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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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CHAPTER L.

THE DATES.

I have given, of course, only an epitome of our conversation, and by the time we had arrived at this point, we had also reached the gate of the churchyard. Again we fastened up our horses; again he took the key from under the tombstone; and once more we entered the dreary little church, and drew aside the curtain of the vestry. I took down the volume of the register. The place was easy to find, seeing, as I have said, it was at the very end of the volume.

The copy I had taken was correct: the date of the marriage in the register was January 15, and it was the first under the 1748, written at the top of the page. I stood for a moment gazing at it; then my eye turned to the entry before it, the last on the preceding page. It bore the date December 13—under the general date at the top of the page, 1747. The next entry after it was dated March 29. At the bottom of the page, or cover rather, was the attestation of the clergyman to the number of marriages in that year; but there was no such attestation at the bottom of the preceding page. I turned to Mr. Coningham, who had stood regarding me, and pointing to the book, said—

"Look here, Mr. Coningham. I cannot understand it. Here the date of the marriage 1748; and that of all their letters, evidently written after the marriage, is 1747."

He looked, and stood looking, but made me no reply. In my turn I looked at him. His face expressed something not far from consternation; but the moment he became aware that I was observing him, he pulled out his handkerchief, and wiping his forehead with an attempt at a laugh, said—

"How hot it is! Yes; there's something awkward there. I hadn't observed it before. I must inquire into that. I confess I cannot explain it all at once. It does certainly seem queer. I must look into those dates when I go home."

He was evidently much more discomposed than he was willing I should perceive. He always spoke rather hurriedly, but I had never heard him stammer before. I was certain that he saw or at least dreaded something fatal in the discrepancy I had pointed out. As to looking into it when he got home, that sounded very like nonsense. He pulled out a notebook, however, and said:

"I may just as well make a note of the blunder—for blunder it must be—a very awkward one indeed, I am afraid. I should think so—I cannot—but then—"

He went on uttering disjointed and unfinished expressions, while he made several notes. His manner was of one who regards the action he is about as useless, yet would have it supposed the right thing to do.

"There!" he said, shutting up his notebook with a slam; and turning away, he strode out of the place—much, it seemed to me, as if his business there was over for ever. I gave one more glance at the volume, and replaced it on the shelf. When I rejoined him, he was already mounted and turning to move off.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Coningham," I said. "I don't exactly know where to put the key."

"Fling it under the gravestone, and come along," he said, muttering something more, in which perhaps I only fancied I heard certain well-known maledictions.

By this time my spirits had sunk as much below their natural level, as a little before, they had risen above it. But I felt that I must be myself, and that no evil any more than good fortune ought for a moment to perturb the tenor of my being. Therefore having locked the door deliberately and carefully, I felt about along the underside of the gravestone until I found the ledge where the key had lain. I then made what haste I could to mount and follow Mr. Coningham, but Lilith delayed the operation by her eagerness. I gave her the rein, and it was well no one happened to be coming in the opposite direction through that narrow and tortuous passage, for she flew round the corners—"turning close to the ground, like a cat when scratching—ly she wheels about after a mouse," as my old favourite Sir Philip Sidney says. Notwithstanding her speed, however, when I reached the mouth of the lane, there was Mr. Coningham half across the first field, with his coat-tails flying out behind him. I would not allow myself to be left in such a discourteous fashion, and gave chase. Before he had measured the other half of the field, I was up with him.

"That mare of yours is a clever one," he said, as I ranged alongside of him. "I thought I would give her a breather. She hasn't enough to do."

"She's not breathing so very fast," I returned. "Her wind is as good as her legs."

"Let's get along then, for I've lost a great deal of time this morning. I ought to have been at Squire Strode's an hour ago. How hot the sun is, to be sure, for this time of the year!"

As he spoke, he urged his horse, but I took and kept the lead, feeling, I confess, a little angry, for I could not help suspecting he had really wanted to run away from me. I did what I could, however, to behave as if nothing had happened. But he was very silent, and his manner towards me was quite altered. Neither could I help thinking it scarcely worthy of a man of the world, not to say a lawyer, to show himself so much chagrined. For my part, having simply concluded that the new-blown bubble-hope had burst, I found myself just where I was before—with a bend sinister on my scutcheon, it might be, but with a good conscience, a tolerably clear brain, and the dream of my Athanasia.

The moment we reached the road, Mr. Coningham announced that his way was in the opposite direction to mine, said his good morning, shook hands with me, and jogged slowly away. I knew that was not the nearest way to Squire Strode's.

I could not help laughing—he had so much the look of a dog with his tail between his legs, or a beast of prey that had made his spring and missed his game. I watched him for some time, for Lilith being pulled both ways—towards home, and after her late companion—was tolerably quiescent, but he never cast a glance behind. When at length a curve in the road hid him from my sight, I turned and went quietly home, thinking what the significance of the unwelcome discovery might be. If the entry of the marriage under the date could not be proved a mere blunder, of which I could see no hope, then certainly my grandfather must be regarded as born out of wedlock, a supposition which, if correct, would account for the dropping of the *Daryll*.

