and children of God, and have been made by God that they may seek after Him and find Him. His contention was that the Christian religion is the crown and key-stone of those various Faiths of the world whereby men in all their tribes and nations of earth have been, in some measure, lighted by God to seek and find Him.

His attitude, therefore, to the heathen among whom he toiled, was liberal and conciliatory. At the same time it was bound to bring about collisions and oppositions somewhere. The native priesthoods were incensed. They declared that the fundamental traditions of the nation's Faith were being undermined. The controversy extended itself to the civil sphere; and the cry was raised that the political institutions of the land were endangered. Traders, too, who depended on the continuance as of yore of the national religion, grew more and more hostile. These disturbances became so pronounced that at last the civil arm of the law had to intervene. The members of the civil service were by no means disposed to intervene.

They desired nothing so much as political quiet. As for the Christian religion, they sat lightly to it; they thought that the Christian religion is all right for the Christians, just as the Indian religion is best for the Indians, and the Chinese religion for the Chinese. But the turmoil created by the vigour and success of Dr. Little at last compelled their intervention. Dr. Little was warned and threatened. He remained undaunted. He was clapped in prison on more than one occasion, and even treated as a common criminal. But as soon as he was liberated he took up his work as before. He declared that the day would come when not only the people among whom he toiled for Christ's sake, but the whole nation and the whole world with its proudest princes and magistrates would bend the knee to his Master, Jesus Christ.

These fearless and unwearied testimonies of his resulted in the formation of a goodly number of mission congregations. In order to organise and man these he received assistance from his Missionary Society at home. But, at the same time, he set about appointing native pastors to take charge of the nucleus congregations he gathered together in his preaching itineraries. These native pastors he took pains to instruct and also to inspire with the holy zeal wherewith Christ animated himself. And, on the whole, they justified the confidence he reposed in them.

It must be confessed, however—and Dr. Little himself very frankly confesses it—that it took all his zeal, patience and faith to maintain the converts upon anything like a Christian level of belief and practice. So long as he himself was on the spot matters went reasonably well. But very frequently, as soon as his presence was removed, there was a falling away on the part of the converts. Idle men attached themselves to the congregations with a view of getting what they could out of the attachment. Other converts thought that, once they were Christians, the time for plain, hard work was done with. Others, guilty of loose life, adulterers and even those guilty of incest, were sometimes allowed to escape discipline altogether. In one particular congregation, when the Holy Communion was celebrated, scenes of drunkenness were sometimes to be witnessed.

Such facts as these would certainly have given over to despair a less devoted missionary than Dr. Little. But,

to his infinite credit be it said, he never lost heart. He used to say that one cannot grow God's trees in a single day. He would speak of his converts as children—bairns, as he called them—who need to be reared gradually and as patiently as infants. And he knew how to use the rod, as a sensible father knows in the rearing of children. But, even in his castigations of them, it was with a patient love, emulating the patience and love of Christ, that he dealt with them.

His methods were frequently the subject of criticism by the friends at home. They looked askance at his converts; even the most faithful of Christ's people at home did so sometimes. They wondered, too, if the home Church was receiving a due return for the money expended on the work in the foreign field. But gradually Dr. Little wore down all such opposition, by the unmistakable success of his mission. More and more he came to occupy the position of meeting the monetary charges of the work by means of the free-will offerings of his native churches. And there even arrived the proud day when the native churches sent home through his hands a handsome contribution, as a kind of thank-offering, to the funds of the home Church itself.

Dr. Little met his death in circumstances that have never been quite made clear. In one of those ebullitions of pagan fury which break out after years of more or less peaceful missionary work, very much as a receding tide seems to gain again on the shore with a sudden wave—in such a momentary tumult he met his death. For some time he had a presentiment that his death was not far away. The office-bearers of one of the congregations he had founded have related that on his last visit to them he spoke in terms which indicated that foreboding. "I am warned," he is reported to have said to them, "that this is the last time we shall see one another face to face; but no dangers move me. I don't value my life itself, if only I can get through with my work with joy, and do a little more to complete the ministry I have received from Christ—the commission to carry among you the Gospel of the Grace of God!"

III.

EPILOGUE.

Such is the manuscript which the one youth read to his friend. The listener expressed his interest. But he had

never heard of this Dr. Silvanus Little before, he said.

"On the contrary," said his friend in reply, "you have heard very frequently of him!"

"I really don't understand," protested the other. "This is the first I have ever heard of him. Who was he? When precisely did those events occur? And where did they occur? Is it of India or China or what, the narrative tells?"

To these questions his friend replied: "It was I who wrote the narrative to which you have been listening. The subject of it is, as I affirmed, well known to you. It is a plain narrative, in disguise, of the work for Christ of the Apostle Paul. I called him Little, because the word 'Paul' means 'little'; I called him Silvanus, because the word may be taken as another form of 'Saul'. Saul, who is called the Apostle Paul, is the missionary whose labours I have been narrating to you. As I say, it is a straightforward account of his labours. It tells in strict accordance with the historical facts we know of Paul the circumstances in which he began his work for Christ, the difficulties he met, the disappointments he suffered, the victories he won. Don't you see that every obstacle you have set against Foreign Missions this evening was encountered by Paul. *He* was 'east' and the Roman world was 'west'. *He* knew as well as you and I do the talk of each nation being properly fitted with its own religion. *He* knew the collisions which the Christian Religion is bound to encounter wherever it spread. *He* knew the necessary disturbance it would bring among old Faiths and the unsettlements of a political kind it would create. *He* knew the cry of them that demand our limiting ourselves to the heathen in our own homeland. If you, with your views of Foreign Missions, had had your way of it 1,900 years ago, St. Paul would never have started! And if Paul had never started, you and I would not have been sitting here with the home we have, and with the bodies we have, and with the minds we have, and with the souls we have!"

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