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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,

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CHAPTER LIII. (Continued.)

"Not unjustly though. The property was not his, but yours—that is, as we then believed. As far as I knew, the result would have been a real service to him, in delivering him from unjust possession—a thing he would himself have scorned. It was all very wrong—very low, if you like—but somehow it then seemed simple enough—a lawful stratagem for the right."

"Your heart was so full of Charley!"

"Then you do forgive me, Wilfrid?"

"With all my soul. I hardly feel now as if I had anything to forgive."

I drew her towards me and kissed her on the forehead. She threw her arms round me, and clung to me, sobbing like a child.

"You will explain it all to Charley—won't you?" she said, as soon as she could speak, withdrawing herself from the arm which had involuntarily crept around her, seeking to comfort her.

"I will," I said.

We were startled by a sound in the clump of trees behind us. Then over their tops passed a wailful gust of wind, through which we thought came the fall of receding footsteps.

"I hope we haven't been overheard," I said. "I shall go at once and tell Charley all about it. I will just see you home first."

"There's no occasion for that, Wilfrid; and I'm sure I don't deserve it."

"You deserve a thousand thanks. You have lifted a mountain off me. I see it all now. When your father found it was no use—"

"Then I saw I had wronged you, and I couldn't bear myself till I had confessed all."

"Your father is satisfied then that the register would not stand in evidence?"

"Yes. He told me all about it."

"He has never said a word to me on the matter; but just dropped me in the dirt, and let me lie there."

"You must forgive him too, Wilfrid. It was a dreadful blow to him, and it was weeks before he told me. We couldn't think what was the matter with him. You see he had been cherishing the scheme ever since your father's death, and it was a great humiliation to find he had been sitting so many years on an addled egg," she said, with a laugh in which her natural merriment once more peeped out.

I walked home with her, and we parted like old friends.

On my way to the Temple, I was anxiously occupied as to how Charley would receive the explanation I had to give him. That Clara's confession would be a relief I could not doubt; but it must cause him great pain notwithstanding. His sense of honour was so keen, and his ideal of womankind so lofty, that I could not but dread the consequences of the revelation. At the same time I saw how it might benefit him. I had begun to see that it is more divine to love the erring than to love the good, and to understand how there is more joy over the one than over the ninety and nine. If Charley, understanding that he is no divine lover who loves only so long as he is able to flatter himself that the object of his love is immaculate, should find that he must love Clara in spite of her faults and wrong doings, he might thus grow to be less despairful over his own failures; he might, through his love for Clara, learn to hope for himself, notwithstanding the awful distance at which perfection lay removed.

But as I went I was conscious of a strange oppression. It was not properly mental, for my interview with Clara had raised my spirits. It was a kind of physical oppression I felt, as if the air, which was in reality clear and cold, had been damp and close and heavy.

I went straight to Charley's chambers. The moment I opened the door, I knew that something was awfully wrong. The room was dark—but he would often sit in the dark. I called him, but received no answer. Trembling, I struck a light, for I feared to move lest I should touch something dreadful. But when I had succeeded in lighting the lamp, I found the room just as it always was. His hat was on the table. He must be in his bedroom. And yet I did not feel as if anything alive was near me. Why was everything so frightfully still? I opened the door as slowly and fearfully as if I had dreaded arousing a sufferer whose life depended on his repose. There he lay on his bed, in his clothes—fast asleep, as I thought, for he often slept so, and at any hour of the day—the natural relief of his much-perturbed mind. His eyes were closed, and his face was very white. As I looked, I heard a sound—a drop—another! There was a slow drip somewhere. God in heaven! Could it be? I rushed to him, calling him aloud. There was no response. It was too

true! He was dead. The long snake-like Indian dagger was in his heart, and the blood was oozing slowly from around it.

I dare not linger over that horrible night, or the horrible days that followed. Such days! such nights! The letters to write!—The friends to tell!—Clara!—His father!—The police!—The inquest!

Mr. Osborne took no notice of my letter, but came up at once. Entering where I sat with my head on my arms on the table, the first announcement I had of his presence was a hoarse deep broken voice ordering me out of the room. I obeyed mechanically, took up Charley's hat instead of my own, and walked away with it. But the neighbours were kind, and although I did not attempt to approach again all that was left of my friend, I watched from a neighbouring window, and following at a little distance, was present when they laid his form, late at night, in the unconsecrated ground of a cemetery.

I may just mention here what I had not the heart to dwell upon in the course of my narrative—that since the talk about suicide occasioned by the remarks of Sir Thomas Browne, he had often brought up the subject—chiefly however in a half-humorous tone, and from what may be called an æsthetic point of view as to the best mode of accomplishing it. For some of the usual modes he expressed abhorrence, as being so ugly; and on the whole considered—I well remember the phrase, for he used it more than once—that a dagger—and on one of those occasions he took up the Indian weapon already described and said—"such as this now"—was "the most gentleman-like usher into the presence of the Great Nothing." As I had however often heard that those who contemplated suicide never spoke of it, and as his manner on the occasions to which I refer was always merry, such talk awoke little uneasiness; and I believe that he never had at the moment any conscious attraction to the subject stronger than a speculative one. At the same time, however, I believe that the speculative attraction itself had its roots in the misery with which in other and prevailing moods he was so familiar.

