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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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

CHAPTER XXVI.—Continued.

"Well—rather than the belles of Minstercombe should—ring their sweet changes in vain, I suppose I must indulge you."

"A thousand thanks," he said, lifted his hat, and rode on.

My blood was in a cold boil—if the phrase can convey an idea. Clara rode on homewards without looking round, and I followed, keeping a few yards behind her, hardly thinking at all, my very brain seeming cold inside my skull.

There was small occasion as yet, some of my readers may think. I cannot help it—so it was. When we had gone in silence a couple of hundred yards or so, she glanced round at me with a quick sly half-look, and burst out laughing. I was by her side in an instant; her laugh had dissolved the spell that bound me. But she spoke first.

"Well, Mr. Cumbermede?" she said, with a slow interrogation.

"Well, Miss Coningham?" I rejoined, but bitterly, I suppose.

"What's the matter?" she retorted sharply, looking up at me, full in the face, whether in real or feigned anger I could not tell.

"How could you talk of that fellow as you did, and then talk so to him?"

"What right have you to put such questions to me? I am not aware of any intimacy to justify it."

"Then I beg your pardon. But my surprise remains the same."

"Why, you silly boy!" she returned, laughing aloud, "don't you know he is, or will be, my feudal lord. I am bound to be polite to him. What would become of poor grandpapa if I were to give him offence? Besides, I have been in the house with him for a week. He's not a Crichton; but he dances well. Are you going to the ball?"

"I never heard of it. I have not for weeks thought of anything but—but—my writing, till this morning. Now I fear I shall find it difficult to return to it. It looks ages since I saddled the mare!"

"But if you're ever to be an author, it won't do to shut yourself up. You ought to see as much of the world as you can. I should strongly advise you to go to the ball."

"I would willingly obey you—but—but—I don't know how to get a ticket."

"Oh! if you would like to go, papa will have much pleasure in managing that. I will ask him."

"I'm much obliged to you," I returned. "I should enjoy seeing Mr. Brotherton dance."

She laughed again, but it was an oddly constrained laugh.

"It's quite time I was at home," she said, and gave the mare the rein, increasing her speed as she approached the house. Before I reached the little gate, she had given her up to the gardener, who had been on the look out for us.

"Put on her own saddle, and bring the mare round at once, please," I called to the man, as he led her and the horse away together.

"Won't you come in, Wilfrid?" said Clara, kindly and seriously.

"No, thank you," I returned; for I was full of rage and jealousy. To do myself justice, however, mingled with these was pity that such a girl should be so easy with such a man. But I could not tell her what I knew of him. Even if I could have done so, I dared not; for the man who shows himself jealous must be readily believed capable of lying, or at least misrepresenting.

"Then I must bid you good evening," she said, as quietly as if we had been together only five minutes. "I am so much obliged to you for letting me ride your mare!"

She gave me a half-friendly, half-stately little bow, and walked into the house. In a few moments the gardener returned with the mare, and I mounted and rode home in anything but a pleasant mood. Having stabled her, I roamed about the fields till it was dark, thinking for the first time in my life I preferred woods to open grass. When I went in at length I did my best to behave as if nothing had happened. My uncle must, however, have seen that something was amiss, but he took no notice, for he never forced or even led up to confidences. I retired early to bed, and passed an hour or two of wretchedness, thinking over everything that had happened—the one moment calling her a coquette, and the next ransacking a fresh corner of my brain to find fresh excuse for her. At length I was able to arrive at the conclusion that I did not understand her, and having given in so far, I soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

I TRUST it will not be regarded as a sign of shallowness of nature that I rose in the morn-

ing comparatively calm. Clara was to me as yet only the type of general womanhood, around which the amorphous loves of my manhood had begun to gather, not the one woman whom the individual man in me had chosen and loved. How could I love that which I did not yet know; she was but the heroine of my objective life, as projected from me by my imagination—not the love of my being. Therefore, when the wings of sleep had fanned the notes from my brain, I was cool enough, notwithstanding an occasional tongue of indignant flame from the ashes of last night's fire, to sit down to my books, and read with tolerable attention my morning portion of Plato. But when I turned to my novel, I found I was not master of the situation. My hero too was in love and in trouble; and after I had written a sentence and a half, I found myself experiencing the fate of Heine when he roused the Sphinx of past love by reading his own old verses:—

Lebendig ward das Marmorbild,
Der Stein begann zu aechzen.

In a few moments I was pacing up and down the room, eager to burn my moth-wings yet again in the old fire. And, by the way, I cannot help thinking that the moths enjoy their fate, and die in ecstasies. I was, however, too shy to venture on a call that very morning; I should both feel and look foolish. But there was no more work to be done then. I hurried to the stable, saddled my mare, and set out for a gallop across the farm, but towards the high road leading to Minstercombe, in the opposite direction, that is, from the Hall, which I flattered myself was to act in a strong-minded manner. There were several fences and hedges between, but I cleared them all without discomfiture. The last jump was into a lane. We, that is my mare and I, had scarcely alighted, when my ears were invaded by a shout. The voice was the least welcome I could have heard, that of Brotherton. I turned and saw him riding up the hill, with a lady by his side.

