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## WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

### An Autobiographical Story.

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#### INTRODUCTION.

I AM—I will not say how old, but well past middle age. This much I feel compelled to mention, because it has long been my opinion that no man should attempt a history of himself until he has set foot upon the border land where the past and the future begin to blend in a consciousness somewhat independent of both, and hence interpreting both. Looking westward, from this vantage-ground, the setting sun is not the less lovely to him that he recalls a merrier time when the shadows fell the other way. Then they sped westward before him, as if to vanish, chased by his advancing footsteps, over the verge of the world. Now they come creeping towards him, lengthening as they come. And they are welcome. Can it be that he would ever have chosen a world without shadows? Was not the trouble of the shadowless noon the dearest of all? Did he not then long for the curtained queen—the all-shadowy night? And shall he now regard with dismay the setting sun of his earthly life? When he looks back, he sees the farthest cloud of the sun-deserted east alive with a rosy hue. It is the prophecy of the sunset concerning the dawn. For the sun itself is ever a rising sun, and the morning will come though the night should be dark.

In this "season of calm weather," when the past has receded so far that he can behold it as in a picture, and his share in it as the history of a man who had lived and would soon die; when he can confess his faults without the bitterness of shame, both because he is humble, and because the faults themselves have dropped from him; when his good deeds look poverty-stricken in his eyes, and he would no more claim consideration for them than expect knighthood because he was no thief; when he cares little for his reputation, but much for his character—little for what has gone beyond his control, but endlessly much for what yet remains in his will to determine; then, I think, a man may do well to write his own life.

"So," I imagine a reader interposing, "you profess to have arrived at this high degree of perfection yourself?"

I reply that the man who has attained this kind of indifference to the past, this kind of hope in the future, will be far enough from considering it a high degree of perfection. The very idea is to such a man ludicrous. One may eat bread without claiming the honours of an athlete; one may desire to be honest and not count himself a saint. My object in thus shadowing out what seems to me my present condition of mind, is merely to render it intelligible to my readers how an autobiography might come to be written without rendering the writer justly liable to the charge of that overweening, or self-conceit, which might be involved in the mere conception of the idea.

In listening to similar recitals from the mouths of elderly people, I have observed that many things which seemed to the persons principally concerned ordinary enough, had to me a wonder and a significance they did not perceive. Let me hope that some of the things I am about to relate may fare similarly, although, to be honest, I must confess I could not have undertaken the task, for a task it is, upon this chance alone; I do think some of my history worthy of being told, just for the facts' sake. God knows I have had small share in that worthiness. The weakness of my life has been that I would ever do some great thing; the saving of my life has been my utter failure. I have never done a great deed. If I had, I know that one of my temperament could not have escaped serious consequences. I have had more pleasure when a grown man in a certain discovery concerning the ownership of an apple of which I had taken the ancestral bite when a boy, than I can remember to have resulted from any action of my own during my whole existence. But I detest the notion of puzzling my readers in order to enjoy their fancied surprise, or their possible praise of a worthless ingenuity of concealment. If I ever appear to behave to them thus, it is merely that I follow the course of my own knowledge of myself and my affairs, without any desire to give them either the pain or the pleasure of suspense, if indeed I may flatter myself with the hope of interesting them to such a degree that suspense should become possible.

When I look over what I have written, I find the tone so sombre—let me see: what sort an evening is it on which I commence this book? Ah! I thought so: a sombre evening. The sun is going down behind a low bank of gray cloud, the upper edge of which he tinges with a faded shadow. There will be rain before morning. It is late autumn, and some of the crops are gathered in. A bluish fog is rising from the lower meadows. As I look I grow cold. It is not, somehow, an interesting evening. Yet if I found just this evening

