

[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

OUTSIDE.

I.

She is singing a song that she sang for me
Often and often in bygone years.
And my ears are blessed, though my eyes must be
Dim with the darkness that comes through tears.

II.

I am not angry.—I am not mad.—
I do not rave at the fates that kill—
There is something within me that makes me glad,—
Let her love me or not—I can love her still.

III.

If she knew that I heard her sing to-night,
Would the faintest quiver disturb her heart?
Would her ears grow deaf to the gilded wight
Who is using the words of the marriage mart?

IV.

What matter? I worship her, body and soul—
For a touch of her fingers day and night
I would work and wait till the ashly coal
Of my life rekindled in love's own light.

V.

And I stand outside as proud as a god
With the gold in thought of what once has been.
In a threadbare coat and shabbily shod,
While minions of fashion surround my queen.

VI.

'Tis many a lonely, wearisome day
Since she sang that song for myself alone—
But her voice is hushed and I go my way
With a widowed heart that has lost its throne.

JOHN READE.

REGISTERED in accordance with the Copyright Act
of 1868.]

WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,
Author of "Alec Forbes," etc.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE TOP OF THE CHIMNEY-STAIR.

I FEAR my readers have thought me too long occupied with the explanatory foundations of my structure: I shall at once proceed to raise its walls of narrative. Whatever further explanations may be necessary, can be applied as buttresses in lieu of a broader base.

One Sunday—it was his custom of a Sunday—I fancy I was then somewhere about six years of age—my uncle rose from the table after our homely dinner, took me by the hand, and led me to the dark door with the long arrow-headed hinges, and up the winding stone stair which I never ascended except with him or my aunt. At the top was another rugged door, and within that, one covered with green baize. The last opened on what had always seemed to me a very paradise of a room. It was old-fashioned enough; but childhood is of any and every age, and it was not old-fashioned to me—only intensely cosy and comfortable. The first thing my eyes generally rested upon was an old bureau, with a book-case on the top of it, the glass-doors of which were lined with faded silk. The next thing I would see was a small tent-bed, with the whitest of curtains, and enchanting fringes of white ball-tassels. The bed was covered with an equally charming counterpane of silk patchwork. The next object was the genius of the place, in a high, close, easy-chair, covered with some dark stuff, against which her face, surrounded with its widow's cap, of ancient form, but dazzling whiteness, was strongly relieved. How shall I describe the shrunken, yet delicate, the gracious, if not graceful form, and the face from which extreme old age had not wasted half the loveliness? Yet I always beheld it with an indescribable sensation, one of whose elements I can isolate and identify as a faint fear. Perhaps this arose partly from the fact that, in going up the stair, more than once my uncle had said to me "You must not mind what grannie says, Willie, for old people will often speak strange things that young people cannot understand. But you must love grannie, for she is a very good old lady."

"Well, grannie, how are you to-day?" said my uncle, as we entered, this particular Sunday. I may as well mention at once that my uncle called her grannie in his own right and not in mine, for she was in truth my great grandmother.

"Pretty well, David, I thank you; but much too long out of my grave," answered grannie; in no sepulchral tones, however, for her voice, although weak and uneven, had a sound in it like that of one of the upper strings of a violin. The plaintiveness of it touched me, and I crept near her—nearer than I believe, I had ever yet gone of my own will—and laid my hand upon hers. I withdrew it instantly, for there was something in the touch that made me—not shudder, exactly—but creep. Her hand was smooth and soft, and warm too, only somehow the skin of it seemed dead. With a quicker movement than belonged to her years, she caught hold of mine, which she kept in one of her hands, while she stroked it with the other. My slight repugnance vanished for the time, and I looked up in her face, grateful for a tenderness which was altogether new to me.

"What makes you so long out of your grave, grannie?" I asked.

"They won't let me into it, my dear."

"Who won't let you, grannie?"

"My own grandson there, and the woman down the stair."

"But you don't really want to go—do you, grannie?"