CHAPTER LIV.

ISOLATION.

AFTER writing to Mr. Osborne to acquaint him with the terrible event, the first thing I did was to go to Clara. I will not attempt to describe what followed. The moment she saw me, her face revealed, as in a mirror, the fact legible on my own, and I had scarcely opened my mouth when she cried "He is dead!" and fell fainting on the floor. Her aunt came, and we succeeded in recovering her a little. But she lay still as death on the couch where we had laid her, and the motion of her eyes hither and thither as if following the movements of some one about the room was the only sign of life in her. We spoke to her, but evidently she heard nothing; and at last, leaving her when the doctor arrived, I waited for her aunt in another room, and told her what had happened.

Some days after, Clara sent for me, and I had to tell her the whole story. Then, with agony in every word she uttered, she managed to inform me that when she went in after I left her at the door that night, she found waiting her a note from Charley; and this she now gave me to read. It contained a request to meet him that evening at the very place which I had appointed. It was their customary rendezvous when she was in town. In all probability he was there when we were, and heard and saw—heard too little and saw too much, and concluded that both Clara and I were false to him. The frightful perturbation which a conviction such as that must cause in a mind like his could be nothing short of madness. For, ever tortured by a sense of his own impotence, of the gulf to all appearance eternally fixed between his actions and his aspirations, and unable to lay hold of the Essential, the Causing Goodness, he had clung with the despair of a perishing man to the dim reflex of good he saw in her and me. If his faith in that was indeed destroyed, the last barrier must have given way, and the sea of madness ever breaking against it, must have broken in and overwhelmed him. But, O my friend! surely long ere now thou knowest that we were not false; surely the hour will yet dawn when I shall again hold thee to my heart; yea, surely, even if still thou countest me guilty, thou hast already found for me endless excuse and forgiveness.

I can hardly doubt however that he inherited a strain of madness from his father, a madness which that father had developed by forcing upon him the false forms of a true religion.

It is not then strange that I should have thought and speculated much about madness. What does its frequent impulse to suicide indicate? May it not be its main instinct to destroy itself as an evil thing? May not the impulse arise from some unconscious conviction that there is for it no remedy but the shuffling off of this mortal coil—nature herself

dimly urging through the fumes of the madness to the one blow which lets in the light and air? Doubtless, if in the mind so sadly unhinged, the sense of a holy Presence could be developed—the sense of a love that loves through all vagaries—of a hiding place from forms of evil the most fantastic—of a fatherly care that not merely holds its insane child in its arms, but enters into the chaos of his imagination, and sees every wildest horror with which it swarms; if, I say, the conviction of such a love dawned on the disordered mind, the man would live in spite of his imaginary foes, for he would pray against them as sure of being heard as St. Paul, when he prayed concerning the thorn from which he was not delivered, but against which he was sustained. And who can tell how often this may be the fact—how often the lunatic also lives by faith? Are not the forms of madness most frequently those of love and religion? Certainly, if there be a God, he does not forget his frenzied offspring; certainly he is more tender over them than any mother over her idiot darling; certainly he sees in them what the eye of the brother or sister cannot see. But some of them at least have not enough of such support to be able to go on living; and for my part, I confess I rejoice as often as I hear that one has succeeded in breaking his prison-bars. When the crystal shrine has grown dim, and the fair forms of nature are in their entrance contorted hideously; when the sunlight itself is as blue lightning, and the wind in the summer trees is as "a terrible sound of stones cast down, or a rebounding echo from the hollow mountains;" when the body is no longer a mediator between the soul and the world, but the prison-house of a lying gaoler and torturer—how can I but rejoice to hear that the tormented captive has at length forced his way out into freedom?

When I look behind me, I can see but little through the surging lurid smoke of that awful time. The first sense of relief came when I saw the body of Charley laid in the holy earth. For the earth is the Lord's—and none the less holy that the voice of the priest may have left it without his consecration. Surely if ever the Lord laughs in derision, as the Psalmist says, it must be when the voice of a man would in his name exclude his fellows from their birthright. O Lord, gather thou the outcasts of thy Israel, whom the priests and the rulers of thy people have cast out to perish.

I remember for the most part only a dull agony, interchanging with apathy. For days and days I could not rest, but walked hither and thither, careless whither. When at length I would lie down weary and fall asleep, suddenly I would start up, hearing the voice of Charley crying for help, and rush in the middle of the winter night into the wretched streets, there to wander till daybreak. But I was not utterly miserable. In my most wretched dreams I never dreamed of Mary, and through all my waking distress I never forgot her. I was sure in my very soul that she did me no injustice. I had laid open the deepest in me to her honest gaze, and she had read it, and could not but know me. Neither did what had occurred quench my growing faith. I had never been able to hope much for Charley in this world; for something was out of joint with him, and only in the region of the unknown was I able to look for the setting right of it. Nor had many weeks passed before I was fully aware of relief when I remembered that he was dead. And whenever the thought arose that God might have given him a fairer chance in this world, I was able to reflect that apparently God does not care for this world save as a part of the whole; and on that whole I had yet to discover that he could have given him a fairer chance.

