# NOT THE RIGHTEOUS!

ADAPTED FROM PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION'S RADIO SERIES, "UNSHACKLED!"

by Jack Odell



## Chapter 5

### Dick Ramey . . . masterpiece

"STEAMBOAT 'ROUND THE BEND!" Three quarters of a century ago those were magic words, and barefoot country kids came running to see the big sternwheelers. Dick Ramey was only ten when he lost his heart to the Ohio River and the woodburning packets.

His people were "Kentucky Hoosiers," scratching a poor existence out of a small farm on the Indiana shore. The life was hard, and Dick lived for the day he could be a riverman. A strong boy was needed to help out on the farm, but when he was twelve, in spite of his mother's pleading and his father's bad health, he ran away.

In those days boys went to work early. Dick was big for his age and had no trouble finding a job aboard a steamer. He found the gypsy life to his liking. Lying on the lower deck with the white water foaming close beside him and the green bank sliding past, Dick came close to complete contentment. With a new scene around every bend, it was easy to forget the neglected responsibilities at home.

Restlessness returned when the hawsers were out at a landing. Then he went ashore with the older men and learned new ways to deaden an uneasy conscience. By the time he was fifteen, Dick was a hard drinker and a habitual gambler.

When winter closed the river, he drifted home. But each spring the first distant hoot of a steam whistle pulled him back to the Ohio.

The winter Dick began calling on one of the neighborhood girls his mother had hope she might persuade him to settle down, and as his interest in Mary Ransom grew warmer she opened a full scale campaign to keep him on the land.

"Dick," she began, "when are you gonna marry and settle down?"

"When I want to. If I ever want to."

"You been seein' a lot of Mary Ransom lately. You think she's a mighty purty girl, don't you, son?"

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't. Anyway, it ain't none of your business."

"It is now, son. Mary made it my business. She come to see me last week."

"Yeah?" Dick shuffled restlessly.

"Yes, she did. She wants me to tell you that she'll marry 'you . . . if you'll settle down to farmin' and quit the river."

"What farm? This one?"

"No, son. One her Pa just deeded to her. Mary and the farm are yours for the askin'."

"And what if I'm not interested?"

"Then I'd say you're a mighty foolish boy."

When the winter broke, the question was still undecided.

Dick went back to the river. He knew he wanted Mary. They'd become very close that year. But he wanted his freedom, too. He was a drifter by nature and he wanted to keep on drifting.

All that summer he struggled with his indecision. The problem followed him up and down the Ohio and in and out of dozens of waterfront saloons and gambling houses. When ice in the river sent him home again, the choice was still to be made. Long before the next spring came around, Dick knew he wanted the girl most of all. Still he tried to work out an impossible compromise. He made one big effort to persuade her.

"Mary, I want you on the river with me."

"What?"

"Sure, we could get a houseboat and . . ."

"No, Dick!"

"You'd love it out there on the river, Mary - with me . . ."

"I know I would. It's not the river. It's the life that goes with it - the drinkin' and the gamblin'. I'd lose you in no time."

Dick was loaded with good intentions.

"I'd give all that up, honey. I promise I would."

"No use to promise, Dick. It just wouldn't work."

Dick was a gambler, but Mary was a better one - as women usually are. She staked everything on an ultimatum.

"Dick, it has to be the farm - or nothin'."

It was choose or lose, and Dick Ramey chose.

That spring he couldn't hear the whistles for the wedding bells. Dick made an honest effort to make good as a farmer, but his heart was never really in the dull and tiring routine. When the old restlessness came back, he began slipping off to town on Saturdays. As time went by the weekends lengthened. He often stayed away until Monday or Tuesday.

The neglected farm ran down and the income dwindled.

Dick talked Mary into a mortgage and tried to pyramid his cash at the gambling tables. It's a gambler's axiom that frightened money never wins. Dick was no exception. He lost at the tables even faster than he had at farming. In time he piled up a gambling debt he couldn't meet.

The crisis came on his thirtieth birthday. Professional gamblers have unique and terrifying methods of collecting delinquent accounts. They gave him just twenty-four hours to pay up and backed their demand with serious threats.