"I do want to go, Willie. I ought to have been there long ago. I am very old; so old, that I've forgotten how old I am. How old am I?" she asked, looking up at my uncle.

"Nearly ninety-five, grannie; and the older you get before you go, the better we shall be pleased, as you know very well."

"There! I told you," she said, with a smile, not all of pleasure, as she turned her head towards me. "They won't let me go. I want to go to my grave, and they won't let me! Is that an age at which to keep a poor woman from her grave?"

"But it's not a nice place, is it, grannie?" I asked, with the vaguest ideas of what the grave meant. "I think somebody told me it was in the churchyard."

But neither did I know with any clearness what the church itself meant, for we were a long way from church, and I had never been there yet.

"Yes, it is in the churchyard, my dear."

"Is it a house?" I asked.

"Yes, a little house; just big enough for one."

"I shouldn't like that."

"Oh yes you would."

"Is it a nice place, then?"

"Yes, the nicest place in the world, when you get to be so old as I am. If they would only let me die!"

"Die, grannie!" I exclaimed. My notions of death as yet were derived only from the fowls brought from the farm, with their necks hanging down long and limp, and their heads wagging hither and thither.

"Come, grannie, you mustn't frighten our little man," interposed my uncle, looking kindly at us both.

"David!" said grannie, with a reproachful dignity. "You know what I mean well enough. You know that until I have done what I have to do, the grave that is waiting for me will not open its mouth to receive me. If you will only allow me to do what I have to do, I shall not trouble you long. Oh dear! oh dear!" she broke out, moaning and rocking herself to and fro. "I am too old to weep, and they will not let me to my bed. I want to go to bed. I want to go to sleep."

She moaned and complained like a child. My uncle went near and took her hand.

"Come, come, dear grannie!" he said, "you must not behave like this. You know all things are for the best."

"To keep a corpse out of its grave!" retorted the old lady, almost fiercely, only she was too old and weak to be fierce. "Why should you keep a soul that's longing to depart and go to its own people, lingering on in the coffin? What better than a coffin is this withered body? The child is old enough to understand me. Leave him with me for half an hour, and I shall trouble you no longer. I shall at least wait my end in peace. But I think I should die before the morning."

"Ere grannie had finished this sentence, I had shrunk from her again and retreated behind my uncle."

"There!" she went on, "you make my own child fear me. Don't be frightened, Willie dear; your old mother is not a wild beast; she loves you dearly. Only my grand-children are so undutiful! They will not let my own son come near me."

How I recall this I do not know, for I could not have understood it at the time. The fact is that during the last few years I have found pictures of the past returning upon me in the most vivid and unaccountable manner, so much so as almost to alarm me. Things I had utterly forgotten—or so far at least that when they return they must appear only as vivid imaginations, were it not for a certain conviction of fact which accompanies them—are constantly dawning out of the past. Can it be that the decay of the observant faculties allows the memory to revive and gather force? But I must refrain, for my business is to narrate, not to speculate.

My uncle took me by the hand, and turned to leave the room. I cast one look at grannie as he led me away. She had thrown her head back on her chair, and her eyes were closed; but her face looked offended, almost angry. She looked to my fancy as if she were trying but unable to lie down. My uncle closed the doors very gently. In the middle of the stair he stopped, and said in a low voice,

"Willie, do you know that when people grow very old they are not quite like other people?"

"Yes. They want to go to the churchyard," I answered.

"They fancy things," said my uncle.

"Grannie thinks you are her own son."

"And ain't I?" I asked innocently.

"Not exactly," he answered. "Your father was her son's son. She forgets that, and wants to talk to you as if you were your grandfather. Poor old grannie. I don't wish you to go and see her without your aunt or me; mind that."