CHAPTER LV.

ATTEMPTS AND COINCIDENCES.

It was months before I could resume my work. Not until Charley's absence was as it were so far established and accepted that hope had begun to assert itself against memory; that is not until the form of Charley ceased to wander with despairful visage behind me and began to rise amongst the silvery mists before me, was I able to invent once more, or even to guide the pen with certainty over the paper. The moment however that I took the pen in my hand another necessity seized me.

Although Mary had hardly been out of my thoughts, I had heard no word of her since her brother's death. I dared not write to her father or mother after the way the former had behaved to me, and I shrunk from approaching Mary with a word that might suggest a desire to intrude the thoughts of myself upon the sacredness of her grief. Why should she think of me? Sorrow has ever something of a divine majesty, before which one must draw nigh with bowed head and bated breath:

Here I and sorrows sit;

Here is my throne: bid kings come bow to it.

But the moment I took the pen in my hand to write, an almost agonizing desire to speak to her laid hold of me. I dared not yet write to her, but, after reflection, resolved to send her some verses which should make her think of

both Charley and myself, through the pages of a magazine which I knew she read.

O look not on the heart I bring—
It is too low and poor;
I would not have thee love a thing
Which I can ill endure.

Nor love me for the sake of what
I would be if I could;
O'er peaks as o'er the marshy flat,
Still soars the sky of good.

See, love, afar, the heavenly man
The will of God would make;
The thing I must be when I can,
Love now, for faith's dear sake.

But when I had finished the lines, I found the expression had fallen so far short of what I had in my feeling, that I could not rest satisfied with such an attempt at communication. I walked up and down the room thinking of the awful theories regarding the state of mind at death in which Mary had been trained. As to the mere suicide, love ever finds refuge in presumed madness; but all of her school believed that at the moment of dissolution the fate is eternally fixed either for bliss or woe, determined by the one or the other of two vaguely defined attitudes of the mental being towards certain propositions; concerning which attitudes they were at least right in asserting that no man could of himself assume the safe one. The thought became unendurable that Mary should believe that Charley was damned—and that for ever and ever. I must and would write to her, come of it what might. That my Charley, whose suicide came of misery that the painful flutterings of his half-born wings would not bear him aloft into the empyrean, should appear to my Athanasia lost in an abyss of irrecoverable woe; that she should think of God as sending forth his spirit to sustain endless wickedness for endless torture;—it was too frightful. As I wrote, the fire burned and burned, and I ended only from despair of utterance. Not a word can I now recall of what I wrote:—the strength of my feelings must have paralyzed the grasp of my memory. All I can recollect is that I closed with the expression of a passionate hope that the God who had made me and my Charley to love each other, would somewhere, some day, somehow, when each was grown stronger and purer, give us once more to each other. In that hope alone, I said, was it possible for me to live. By return of post, I received the following:—

"Sir,

"After having everlastingly ruined one of my children, body and soul, for your sophisms will hardly alter the decrees of divine justice,—once more you lay your snares—now to drag my sole remaining child into the same abyss of perdition. Such wickedness—wickedness even to the pitch of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, I have never in the course of a large experience of impenitence found paralleled. It almost drives me to the belief that the enemy of souls is still occasionally permitted to take up his personal abode in the heart of him who wilfully turns aside from revealed truth. I forgive you for the ruin you have brought upon our fondest hopes, and the agony with which you have torn the heart of those who more than life loved him of whom you falsely called yourself the friend. But I fear you have already gone too far ever to feel your need of that forgiveness which alone can avail you. Yet I say—Repent, for the mercy of the Lord is infinite. Though my boy is lost to me for ever, I should yet rejoice to see the instrument of his ruin plucked as a brand from the burning.

"You obedient well-wisher,
"CHARLES OSBORNE.

"P.S.—I retain your letter for the sake of my less experienced brethren, that I may be able to afford an instance of how far the unregenerate mind can go in its antagonism to the God of Revelation."

I breathed a deep breath, and laid the letter down, mainly concerned as to whether Mary had had the chance of reading mine. I could believe any amount of tyranny in her father—even to perusing and withholding her letters; but in this I may do him injustice, for there is no common ground known to me from which to start in speculating upon his probable actions. I wrote in answer something nearly as follows:

"Sir,

"That you should do me injustice can by this time be no matter of surprise to me. Had I the slightest hope of convincing you of the fact, I should strain every mental nerve to that end. But no one can labour without hope, and as in respect of your justice I have none, I will be silent. May the God in whom I trust convince you of the cruelty of which you have been guilty; the God in whom you profess to believe, must be too like yourself to give any ground of such hope from him.

"Your obedient servant,
"WILFRID CUMBERMEDE."

If Mary had read my letter, I felt assured her reading had been very different from her