On the way home, I jumped no hedges.

Having taken my farewell of Lilith, I packed my "bag of needments," locked the door of my uncle's room, which I would have no one enter in my absence, and set out to meet the night mail.

CHAPTER LI.

CHARLEY AND CLARA.

On my arrival in London, I found Charley waiting for me, as I had expected; and with his help, soon succeeded in finding, in one of the streets leading from the Strand to the river, the accommodation I wanted. There I settled, and resumed the labour so long and thanklessly interrupted.

When I recounted the circumstances of my last interview with Mr. Coningham, Charley did not seem so much surprised at the prospect which had opened before me as disappointed at its sudden close, and would not admit that the matter could be allowed to rest where it was.

"Do you think the change of style could possibly have anything to do with it?" he asked, after a meditative silence.

"I don't know," I replied. "Which change of style do you mean?"

"I mean the change of the beginning of the year from March to January," he answered.

"When did that take place?" I asked.

"Some time about the middle of the last century," he replied; "but I will find out exactly."

The next night he brought me the information that the January which according to the old style would have been that of 1752 was promoted to be the first month of the year 1753.

My dates then were, by several years, antecedent to the change, and it was an indisputable anachronism that the January between the December of 1747 and the March of 1748, should be entered as belonging to the latter year. This seemed to throw a little dubious light upon the perplexity: the January thus entered belonged clearly to 1747, and therefore was the same January with that of my ancestors' letters. Plainly, however, the entry could not stand in evidence, its interpolation at least appearing indubitable, for how otherwise could it stand at the beginning of the new year instead of towards the end of the old, five years before the change of style? Also, I now clearly remembered that it did look a little crushed between the heading of the year and the next entry. It must be a forgery—and a stupid one as well, seeing the bottom of the preceding page, where there was a small blank, would have been the proper place to choose for it—that is, under the heading 1747. Could the 1748 have been inserted afterwards? That did not appear likely, seeing it belonged to all the rest of the entries on the page, there being none between the date in question and March 29, on the 25th of which month the new year began. The conclusion lying at the door was that some one had inserted the marriage so long after the change of style that he knew nothing of the trap there lying for his forgery. It seemed probable that, blindly following the letters, he had sought to place it in the beginning of

the previous year, but, getting bewildered in the apparent eccentricities of the arrangement of month and year, or, perhaps, finding no other blank suitable to his purpose, had at last drawn his bow at a venture. Neither this nor any other theory I could fashion, did I however find in the least satisfactory. All I could be sure of was, that there was no evidence of the marriage—on the contrary a strong presumption against it.

For my part, the dream in which I had indulged had been so short that I very soon recovered from the disappointment of the waking therefrom. Neither did the blot with which the birth of my grandfather was menaced, affect me much. My chief annoyance in regard of that aspect of the affair was in being so related to Geoffrey Brotherton.

I cannot say how it came about, but I could not help observing that, by degrees, a manifest softening appeared in Charley's mode of speaking of his father, although I knew that there was not the least approach to a more cordial intercourse between them. I attributed the change to the letters of his sister, which he always gave me to read. From them I have since learned, chiefly women, the best of their kind, so good and so large-minded that they seem ever on the point of casting aside the unworthy opinions they have been taught, and showing themselves the true followers of him who cared only for the truth; and yet holding by the doctrines of men, and believing them to be the mind of God.

In one or two of Charley's letters to her, I ventured to insert a question or two, and her reference to these in her replies to Charley, gave me an opportunity of venturing to write to her more immediately, in part defending what I thought the truth, in part expressing all the sympathy I honestly could with her opinions. She replied very kindly, very earnestly, and with a dignity of expression as well as of thought which harmonized entirely with my vision of her deeper and grander nature.

The chief bent of my energies was now to vindicate for myself a worthy position in the world of letters; but my cherished hope lay in the growth of such an intimacy with Mary Osborne as might afford ground for the cultivation of far higher and more precious ambitions.

It was not however with the design of furthering these that I was now guilty of what will seem to most men a Quixotic action enough.

"Your sister is fond of riding—is she not?" I asked Charley one day, as we sauntered with our cigars on the terrace of the Adelphi.

"As fond as one can possibly be who has had so little opportunity," he said.

"I was hoping to have a ride with her and Clara the very evening when that miserable affair occurred. The loss of that ride was at least as great a disappointment to me as the loss of the sword."

"You seem to like my sister, Wilfrid," he said.

"At least I care more for her good opinion than I do for any woman's—or man's either, Charley."

"I am so glad!" he responded. "You like her better than Clara then?"

"Ever so much," I said.

He looked more pleased than annoyed, I thought—certainly neither the one nor the other entirely. His eyes sparkled, but there was a flicker of darkness about his forehead.

"I am very glad," he said again, after a moment's pause. "I thought—I was afraid—I had fancied sometimes—you were still a little in love with Clara."

"Not one atom," I returned. "She cured me of that quite. There is no danger of that any more," I added—foolishly, seeing I intended no explanation.