"Hillo!" he cried, almost angrily, "you don't deserve to have such a cob. (He would call her a cob.) You don't know how to use her. To jump her on to the hard like that!"

It was Clara with him!—on the steady stiff old brown horse! My first impulse was to jump my mare over the opposite fence, and take no heed of them, but clearly it was not to be attempted, for the ground fell considerably on the other side. My next thought was to ride away and leave them. My third was one which some of my readers will judge Quixotic, but I have a profound reverence for the Don—and that not merely because I have so often acted as foolishly as he. This last I proceeded to carry out, and lifting my hat, rode to meet them. Taking no notice whatever of Brotherton, I addressed Clara—in what I fancied a distant and dignified manner, which she might, if she pleased, attribute to the presence of her companion.

"Miss Coningham," I said, "will you allow me the honour of offering you my mare? She will carry you better."

"You are very kind, Mr. Cumbermede," she returned, in a similar tone, but with a sparkle in her eyes. "I am greatly obliged to you. I cannot pretend to prefer old crossbones to the beautiful creature which gave me so much pleasure yesterday."

I was off and by her side in a moment, helping her to dismount. I did not even look at Brotherton, though I felt he was staring like an equestrian statue. When I shifted the saddles, Clara broke the silence which I was in too great an inward commotion to heed by asking—

"What is the name of your beauty, Mr. Cumbermede?"

"Lilith," I answered.

"What a pretty name! I never heard it before. Is it after any one—any public character, I mean?"

"Quite a public character," I returned—"Adam's first wife."

"I never heard he had two," she rejoined, laughing.

"The Jews say he had. She is a demon now, and the pest of married women and their babies."

"What a horrible name to give your mare!"

"The name is pretty enough. And what does it matter what the woman was, so long as she was beautiful?"

"I don't quite agree with you there," she returned, with what I chose to consider a forced laugh.

By this time her saddle was firm on Lilith, and in an instant she was mounted. Brotherton moved to ride on, and the mare followed him. Clara looked back.

"You will catch us up in a moment," she said, possibly a little puzzled between us.

I was busy tightening my girths, and fumbled over the job more than was necessary. Brotherton was several yards ahead, and she was walking the mare slowly after him. I made her no answer, but mounted, and rode in the opposite direction. It was rude of course, but I did it. I could not have gone with them, and was afraid if I told her so she would dismount, and refuse the mare.

In a tumult of feeling I rode on without

looking behind me, careless whither—how long I cannot tell, before I woke up to find that I did not know where I was. I must ride till I came to some place I knew, or met some one who could tell me. Lane led into lane, buried betwixt deep banks and lofty hedges, or passing through small woods, until I ascended a rising ground, whence I got a view of the country. At once its features began to dawn upon me: I was close to the village of Aldwick, where I had been at school, and in a few minutes I rode into its wide straggling street. Not a mark of change had passed upon it. There were the same dogs about the doors, and the same cats in the windows. The very ferns in the chinks of the old draw-well, appeared the same; and the children had not grown an inch since I first drove into the place marvelling at its wondrous activity.

The sun was hot, and my horse seemed rather tired. I was in no mood to see any one, and besides had no pleasant recollections of my last visit to Mr. Elder, so I drew up at the door of the little inn, and having sent my horse to the stable for an hour's rest and a feed of oats, went into the sanded parlour, ordered a glass of ale, and sat staring at the china shepherdesses on the chimney-piece. I see them now, the ugly things, as plainly as if that had been an hour of the happiest reflections. I thought I was miserable, but I know now that although I was much disappointed, and everything looked dreary and uninteresting about me, I was a long way off misery. Indeed the passing vision of a neat unbanned village-girl on her way to the well, was attractive enough still to make me rise and go to the window. While watching, as she wound up the long chain, for the appearance of the familiar mossy bucket, dripping diamonds, as it gleamed out of the dark well into the enden sunlight, I heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and turned to see what kind of apparition would come. Presently it appeared, and made straight for the inn. The rider was Mr. Coningham! I drew back to escape his notice, but his quick eye had caught sight of me, for he came into the room with outstretched hand.

"We are fated to meet, Mr. Cumbermede," he said. "I only stopped to give my horse some meal and water, and had no intention of dismounting. Ale? I'll have a glass of ale, too," he added, ringing the bell. "I think I'll let him have a feed, and have a mouthful of bread and cheese myself."

He went out, and had I suppose gone to see that his horse had his proper allowance of oats, for when he returned, he said, merrily:

"What have you done with my daughter, Mr. Cumbermede?"

"Why should you think me responsible for her, Mr. Coningham?" I asked, attempting a smile.

No doubt he detected the attempt in the smile, for he looked at me with a sharpened expression of the eyes, as he answered—still in a merry tone—

"When I saw her last, she was mounted on your horse, and you were on my father's. I find you still on my father's horse, and your own—with the lady—nowhere. Have I made out a case of suspicion?"

"It is I who have cause of complaint," I returned—"who have neither lady nor mare—except indeed you imagine I have in the case of the latter made a good exchange."