It was a tight spot, but Dick had a plan. It called for his wife's help, and though she knew it was wrong, Mary at last agreed to use her influence. The problem was persuading Dick's father to mortgage the old family farm for enough to cover the debt. Where Dick might fail, an appeal from Mary was certain to succeed. As he harnessed the team for the drive to his parents' place, he felt his troubles were at an end. When Mary wished him a happy birthday, he laughed and kissed her.

Everything was going to be fine, and he had a quart bottle hidden under the wagon seat.

Dick's father was standing near the gate to meet them. As they drew near he raised his hand in greeting. Then, as, they waved back, the old man stiffened in sudden agony and fell to the ground. He was unconscious when Dick carried him into the house.

Driving to notify the doctor, Dick tried to steady himself with the bottle. His plans for paying off the gamblers were tottering.

The outlook became worse when the doctor completed his examination and gave an opinion.

"I don't believe he can live more than a few days," Dick's problem overrode his grief.

"Doc - do you s'pose he could - uh, sign a paper in the shape he's in?"

"Sign a paper? Dick, the man's unconscious. He's dying!"

"Yeah, I know, Doc. But won't he . . .?"

"Regain consciousness?"

"Yeah."

"I doubt it. He'll likely hang on for a few days, but I expect him to remain unconscious."

The doctor drove off. Mary went home alone to care for the stock. When Dick's mother went to bed, he was left alone with his dying father, his bottle, and his problem.

Without the old man's signature there could be no mortgage. But the gambling debt stood. Dick was dealing with ruthless men who demanded a sure thing.

Life insurance is a sure thing, and the elder Ramey had life insurance. But it takes a corpse to make it sure.

The old man's shallow, tired breathing went on and on.

Dick listened and drank and watched the clock. He recalled stories of drawn-out illnesses, of dying men who clung to life when hope was gone.

He shuddered at his own imaginings and drank deep from the bottle. The pale corn-likker burned its way down and he stopped shaking. The evil ideas stayed with him.

"One day - two days - three days - a week. What's the difference? He's dead right now, and too stubborn to stop breathing."

Ramey stood slowly and lurched to the bed. He leaned over. The closed eyes and parted blue lips fascinated him. He reached out and placed his hands lightly, experimentally around the dry, scrawny neck. Was his problem really this simple? All he needed was a moment's resolution. The blood pounded in his head. He drew a sharp, spasmodic breath.

The eyes of the dying man fluttered open. "Dick . . ."

Ramey pulled his hands away. The faint, whispering voice spoke again.

"GOD forgive you, son." A pause - and again . . . "GOD forgive you!" The faded eyes closed.

Dick Ramey turned away and tilted the bottle until every drop had run down his throat. Then he slumped back into his chair. The tired breathing went on and on.

The end came quietly a few hours later. Whatever lay on Dick's conscience, his hands were unbloodied. He had an insurance policy and a corpse. The gamblers were willing to wait for their sure thing.

At the funeral, Dick was unable to look into the casket.

Nor could he meet his mother's eyes. Neighbors took his haggard look for a sign of mourning, but the thing that gnawed at him was far worse. He lived every hour with the knowledge of how near he had come to murdering his own father.

In the months that followed, familiar surroundings were unbearable. Ramey's restlessness and his

drinking increased. At last Mary agreed to sell the farm and move to Chicago.

It takes more than distance to escape a nagging conscience. For more than six years he never laughed, almost never smiled. He relied more and more on liquor to blur his memory of the dying man's accusing eyes. There is an ounce of remorse at the bottom of every bottle, and Dick's mornings were times of horror. The only escape he knew was in more whiskey.

He concealed the story of the deathbed, but Mary knew some secret torture was destroying their lives. Each day was just a little worse than the one before.

Undernourished and living in foul surroundings, Mary developed tuberculosis. This added weight to Dick's burden of guilt.

The accusing visions stayed with him even when he was drunk. He sat for hours at a time, muttering and crying to himself.

There was still another blow. Mary saved her discovery until Dick was sober, but he was on the shaking edge of delirium tremens when she broke the news.

"Dick, a terrible thing's goin' to happen."

"What are you gettin' at?" He glared at her from the fear-ridden depths of his hangover.

"We're goin' to have a baby!"

This was disaster heaped on ruin. During the months that followed, Mary was too weak to leave her bed. Dick had been drinking to escape the memory of one sickbed. Now he was trapped in a room with another one. The association of ideas was so vivid he could barely force himself to walk near the bed.