well described in a novel, I should enjoy it heartily. The poorest, weakest drizzle upon the window-panes of a dreary road-side inn in a country of slate-quarries, possesses an interest to him who enters it by the door of a book, hardly less than the pouring rain which threatens to swell every brook to a torrent. How is this? I think it is because your troubles do not enter into the book, and its troubles do not enter into you, and therefore nature operates upon you unthwarted by the personal conditions which so often counteract her present influences. But I will rather shut out the fading west, the gathering mists, and the troubled consciousness of Nature altogether, light my fire and my pipe, and then try whether in my first chapter I cannot be a boy again in such fashion that my ghostly companion, that is, my typical reader, will not be too impatient to linger a little in the meadows of childhood ere we pass to the corn-fields of riper years.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### WHERE I FIND MYSELF.

No wisest chicken, I presume, can recall the first moment when the chalk-oval sur-

They made the wind, and threw it at me. I used my natural senses, and this was what they told me. The discovery impressed me so deeply that even now I cannot look upon trees without a certain indescribable, and, but for this remembrance, unaccountable awe. A grove was to me for many years a fountain of winds, and, in the stillest day, to look into a depth of gathered stems filled me with dismay; for the whole awful assembly might, writhing together in earnest and effectual contortion, at any moment begin their fearful task of churning the wind.

There were no trees in the neighbourhood of the house where I was born. It stood in the midst of grass, and nothing but grass was to be seen for a long way on every side of it. There was not a gravel path or a road near it. Its walls, old and rusty, rose immediately from the grass. Grass blades and a few heads of daisies leaned trustingly against the brown stone, all the sharpness of whose fractures had long since vanished, worn away by the sun and the rain, or filled up by the slow lichens, which I used to think were young stones growing out of the wall. The ground was part of a very old dairy-farm, and my uncle, to whom it belonged, would not have a path about the place. But then the grass was well

gray slates, rose very steep, and had narrow, tall dormer windows in it. The edges of the gables rose, not in a slope, but in a succession of notches, like stairs. Altogether, the shell to which, considered as a crustaceous animal, I belonged—for man is every animal according as you choose to contemplate him—had an old-world look about it—a look of the time when men had to fight in order to have peace, to kill in order to live. Being, however, a crustaceous animal, I, the heir of all the new impulses of the age, was born and reared in closest neighbourhood with strange relics of a vanished time. Humanity so far retains its chief characteristics that the new generations can always flourish in the old shell.

The dairy was at some distance, so deep in a hollow that a careless glance would not have discovered it. I well remember my astonishment when my aunt first took me there; for I had not even observed the depression of surface; all had been a level green to my eyes. Beyond this hollow were fields divided by hedges, and lanes, and the various goings to and fro of a not unpeopled although quiet neighbourhood. Until I left home for school, however, I do not remember to have seen a carriage of any kind approach our solitary dwelling. My uncle would have regarded it as little short of an insult for anyone to drive wheels over the smooth lawn surface in which our house dwelt like a solitary island in the sea.

Before the threshold lay a brown patch, worn bare of grass, and beaten hard by the descending feet of many generations. The stone threshold itself was worn almost to a level with it. A visitor's first step was into what would, in some parts, be called the house-place, a room which served all the purposes of a kitchen, and yet partook of the character of an old hall. It rose to a fair height, with smoke-stained beams above; and was floored with a kind of cement, hard enough, and yet so worn that it required a good deal of local knowledge to avoid certain jars of the spine from sudden changes of level. All the furniture was dark and shining, especially the round table, which, with its bewildering, spider-like accumulation of legs, waited under the mullioned, lozenge window until meal-time, when, like an animal roused from its lair, it stretched out those legs, and assumed expanded and symmetrical shape in front of the fire in winter, and nearer the door in summer. It recalls the vision of my aunt, with a hand at each end of it, searching empirically for the level—feeling for it, that is, with the creature's own legs—before lifting the hanging leaves, and drawing out the hitherto supernumerary legs to support them; after which would come a fresh adjustment of level, another hustling to and fro, that the new feet likewise might settle on elevations of equal height; and then came the snowy cloth or the tea-tray, deposited cautiously upon its shining surface.