"Hardly that, I imagine, if yours is half so good as she looks. But, seriously, have you seen Clara to-day?"

I told him the facts as lightly as I could. When I had finished, he stared at me with an expression which for the moment I avoided attempting to interpret.

"On horseback with Mr. Brotherton?" he said, uttering the words as if every syllable had been separately italicised.

"You will find it as I say," I replied, feeling offended.

"My dear boy—excuse my freedom," he returned—"I am nearly three times your age—you do not imagine I doubt a hair's breadth of your statement! But—the giddy goose!—How could you be so silly? Pardon me again. Your unselfishness is positively amusing! To hand over your horse to her, and then ride away all by yourself on that—respectable stager!"

"Don't abuse the old horse," I returned. "He is respectable, and has been more in his day."

"Yes, yes. But for the life of me I cannot understand it. Mr. Cumbermede, I am sorry for you. I should not advise you to choose the law for a profession. The man who does not regard his own rights, will hardly do for an adviser in the affairs of others."

"You were not going to consult me, Mr. Coningham, were you?" I said, now able at length to laugh without effort.

"Not quite that," he returned, also laughing. "But a right, you know, is one of the most serious things in the world."

It seemed irrelevant to the trifling character of the case. I could not understand why he should regard the affair as of such importance.

"I have been in the way of thinking," I said, "that one of the advantages of having rights was, that you could part with them when

you pleased. You're not bound to insist on your rights, are you?"

"Certainly you would not subject yourself to a criminal action by forgetting them, but you might suggest to your friends a commission of lunacy. I see how it is. That is your uncle all over! He was never a man of the world."

"You are right there, Mr. Coningham. It is the last epithet any one would give my uncle."

"And the first any one would give me, you imply, Mr. Cumbermede."

"I had no such intention," I answered. "That would have been rude."

"Not in the least. I should have taken it as a compliment. The man who does not care about his rights, depend upon it, will be made a tool of by those that do. If he is not a spoon already, he will become one. I shouldn't have *gilded* it at all if I hadn't known you."

"And you don't want to be rude to me."

"I don't. A little experience will set you all right; and that you are in a fair chance of getting if you push your fortune as a literary man. But I must be off. I hope we may have another chat before long."

He finished his ale, rose, bade me good-bye, and went to the stable. As soon as he was out of sight, I also mounted and rode homewards.

By the time I reached the gate of the park, my depression had nearly vanished. The comforting powers of sun and shadow, of sky and field, of wind and motion, had restored me to myself. With a side glance at the windows of the cottage as I passed, and the glimpse of a bright figure seated in the drawing-room window, I made for the stable, and found my Lilith waiting me. Once more I shifted my saddle, and rode home, without even another glance at the window as I passed.

A day or two after, I received from Mr. Coningham a ticket for the county ball, accompanied by a kind note. I returned it at once with the excuse that I feared incapacitating myself for work by dissipation.

Henceforward I avoided the park, and did not again see Clara before leaving for London. I had a note from her, thanking me for Lilith, and reproaching me for having left her to the company of Mr. Brotherton, which I thought cool enough, seeing they had set out together without the slightest expectation of meeting me. I returned a civil answer, and there was an end of it.

I must again say for myself, that it was not mere jealousy of Brotherton that led me to act as I did. I could not and would not get over the contradiction between the way in which she had spoken of him, and the way in which she spoke to him, followed by her accompanying him in the long ride to which the state of my mare bore witness. I concluded that, although she might mean no harm, she was not truthful. To talk of a man with such contempt, and then behave to him with such frankness, appeared to me altogether unjustifiable. At the same time their mutual familiarity pointed to some foregone intimacy, in which, had I been so inclined, I might have found some excuse for her, seeing she might have altered her opinion of him, and might yet find it very difficult to alter the tone of their intercourse.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN LONDON.

My real object being my personal history in relation to certain facts and events, I must, in order to restrain myself from that discursiveness the impulse to which is an urging of the historical as well as the artistic Satan, even run the risk of appearing to have been blind to many things going on around me which must have claimed a large place had I been writing an autobiography instead of a distinct portion of one.

I set out with my manuscript in my portmanteau, and a few pounds in my pocket, determined to cost my uncle as little as I could.

I well remember the dreariness of London, as I entered it on the top of a coach, in the closing darkness of a late autumn afternoon. The shops were not all yet lighted, and a drizzly rain was falling. But these outer influences hardly got beyond my mental skin, for I had written to Charley, and hoped to find him waiting for me at the coach-office. Nor was I disappointed, and in a moment all discomfort was forgotten. He took me to his chambers in the New Inn.

I found him looking better, and apparently, for him, in good spirits. It was soon arranged, at his entreaty, that for the present I should share his sitting-room, and have a bed put up for me in a closet he did not want. The next day I called upon certain publishers and left with them my manuscript. Its fate is of no consequence here, and I did not then wait to know it, but at once began to fly my feather at lower game, writing short papers and tales for the magazines. I had a little success from the first; and although the surroundings of my new abode were dreary enough, although, now and then, especially when the winter sun shone bright into the court, I longed for one peep into space across the field that now itself