Whether I made any promise I do not re-

member; but I know that a new something was mingled with my life from that moment. An air as it were of the tomb mingled henceforth with the homely delights of my life. Grannie wanted to die, and uncle would not let her. She longed for her grave, and they would keep her above ground. And from the feeling that grannie ought to be buried, grew an awful sense that she was not alive—not alive, that is, as other people are alive, and a gulf was fixed between her and me which for a long time I never attempted to pass, avoiding as much as I could all communication with her, even when my uncle or aunt wished to take me to her room. They did not seem displeased, however, when I objected, and not always insisted on obedience. Thus affairs went on in our quiet household for what seemed to me a very long time.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PENDULUM.

It may have been a year after this, it may have been two, I cannot tell, when the next great event in my life occurred. I think it was towards the close of an autumn, but there was not so much about our house as elsewhere to mark the changes of the seasons, for the grass was always green. I remember it was a sultry afternoon. I had been out almost the whole day, wandering hither and thither over the grass, and I felt hot and oppressed. Not an air was stirring. I longed for a breath of wind, for I was not afraid of the wind itself, only of the trees that made it. Indeed, I delighted in the wind, and would run against it with exuberant pleasure, even rejoicing in the fancy that I, as well as the trees, could make the wind by shaking my hair about as I ran. I must run, however; whereas the trees, whose prime business it was, could do it without stirring from the spot. But this was much too hot an afternoon for me, whose mood was always more inclined to the passive than the active, to run about and toss my hair, even for the sake of the breeze that would result therefrom. I bethought myself. I was nearly a man now; I would be afraid of things no more; I would get out my pendulum, and see whether that would not help me. Not this time would I flinch from what consequences might follow. Let them be what they might, the pendulum should wag, and have a fair chance of doing its best.

I went up to my room, a sense of high enterprise filling my little heart. Composedly, yea solemnly, I set to work, even as some enchanter of old might have drawn his circle, and chosen his spell out of his iron-clasped volume. I strode to the closet in which the awful instrument dwelt. It stood in the farthest corner. As I lifted it, something like a groan invaded my ear. My notions of locality were not then sufficiently developed to let me know that grannie's room was on the other side of that closet. I almost let the creature, for as such I regarded it, drop. I was not to be deterred, however. I bore it carefully to the light, and set it gently on the window-sill, full in view of the distant trees towards the west. I left it then for a moment, as if that it might gather its strength for its unwonted labours, while I closed the door, and, with what fancy I can scarcely imagine now, the curtains of my bed as well. Possibly it was with some notion of having one place to which, if the worst came to the worst, I might retreat for safety. Again I approached the window, and after standing for some time in contemplation of the pendulum, I set it in motion, and stood watching it.

It swung slower and slower. It wanted to stop. It should not stop. I gave it another swing. On it went, at first somewhat distractedly, next more regularly, then with slowly retarding movement. But it should not stop.

I turned in haste and got from the side of my bed the only chair in the room, placed it in the window, sat down before the reluctant instrument, and gave it a third swing. Then, my elbows on the sill, I sat and watched it with growing awe, but growing determination as well. Once more it showed signs of refusal; once more the forefinger of my right hand administered impulse.

Something gave a crack inside the creature: away went the pendulum, swinging with a will. I sat and gazed, almost horror-stricken. Ere many moments had passed, the feeling of terror had risen to such a height that, but for the very terror, I would have seized the pendulum in a frantic grasp. I did not. On it went, and I sat looking. My dismay was gradually subsiding.

I have learned since that a certain ancestor—or was he only a great-uncle?—I forget—had a taste for mechanics, even to the craze of the perpetual motion, and could work well in brass and iron. The creature was probably some invention of his. It was a real marvel, how, after so many years of idleness, it could now go as it did. I confess, as I contemplate the thing, I am in a puzzle, and almost fancy the whole a dream. But let it pass. At worst, something of which this is the sole representative residuum, wrought an effect on me which embodies its cause thus, as I search for it in the past. And why should not the individual life have its misty legends as well as that of

nations? From them, as from the golden and rosy clouds of morning, dawn at last the true sun of its unquestionable history. Every boy has his own fables, just as the Romans and the English of the world have their Romuli and their Arthurs, their suckling wolves and their granite-sheathed swords. Do they not reflect each other? I tell the tale as 'tis left in me.

