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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,

Author of "Alec Forbes," etc.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

"That would be no reason, even if it were a fact, which it is not. You believe it, or rather, choose to think you believe it, because you've been told it. Sooner than pretend to teach what I had never learned, and be looked up to as a pattern of godliness, I would list in the ranks. There, at least, a man might earn an honest living."

"By Jove! You do make a fellow feel uncomfortable!" repeated Home. "You've got such a—such an uncompromising way of saying things—to use a mild expression!"

"I think it's a sneaking thing to do, and unworthy of a gentleman."

"I don't see what right you've got to bully me in that way," said Home, getting angry.

It was time to interfere.

"Charley is so afraid of being dishonest, Home," I said, "that he is rude. You are rude now, Charley."

"I beg your pardon, Home," exclaimed Charley at once.

"Oh, never mind!" returned Home with gloomy good nature.

"You ought to make allowance, Charley," I pursued. "When a man has been accustomed all his life to hear things spoken of in a certain way, he cannot help having certain notions to start with."

"If I thought as Osborne does," said Home, "I would sooner list than go into the church."

"I confess," I rejoined, "I do not see how any one can take orders, except he not only loves God with all his heart, but receives the story of the New Testament as a revelation of him, precious beyond utterance. To the man who accepts it so, the calling is the noblest in the world."

The others were silent, and the conversation turned away. From whatever cause, Home did not go into the church, but died fighting in India.

He soon left us—Charley remaining behind.

"What a hypocrite I am!" he exclaimed; "—following a profession in which I must often, if I have any practice at all, defend what I know to be wrong, and seek to turn justice from its natural course."

"But you can't always know that your judgment is right, even if it should be against your client. I heard an eminent barrister say once, that he had come out of the court convinced by the arguments of the opposite counsel."

"And having gained the case?"

"That I don't know."

"He went in believing his own side any how, and that made it all right for him."

"I don't know that either. His private judgment was altered, but whether it was for or against his client, I do not remember. The fact however shows that one might do a great wrong by refusing a client whom he judged in the wrong."

"On the contrary, to refuse a brief on such grounds, would be best for all concerned. Not believing in it, you could not do your best, and might be preventing one who would believe in it from taking it up."

"The man might not get anybody to take it up."

"Then there would be little reason to expect that a jury charged under ordinary circumstances would give a verdict in his favour."

"But it would be for the barristers to constitute themselves the judges."

"Yes—of their own conduct—only that. There I am again! The finest ideas about the right thing—and going on all the same, with open eyes running my head straight into the noose! Wilfrid, I'm one of the weakest animals in creation. What if you found at last that I had been deceiving you? What would you say?"

"Nothing, Charley—to any one else."

"What would you say to yourself then?"

"I don't know. I know what I should do."

"What?"

"Try to account for it, and find as many reasons as I could to justify you. That is, I would do just as you do for every one but yourself."

He was silent—plainly from emotion, which I attributed to his pleasure at the assurance of the strength of my friendship.

"Suppose you could find none?" he said, recovering himself a little.

"I should still believe there were such. *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, you know."

He brightened at this.

"You are a friend, Wilfrid! What a strange condition mine is—for ever feeling I could do this and that difficult thing, were it to fall in my way, and yet constantly failing in the simplest duties—even to that of common politeness. I behaved like a brute to Home. He's a fine fellow, and only wants to see a thing to do it. I see it well enough, and

don't do it. Wilfrid, I shall come to a bad end. When it comes, mind I told you so, and blame nobody but myself. I mean what I say."

"Nonsense, Charley! It's only that you haven't active work enough, and get morbid with brooding over the germs of things."

"Oh, Wilfrid, how beautiful a life might be! Just look at that one in the New Testament! Why shouldn't I be like that? I don't know why. I feel as if I could. But I'm not, you see—and never shall be. I'm selfish, and ill-tempered, and—"

"Charley! Charley! There never was a less selfish or better-tempered fellow in the world."

"Don't make me believe that, Wilfrid, or I shall hate the world as well as myself. It's all my hypocrisy makes you think so. Because I am ashamed of what I am, and manage to hide it pretty well, you think me a saint. That is heaping damnation on me."

"Take a pipe, Charley, and shut up. That's rubbish!" I said. I doubt much if it was what I ought to have said, but I was alarmed for the consequences of such brooding. "I

dividing space. The grass was like my own grass at home, and I went wandering over it in all the joy of the new spring, which comes every year to our hearts as well as to their picture outside. The workmen were at that time busy about the unfinished botanical gardens, and I wandered thitherward, lingering about, and pondering and inventing, until the sun was long withdrawn, and the shades of night had grown very brown. I was at length sauntering slowly home to put a few finishing touches to a paper I had been at work upon all day, when something about a young couple in front of me attracted my attention. They were walking arm in arm, talking eagerly, but so low that I heard only a murmur. I did not quicken my pace, yet was gradually gaining upon them, when suddenly the conviction started up in my mind that the gentleman was Charley. I could not mistake his back, or the stoop of his shoulders as he bent towards his companion. I was so certain of him that I turned at once from the road, and wandered away across the grass: if he did not choose to tell me about the lady, I had no right to know. But I confess to a strange trouble that he had

always felt that Charley depended on me—that I had rather to take care of him, than to look for counsel from him.