"How do you mean?" he asked, a little uneasily.

I had no answer ready, and a brief silence followed. The subject was not resumed.

It may well seem strange to my reader that I had never yet informed him of the part Clara had had in the matter of the sword. But, as I have already said, when anything moved me very deeply, I was never ready to talk about it. Somehow, whether from something of the cat-nature in me, I never liked to let go my hold of it without good reason. Especially I shrunk from imparting what I only half comprehended; and besides, in the present case, the thought of Clara's behaviour was so painful to me still, that I recoiled from any talk about it—the more that Charley had a kind and good opinion of her, and would I knew only start objections and explanations defensive, as he had done before on a similar occasion, and this I should have no patience with. I had therefore hitherto held my tongue. There was, of course, likewise the fear of betraying his sister, only the danger of that was small, now that the communication between the two girls seemed at an end for the time; and if it had not been that a certain amount of mutual reticence had arisen between us, first on Charley's part and afterwards on mine, I doubt much whether, after all, I should not by this time have told him the whole story. But the moment I had

spoken as above, the strangeness of his look, which seemed to indicate that he would gladly request me to explain myself but for some hidden reason, flashed upon me the suspicion that he was himself in love with Clara. The moment the suspicion entered, a host of circumstances crystallized around it. Fact after fact flashed out of my memory, from the first meeting of the two in Switzerland down to this last time I had seen them together, and in the same moment I was convinced that the lady I saw him with in the Regent's Park was no other than Clara. But if it were so, why had he shut me out from his confidence? Of the possible reasons which suggested themselves, the only one which approached the satisfactory was, that he had dreaded hurting me by the confession of his love for her, and preferred leaving it to Clara to cure me of a passion to which my doubtful opinion of her gave a probability of weakness and ultimate evanescence.

A great conflict awoke in me. What ought I to do? How could I leave him in ignorance of the falsehood of the woman he loved? But I could not make the disclosure now. I must think about the how and the how much to tell him. I returned to the subject which had led up to the discovery.

"Does your father keep horses, Charley?"

"He has a horse for his parish work, and my mother has an old pony for her carriage."

"Is the rectory a nice place?"

"I believe it is, but I have such painful associations with it, that I hardly know."

The Arab loves the desert sand where he was born; the thief loves the court where he used to play in the gutter. How miserable Charley's childhood must have been! How could I tell him of Clara's falsehood?

"Why doesn't he give Mary a pony to ride?" I asked. "But I suppose he hasn't room for another."

"Oh yes, there's plenty of room. His predecessor was rather a big fellow. In fact, the stables are on much too large a scale for a clergyman. I daresay he never thought of it. I must do my father the justice to say there's nothing stingy about him, and I believe he loves my sister even more than my mother. It certainly would be the best thing he could do for her to give her a pony. But she will die of religion—young, and be sainted in a twopenny tract, and that is better than a pony. Her hair doesn't curl—that's the only objection. Some one has remarked that all the good children who die have curly hair."

Poor Charley! Was his mind more healthy then? Was he less likely to come to an early death? Was his want of faith more life-giving than what he considered her false faith?

"I see no reason to fear it," I said, with a tremor at my heart as I thought of my dream.

That night I was sleepless—but about Charley—not about Mary. What could I do?—what ought I to do? Might there be some mistake in my judgment of Clara? I searched, and I believe searched honestly, for any possible mode of accounting for her conduct that might save her uprightness, or mitigate the severity of the condemnation I had passed upon her. I could find none. At the same time, what I was really seeking was an excuse for saying nothing to Charley. I suspect now that had I searched after justification or excuse for her from love to herself, I might have succeeded in constructing a theory capable of sheltering her; but as it was, I failed utterly; and turning at last from the effort, I brooded instead upon the Quixotic idea already adverted to, grown the more attractive as offering a good excuse for leaving Charley for a little.

CHAPTER LII.

LILITH MEETS WITH A MISFORTUNE.

The next day, leaving a note to inform Charley that I had run home for a week, I set out for the moat, carrying with me the best side-saddle I could find in London.

As I left the inn at Minstercombe in a gig, I saw Clara coming out of a shop. I could not stop and speak to her, for, not to mention the opinion I had of her, and the treachery of which I accused her, was I not at that very moment meditating how best to let her lover know that she was now to be depended upon? I touched the horse with the whip, and drove rapidly past. Involuntarily, however, I glanced behind, and saw a white face staring after me. Our looks encountering thus, I lifted my hat, but held on my course.

I could not help feeling very sorry for her. The more falsely she had behaved, she was the more to be pitied. She looked very beautiful with that white face. But how different was her beauty from that of my Athanasia!

Having tried the side-saddle upon Lilith, and found all it wanted was a little change in the stuffing about the withers, I told Styles to take it and the mare to Minstercombe the next morning, and have it properly fitted.

What trifles I am lingering upon! Lilith is gone to the worms—no, that I do not believe: amongst the things most people believe, and I cannot, that is one; but at all events she is dead, and the saddle gone to worms; and yet, for reasons which will want no explanation to my one reader, I care to linger even