

REGISTERED in accordance with the Copyright Act of 1868.]

WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LEADS.

The moment Mrs. Wilson was gone, I expected to see Clara peep out from behind the tapestry in the corner; but as she did not appear I lifted it, and looked in. There was nothing behind but a closet almost filled with books, not upon shelves but heaped up from floor to ceiling. There had been just room and no more for Clara to stand between the tapestry and the books. It was of no use attempting to look for her—at least I said so to myself, for as yet the attraction of an old book was equal to that of a young girl. Besides, I always enjoyed waiting—up to a certain point. Therefore, I resumed my place on the floor, with the *Seven Champions* in one hand, and my chamber-candlestick in the other.

I had for the moment forgotten Clara in the adventures of St. Andrew of Scotland, when the *sitting* of her frock aroused me. She was at my side.

"Well, you've had your dinner? Did she give you any dessert?"

"This is my dessert," I said, holding up the book. "It's for more than —"

"Far more than your dessert," she pursued, "if you prefer it to me."

"I looked for you first," I said, defensively.

"Where?"

"In the closet there."

"You didn't think I was going to wait there, did you? Why, the very spiders are hanging dead in their own webs in there. But here's some dessert for you—if you're as fond of apples as most boys," she added, taking a rosy-cheeked beauty from her pocket.

I accepted it, but somehow did not quite relish being lumped with boys in that fashion. As I ate it, which I should have felt bound to do even had it been less acceptable in itself, she resumed—

"Wouldn't you like to see the company arrive? That's what I came for. I wasn't going to ask Goody Wilson."

"Yes, I should," I answered; "but Mrs. Wilson told me to keep here, and not get in their way."

"Oh! I'll take care of that. We shan't go near them. I know every corner of the place—a good deal better than Mrs. Wilson. Come along, Wilfrid—that's your name, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Am I to call you Clara?"

"Yes, if you are good—that is if you like. I don't care what you call me. Come along."

I followed. She led me into the armoury. A great clang of the bell in the paved court fell upon our ears.

"Make haste," she said, and darted to the door at the foot of the little stair. "Mind how you go," she went on. "The steps are very much worn. Keep your right shoulder foremost."

I obeyed her directions, and followed her up the stair. We passed the door of a room over the armoury, and ascended still, to creep out at last through a very low door on to the leads of the little square tower. Here we could, on the one side, look into every corner of the paved court, and on the other, across the roof of the hall, could see about half of the high court as they call it, into which the carriages drove; and from this post of vantage, we watched the arrival of a good many parties. I thought the ladies tripping across the paved court, with their gay dresses lighting up the spring twilight, and their sweet voices rippling its almost pensive silence, suited the time and the place much better than the carriages dashing into the other court, fine as they looked with their well-kept horses and their servants in gay liveries. The sun was down, and the moon was rising—near the full, but there was too much light in the sky to let her make much of herself yet. It was one of those spring evenings which you could not tell from an autumn one except for a certain something in the air appealing to an undefined sense—rather that of smell than any other. There were green buds and not withering leaves in it—life and not death; and the voices of the gathering guests were of the season, and pleasant to the soul. Of course Nature did not then affect me so definitely as to make me give forms of thought to her influences. It is now first that I turn them into shapes and words.

As we stood, I discovered that I had been a little mistaken about the position of the Hall. I saw that, although from some points in front it seemed to stand on an isolated rock, the ground rose behind it, terrace upon terrace, the uppermost of which terraces was crowned with rows of trees. Over them, the moon was now gathering her strength.

"It is rather cold; I think we had better go in," said Clara, after we had remained there for some minutes without seeing any fresh arrivals.

"Very well," I answered. "What shall we do? Shall you go home?"

"No, certainly not. We must see a good deal more fun first."

"How will you manage that? You will go to the ball-room, I suppose. You can go where you please, of course."

"Oh, no! I'm not grand enough to be invited. Oh, dear no! At least I am not old enough."

"But you will be some day."

"I don't know. Perhaps. We'll see. Meantime we must make the best of it. What are you going to do?"

"I shall go back to the library."

"Then I'll go with you—till the music begins; and then I'll take you where you can see a little of the dancing. It's great fun."

"But how will you manage that?"

"You leave that to me."

We descended at once to the armoury, where I had left my candle; and thence we returned to the library.

"Would you like me to read to you?" I asked.

"I don't mind—if it's anything worth hearing."

"Don't you hear the music?" she said, half indignantly.

"I hear it now," I answered; "but why —?"

"Come along," she interrupted eagerly. "We shall just be in time to see them go across from the drawing-room to the ball-room. Come, come. Leave your candle."

I put down my book with some reluctance.

She led me into the armoury, and from the armoury out on the gallery half-encompassing the great hall, which was lighted up, and full of servants. Opening another door in the gallery, she conducted me down a stair which led almost into the hall, but, ascending again behind it, landed us in a little lobby, on one side of which was the drawing-room, and on the other the ball-room, on another level, reached by a few high semi-circular steps.

"Quick! quick!" said Clara, and turning sharply round, she opened another door, disclosing a square-built stone staircase. She pushed the door carefully against the wall, ran up a few steps, I following in some trepidation, turned abruptly and sat down. I did as she did, questioning nothing: I had committed myself to her superior knowledge.



"GIVE ME A KISS BEFORE I GO."

"Well, I'll read you a bit of the book I was reading when you came in."

"What! that musty old book! No, thank you. It's enough to give one the horrors. The very sight of it is enough. How can you like such frumpy old things?"

"Oh! you mustn't mind the look of it," I said. "It's very nice inside!"

"I know where there is a nice one," she returned. "Give me the candle."