The weary miles rolled away. Early in the morning, we reached Minstercombe. There I got a carriage, and at once continued my journey.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHANGES.

I MET no one at the house-door, or in the kitchen, and walked straight up the stair to my uncle's room. The blinds were down, and the curtains were drawn, and I could but just see the figure of my aunt seated beside the bed. She rose, and without a word of greeting, made way for me to approach the form which lay upon it stretched out straight and motionless. The conviction that I was in the presence of death seized me; but instead of the wretchedness of heart and soul which I had expected to follow the loss of my uncle, a something deeper than any will of my own asserted itself; and, as it were, took the matter from me. It was as if my soul avoided the separation by breaking with the world of material things, asserting the shadowy nature of all the visible, and choosing its part with the something which had passed away. It was as if my deeper self said to my outer consciousness: "I too am of the dead—one with them, whether they live or are no more. For a little while I am shut out from them, and surrounded with things that seem; let me gaze on the picture while it lasts; dream or no dream, let me live in it according to its laws, and await what will come next; if an awaking, it is well; if only a perfect because dreamless sleep, I shall not be able to lament the endless separation—but while I know myself, I will hope for something better." Like this, at least, was the blossom into which, under my after brooding, the bud of that feeling broke.

I laid my hand upon my uncle's forehead. It was icy cold, just like my grannie's when my aunt had made me touch it. And I knew that my uncle was gone, that the slow tide of the eternal ocean had risen while he lay motionless within the wash of its waves, and had floated him away from the shore of our world. I took the hand of my aunt, who stood like a statue behind me, and led her from the room. "He is gone, aunt," I said, as calmly as I could.

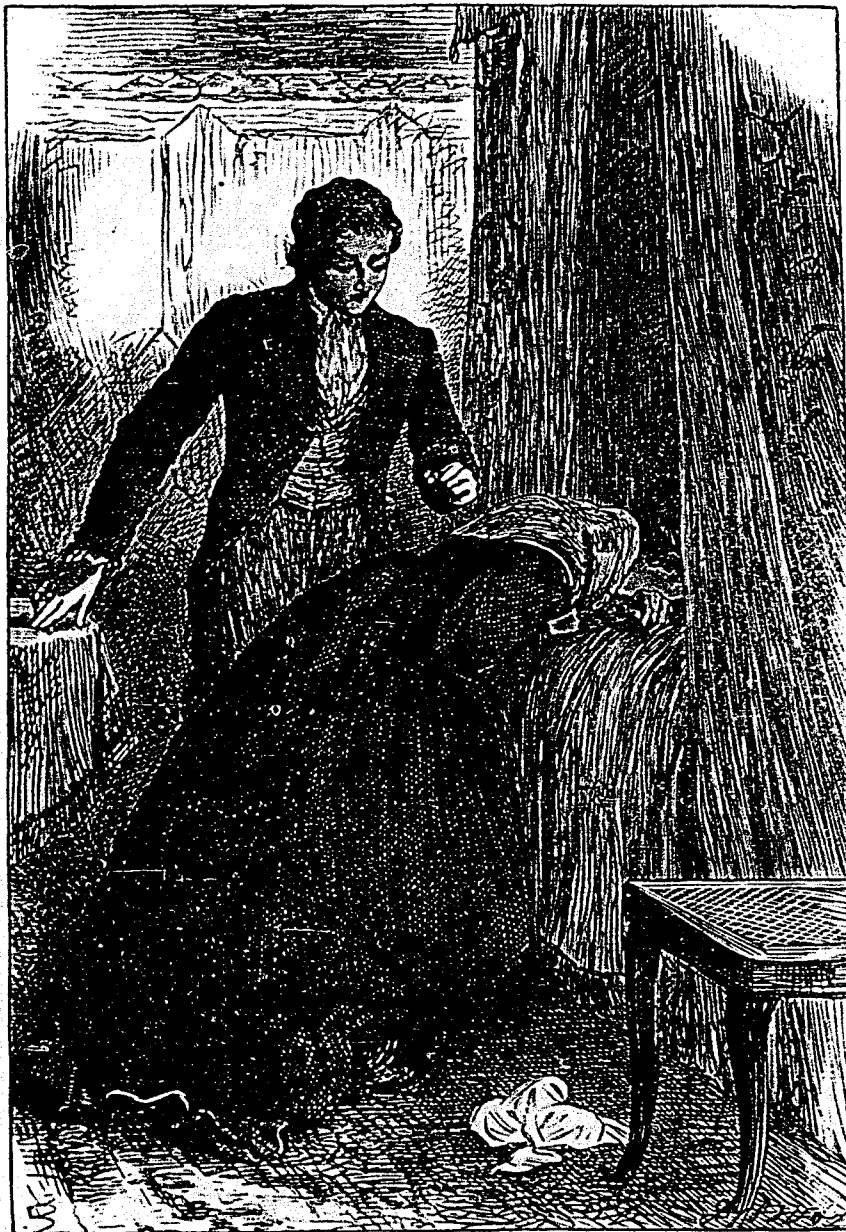
She made no reply, but gently withdrew her hand from mine, and returned into the chamber. I stood a few moments irresolute, but reverence for her sorrow prevailed, and I went down the stair, and seated myself by the fire. There the servant told me that my uncle had never moved since they laid him in his bed. Soon after, the doctor arrived, and went up-stairs; but returned in a few minutes, only to affirm the fact. I went again to the room, and found my aunt lying with her face on the bosom of the dead man. She allowed me to draw her away, but when I would have led her down, she turned aside, and sought her own chamber, where she remained for the rest of the day.