As he sat in the room night after night, stupefied by liquor, the voice of a memory whispered endlessly in his brain.

"GOD forgive you, son. GOD forgive you."

Dick began talking back to the voice, denying his guilt.

Mary heard that one-sided, disjointed argument and learned what haunted her husband.

When he was able to listen, she tried to reason with him. "Dick - you didn't kill your father, did you?"

"No!"

"Well, then . . .?"

The thing at last was in the open and Ramey could talk about it. He thought it over, and then asked, "Mary, what does the Bible say about - killing?"

She got out the worn old Book - and found the twentieth chapter of the Book of Exodus. Dick took it and read, "Thou shalt not kill."

So far so good. Then Mary was struck with a sudden thought.

"Dick, did you want to kill him?"

Guiltily, he muttered, "What difference does that make?"

She turned to the Gospel according to Matthew and pointed to the twenty-first verse of the fifth chapter.

"**Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill, and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment** . . . "

Dick flung the Bible to the floor and stormed out of the house.

After that, he was never completely sober. Time after time he resolved to save money for the baby's birth, but what little there was always went for liquor.

When Mary's time came, Dick faced the ordeal of attending her himself. He went out and fortified himself with whiskey, and when he staggered home the baby had already arrived. It was still alive, but Mary was dead. In Dick Ramey's brain, the whisper of his father's voice went on and on, mingled with the infant's crying.

"GOD forgive you, son. GOD forgive you."

Next day, the neighbors did what little they could to help. When the child died, soon after, it was buried beside Mary in Potter's Field. Broken by guilt, loathing himself, Dick Ramey shuffled the streets for weeks in a nightmare of self-accusation. When the alcoholic fog lifted a little, only one thing made sense. He might better be dead. By the same reasoning he had once applied to his stricken father, he was already dead but merely breathing. Why prolong the matter further?

He stumbled back toward his room, planning to make death official with a piece of jagged bottle glass. As he went, he was aware of a vague and distant sound of chanting. The words were unintelligible to him, but it seemed to be a number of voices speaking together in chorus. He turned to see where it came from.

Down the street was coming the gospel wagon of the Pacific Garden Mission. As it rattled over the rough paving bricks, he saw it was filled with people. They were saying together the promise of JESUS, and as the wagon rolled nearer he could distinguish the words.

"**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life**."

Everlasting life - for a man who counted himself already dead.

There was no belief in Dick Ramey, but a fear of the finality of the grave made him pause and listen. When the wagon had passed him, he followed it slowly down the sidewalk.

At the door of the Mission he hesitated. There was a little printed sticker pasted on the glass. It read, "GOD Loves You."

Dick figured that wasn't true, but he went on inside. On the Mission wall he read the same words he'd heard on the street. "**For God so loved the world** . . . "

Back of the rostrum big block letters stated, "GOD Is Love."

Dick wanted to laugh at that, but he felt too much like crying. A little sweet-faced woman came up to him and said, "GOD loves you, my friend."

He looked up at a picture of CHRIST, then raised his fist and shook it wildly. There in the Mission chapel he began to shout.

"All right - if you love me, prove it! If you're so all-powerful and full of love, see what you can do about saving me! If you're so full of forgiveness, forgive me! I've got a load of sin that would bust your back! Go on - do it!"

He was sobbing when they led him into the old prayer room.

The transformation of Dick Ramey was sound, lasting and unmistakable. With his life surrendered to the Living Person of the risen Saviour, Dick knew in the very center of his being that he really was forgiven. He knew the load of sin that had broken him would not break his new Lord, because it had been carried to Calvary nineteen centuries earlier.

They found Dick a job as one of the guards in Chicago's famous Art Institute. He stayed there for many years, and much of his free time was spent working with troubled men at Pacific Garden Mission.

One famous preacher, visiting the Mission, was told about the old riverman and insisted on meeting him at once. He called on Dick at the Art Institute. While they strolled through the galleries together, Dick quietly told his story.

Speaking of that meeting later, the preacher said; "There we were, surrounded by the world's great masterpieces. But the most wonderful of all was that plain, quiet man in the dark blue uniform - because a masterpiece is simply, the work of the Master."

~ end of chapter 5 ~



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