I followed her to another of the rooms, where she searched for some time. At length—"There it is!" she said, and put into my hand *The Castle of Otranto*. The name promised well. She next led the way to a lovely little bay window, forming almost a closet, which looked out upon the park, whence, without seeing the moon, we could see her light on the landscape, and the great deep shadows cast over the park from the towers of the Hall. There we sat on the broad window sill, and I began to read. It was delightful.—Does it indicate loss of power, that the grown man cannot enjoy the book in which the boy delighted? Or is it that the realities of the book, as perceived by his keener eyes, refuse to blend with what imagination would supply if it might?

No sooner, however, did the first notes of the distant violins enter the ear of my companion, than she started to her feet.

"What's the matter?" I asked, looking up from the book.

The quick ear of my companion had caught the first sounds of the tuning of the instruments, and here we were, before the invitation to dance, a customary observance at Moldwarp Hall, had begun to play. In a few minutes thereafter, the door of the drawing-room opened; when, pair after pair, the company, to the number of over a hundred and fifty, I should guess, walked past the foot of the stair on which we were seated, and ascended the steps into the ball-room. The lobby was dimly lighted, except from the two open doors, and there was little danger of our being seen.

I interrupt my narrative to mention the odd fact, that so fully was my mind possessed with the antiquity of the place, which it had been the pride of generation after generation to keep up, that now when I recall the scene, the guests always appear dressed not as they were then, but in a far more antique style with which after knowledge supplied my inner vision.

Last of all came Lady Brotherton, Sir Giles's wife, a pale, delicately-looking woman, leaning on the arm of a tall, long-necked, would-be-stately, yet insignificant-looking man. She gave a shiver as, up the steps from the warm drawing-room, she came at once opposite our open door.

"What a draught there is here!" she said, adjusting her rose-coloured scarf about her shoulders. "It feels quite wintry. Will you

oblige me, Mr. Mollet, by shutting that door? Sir Giles will not allow me to have it built up. I am sure there are plenty of ways to the leads besides that."

"This door, my lady?" asked Mr. Mollet.

I trembled lest he should see us.

"Yes. Just throw it to. There's a spring lock on it. I can't think —"

The slam and echoing bang of the closing door cut off the end of the sentence. Even Clara was a little frightened, for her hand stole into mine for a moment before she burst out laughing.

"Hush! hush!" I said. "They will hear you."

"I almost wish they would," she said. "What a goose I was to be frightened, and not speak! Do you know where we are?"

"No," I answered; "how should I? Where are we?"

My fancy of knowing the place had vanished utterly by this time. All my mental charts of it had got thoroughly confused, and I do not believe I could have even found my way back to the library.

"Shut out on the leads," she answered. "Come along. We may as well go to meet our fate."

I confess to a little palpitation of the heart as she spoke, for I was not yet old enough to feel that Clara's companionship made the doom a light one. Up the stair we went—here no twisting corkscrew, but a broad flight enough, with square turnings. At the top was a door, fastened only with a bolt inside—against no worse housebreakers than the winds and rains. When we emerged, we found ourselves in the open night.

"Here we are in the moon's drawing-room!" said Clara.

The scene was lovely. The sky was all new—the earth only a background or pedestal for the heavens. The river, far below, shone here and there in answer to the moon, while the meadows and fields lay as in the oblivion of sleep, and the wooded hills were only dark formless masses. But the sky was the dwelling-place of the moon, before whose radiance, penetratingly still, the stars shrunk as if they would hide in the flowing skirts of her garments. There was scarce a cloud to be seen, and the whiteness of the moon made the blueness thin. I could hardly believe in what I saw. It was as if I had come awake without getting out of the dream.

We were on the roof of the ball-room. We felt the rhythmic motion of the dancing feet shake the building in time to the music. "A low melodious thunder" buried beneath—above the eternal silence of the white moon!

We passed to the roof of the drawing-room. From it, upon one side, we could peep into the great gothic window of the hall which rose high above it. We could see the servants passing and repassing, with dishes for the supper which was being held in the dining-room under the drawing-room, for the hall was never used for entertainment now, except on such great occasions as a coming of age, or an election-feast, when all classes met.

"We mustn't stop here," said Clara. "We shall get our deaths of cold."

"What shall we do then?" I asked.

"There are plenty of doors," she answered—"only Mrs. Wilson has a foolish fancy for keeping them all bolted. We must try, though."

Over roof after roof we went; now descending, now ascending a few steps; now walking along narrow gutters, between battlement and sloping roof; now crossing awkward junctions—trying doors many in tower and turret—all in vain! Every one was bolted on the inside. We had grown quite silent, for the case looked serious.

"This is the last door," said Clara—"the last we can reach. There are more in the towers, but they are higher up. What shall we do? Except we go down a chimney, I don't know what's to be done."

Still her voice did not falter, and my courage did not give way. She stood for a few moments, silent. I stood regarding her, as one might listen for a doubtful oracle.

"Yes, I've got it!" she said at length. "Have you a good head, Wilfrid?"

"I don't quite know what you mean," I answered.

"Do you mind being on a narrow place, without much to hold by?"

"High up?" I asked with a shiver.

"Yes."

For a moment I did not answer. It was a special weakness of my physical nature, one which my imagination had increased tenfold—the absolute horror I had of such a transit as she was evidently about to propose. My worst dreams—from which I would wake with my heart going like a fire-engine, were of adventures of the kind. But before a woman, how could I draw back? I would rather lie broken at the bottom of the wall. And if the fear should come to the worst, I could at least throw myself down and end it so.

"Well?" I said, as if I had only been waiting for her exposition of the case.

"Well!" she returned. "Come along, then."

I did go along—like a man to the gallows; only I would not have turned back to save my life. But I should have hailed the slightest