I will not linger over that miserable time. Greatly as I revered my uncle, I was not prepared to find how much he had been respected, and was astonished at the number of faces I had never seen which followed to the churchyard. Amongst them were the Coninghams, father and son; but except by a friendly grasp of the hand, and a few words of condolence, neither interrupted the calm depression rather than grief in which I found myself. When I returned home, there was with my aunt a married sister, whom I had never seen before. Up to this time, she had shown an arid despair, and been regardless of everything about her; but now she was in tears. I left them together, and wandered for hours up and down the lonely playground of my childhood, thinking of many things—most of all, how strange it was that, if there were a hereafter for us, we should know positively nothing concerning it; that not a whisper should cross the invisible line; that the something which had looked from its windows so lovingly, should have in a moment withdrawn, by some back way unknown either to itself or us, into a region of which all we can tell is that thence no prayers and no tears will entice it, to lift for an instant again the fallen curtain, and look out once more. Why should not God, I thought, if a God there be, permit one single return to each, that so the friends left behind in the dark might be sure that death was not the end, and so live in the world as not of the world?

When I re-entered, I found my aunt looking a little cheerful. She was even having something to eat with her sister—an elderly country-looking woman, the wife of a farmer in a distant shire. Their talk had led them back to old times, to their parents and the friends of their childhood; and the memory of the long dead had comforted her a little over the recent loss; for all true hearts death is a uniting, not a dividing power.

"I suppose you will be going back to London, Wilfrid?" said my aunt, who had already been persuaded to pay her sister a visit.

"I think I had better," I answered. "When



"I found my aunt lying with her face on the bosom of the dead man."

wonder what the world would be like if every one considered himself acting up to his own ideal!"

"If he was acting so, then it would do the world no harm that he knew it."

"But his ideal must then be a low one, and that would do himself and everybody the worst kind of harm. The greatest men have always thought the least of themselves."

"Yes, but that was because they were the greatest. A man may think little of himself just for the reason that he is little, and can't help knowing it."

"Then it's a mercy he does know it! for most small people think much of themselves."

"But to know it—and to feel all the time you ought to be and could be something very different, and yet never get a step nearer it! That is to be miserable. Still it is a mercy to know it. There is always a last help."

I mistook what he meant, and thought it well to say no more. After smoking a pipe or two, he was quieter, and left me with a merry remark.

"One lovely evening in spring, I looked from my bed-room window, and saw the red sunset burning in the thin branches of the solitary poplar that graced the few feet of garden behind the house. It drew me out to the park, where the trees were all in young leaf, each with its shadow stretching away from its foot, like its longing to reach its kind across

left me out. I comforted myself, however, with the thought that perhaps when we next met, he would explain, or at least break the silence.

After about an hour, he entered, in an excited mood, merry but uncomfortable. I tried to behave as if I knew nothing, but could not help feeling much disappointed when he left me without a word of his having had a second reason for being in the neighbourhood.

What effect the occurrence might have had, whether the cobweb veil of which I was now aware between us would have thickened to opacity or not, I cannot tell. I dare not imagine that it might. I rather hope that by degrees my love would have got the victory, and melted it away. But now came a cloud which swallowed every other in my firmament. The next morning brought a letter from my aunt, telling me that my uncle had had a stroke, as she called it, and at that moment was lying insensible. I put my affairs in order at once, and Charley saw me away by the afternoon coach.

It was a dreary journey. I loved my uncle with perfect confidence and profound veneration, a result of the faithful and open simplicity with which he had always behaved towards me. If he were taken away, and already he might be gone, I should be lonely indeed, for on whom besides could I depend with anything like the trust which I reposed in him? For, conceitedly or not, I had