How long I sat thus gazing at the now self-impelled instrument, I cannot say. The next point in the progress of the legend, is a gust of wind rattling the window in whose recess I was seated. I jumped from my chair in terror. While I had been absorbed in the pendulum, the evening had closed in; clouds over the sky, and all was gloomy about the house. It was much too dark to see the distant trees, but there could be no doubt they were at work. The pendulum had roused them. Another, a third, and a fourth gust rattled and shook the rickety frame. I had done it at last! The trees were busy away there in the darkness. I and my pendulum could make the wind.

The gusts came faster and faster, and grew into blasts which settled into a steady gale. The pendulum went on swinging to and fro, and the gale went on increasing in violence. I sat half in terror, half in delight at the awful success of my experiment. I would have opened the window to let in the coveted air, but that was beyond my knowledge and strength. I could make the wind blow, but, like other magicians, I could not share in its benefits. I would go out and meet it on the open plain. I crept down the stair like a thief—not that I feared detention, but that I felt such a sense of the important, even the dread, about my instrument, that I was not in harmony with souls reflecting only the common affairs of life. In a moment I was in the middle of the storm—for storm it very nearly was and soon became. I rushed to and fro in the midst of it, lay down and rolled in it, and laughed and shouted as I looked up to the window where the pendulum was swinging, and thought of the trees at work away in the dark. The wind grew stronger and stronger. What if the pendulum should not stop at all, and the wind went on and on, growing louder and fiercer, till it grew mad and blew away the house? Ah, then, poor grannie would have a chance of being buried at last! Seriously, the affair might grow serious.

Such thoughts were passing in my mind, when all at once the wind gave a roar which made me spring to my feet and rush for the house. I must stop the pendulum. There was a strange sound in that blast. The trees themselves had had enough of it, and were protesting against the creature's tyranny. Their master was working them too hard. I ran up the stair on all fours; it was my way when I was in a hurry. Swinging went the pendulum in the window, and the wind roared in the chimney. I seized hold of the oscillating thing, and stopped it; but to my amazement and consternation, the moment I released it, on it went again. I must sit and hold it. But the voice of my aunt called me from below, and as I dared not explain why I would rather not appear, I was forced to obey. I lingered on the stair, half-minded to return.

"What a rough night it is!" I heard my aunt say, with rare remark.

"It gets worse and worse," responded uncle. "I hope it won't disturb grannie; but the wind must roar fearfully in her chimney."

I stood like a culprit. What if they should find out that I was at the root of the mischief, at the heart of the storm?

"If I could believe all I have been reading to-night about the Prince of the Power of the Air, I should not like this storm at all," continued my uncle, with a smile. "But books are not always to be trusted because they are old," he added with another smile. "From the glass, I expected rain and not wind."

"Whatever wind there is, we get it all," said my aunt. "I wonder what Willie is about. I thought I heard him coming down. Isn't it time, David, we did something about his schooling? It won't do to have him idling about this way all day long."

"He's a mere child," returned my uncle. "I'm not forgetting him. But I can't send him away yet."

"You know best," returned my aunt.

"Send him away! What could it mean? Why should I—where should I go? Was not the old place a part of me, just like my own clothes on my own body? This was the kind of feeling that woke in me at the words. But hearing my aunt push back her chair, evidently with the purpose of finding me, I descended into the room.

"Come along, Willie," said my uncle. "Hear the wind, how it roars!"

"Yes, uncle; it does roar," I said, feeling a hypocrite for the first time in my life. Knowing far more about the roaring than he did, I yet spoke like an innocent!

"Do you know who makes the wind, Willie?"

"Yes. The trees," I answered.

My uncle opened his blue eyes very wide, and looked at my aunt. He had had no idea what a little heathen I was. The more a man has wrought out his own mental condition, the readier he is to suppose that children must be able to work out theirs, and to forget that