The walls of this room were always white-washed in the spring, occasioning ever a sharpened contrast with the dark-brown ceiling. Whether that was even swept I do not know; I do not remember ever seeing it done. At all events, its colour remained unimpaired by paint or whitewash. On the walls hung various articles, some of them high above my head, and attractive for that reason if for no other. I never saw one of them moved from its place—not even the fishing-rod, which required the whole length betwixt the two windows; three rusty hooks hung from it, and waved about when a wind entered ruder than common. Over the fishing-rod hung a piece of tapestry, about a yard in width, and longer than that. It would have required a very capable constructiveness indeed to supply the design from what remained, so fragmentary were the forms, and so dim and faded were the once bright colours. It was there as an ornament; for that which is a mere complement of higher modes of life becomes, when useless, the ornament of lower conditions; what we call great virtues are little regarded by the saints. It was long before I began to think how the tapestry could have come there, or to what it owed the honour given it in the house.

On the opposite wall hung another object, which may well have been the cause of my carelessness about the former—attracting to itself all my interest. It was a sword, in a leather sheath. From the point, half way to the hilt, the sheath was split all along the edge of the weapon. The sides of the wound gaped, and the blade was visible to my prying eyes. It was with rust almost as dark a brown as the scabbard that infolded it. But the under parts of the hilt, where dust could not settle, gleamed with a faint golden shine. That sword was to my childish eyes the type of all mystery, a clouded glory, which for many long years I never dreamed of attempting to unveil. Not the sword Excalibur, had it been "stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings," could have radiated more marvel into the hearts of young knights than that sword radiated into mine. Night after night I would dream of danger drawing nigh—crowds of men of evil purpose—enemies to me or to my country; and ever in the beginning of my dream I stood ready, foreknowing and waiting; for I had climbed and had taken the ancient power from the wall, and had



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Chap. I.

rounding it gave way, and instead of the cavern of limestone which its experience might have led it to expect it found a world of air and movement and freedom and blue sky—with kites in it. For my own part, I often wished when a child, that I had watched while God was making me, so that I might have remembered how he did it. Now my wonder is whether when I creep forth into "that new world which is the old," I shall be conscious of the birth, and enjoy the whole mighty surprise, or whether I shall become gradually aware that things are changed, and stare about me like the new-born baby. What will be the candle-flame that shall first attract my new-born sight? But I forget that speculation about the new life is not writing the history of the old.

I have often tried how far back my memory could go. I suspect there are awfully ancient shadows mingling with our memories; but, as far as I can judge, the earliest definite memory I have is the discovery of how the wind was made; for I saw the process going on before my very eyes, and there could be, and there was, no doubt of the relation of cause and effect in the matter. There were the trees swaying themselves about after the wildest fashion, and there was the wind in consequence visiting my person somewhat too roughly. The trees were blowing in my face.

subdued by the cows, and, indeed, I think, would never have grown very long, for it was of that delicate sort which we see only on downs and in parks and on old grazing farms. All about the house—as far, at least, as my lowly eyes could see—the ground was perfectly level, and the lake of greenery, out of which it rose like a solitary rock, was to me an un-failing mystery and delight. This will sound strange in the ears of those who consider a mountainous, or at least an undulating surface, essential to beauty; but nature is altogether independent of what is called fine scenery. There are other organs than the eyes, even if grass and water and sky were not of the best and loveliest of nature's shows.

The house, I have said, was of an ancient-looking stone, gray and green and yellow and brown. It looked very hard; yet there were some attempts at carving about the heads of the narrow windows. The carving had, however, become so dull and shadowy that I could not distinguish a single form or separable portion of design; still some ancient thought seemed ever flickering across them. The house, which was two stories in height, had a certain air of defence about it, ill to explain. It had no caves, for the walls rose above the edge of the roof; but the hints at battlements were of the merest. The roof, covered with