

REGISTERED in accordance with the Copyright Act of 1868.

WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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

CHAPTER LIX. (Continued.)

But, as I still sat, a flow of sweet sad repentant thought passing gently through my bosom, all at once the self to which, unable to confide it to the care of its own very life, the God conscious of himself and in himself conscious of it, I had been for months offering the sacrifices of despair and indignation, arose in spectral hideousness before me. I saw that I, a child of the infinite, had been worshipping the finite—and therein dragging down the infinite towards the fate of the finite. I do not mean that in Mary Osborne I had been worshipping the finite. It was the eternal, the lovely, the true that in her I had been worshipping; in myself I had been worshipping the mean, the selfish, the finite, the god of spiritual greed. Only in himself can a man find the finite to worship; only in turning back upon himself does he create the finite for and by his worship. All the works of God are everlasting; the only perishable are some of the works of man. All love is a worship of the infinite; what is called a man's love for himself, is not love; it is but a phantastic resemblance of love; it is a creating of the finite, a creation of death. A man cannot love himself. If all love be not creation—as I think it is—it is at least the only thing in harmony with creation, and the love of oneself is its absolute opposite. I sickened at the sight of myself; how should I ever get rid of the demon? The same instant I saw the one escape; I must offer it back to its source—commit it to him who made it. I must live no more from it, but from the source of it; seek to know nothing more of it than he gave me to know by his presence therein. Thus might I become one with the Eternal in such an absorption as Buddha had never dreamed; thus might I draw life ever fresh from its fountain. And in that fountain alone would I contemplate its reflex. What flashes of self-consciousness might cross me, should be God's gift, not of my seeking, and offered again to him in ever new self-sacrifice. Alas! alas! this I saw then, and this I yet see; but oh, how far am I still from that divine annihilation! The only comfort is—God is, and I am his, else I should not be at all.

I saw, too, that thus God also lives—in his higher way. I saw, shadowed out in the absolute devotion of Jesus to men, that the very life of God, by which we live, is an everlasting eternal giving of himself away. He asserts himself, only, solely, altogether, in an infinite sacrifice of devotion. So must we live; the child must be as the father; live he cannot on any other plan struggle as he may. The father requires of him nothing that he is not or does not himself, who is the one prime unconditioned sacrificer and sacrifice. I threw myself on the ground, and offered back my poor wretched self to its owner, to be taken and kept, purified and made divine.

The same moment a sense of reviving health began to possess me. With many fluctuations, it has possessed me, has grown, and is now, if not a persistent cheerfulness, yet an unyielding hope. The world bloomed again around me. The sunrise again grew gloriously dear; and the sadness of the moon was lighted from a higher sun than that which returns with the morning.

My relation to Mary resolved and re-formed itself in my mind into something I can explain only by the following—call it a dream: it was not a dream; call it vision: it was not a vision; and yet I will tell it as if it were either, being far truer than either.

I lay like a child on one of God's arms. I could not see his face, and the arm that held me was a great cloudy arm. I knew that on his other arm lay Mary. But between us were forests and plains, mountains and great seas; and, unspeakably worse than all, a gulf with which words had nothing to do, a gulf of pure separation, of impassable nothingness, across which no device, I say not of human skill, but of human imagination, could cast a single connecting cord. There lay Mary, and here lay I—both in God's arms—utterly parted. As in a swoon I lay, through which suddenly came the words: "What God had joined, man cannot sunder." I lay thinking what they could mean. All at once I thought I knew. Straightway I rose on the cloudy arm, looked down on a measureless darkness beneath me, and up on a great, dreary, world-filled eternity above me, and crept along the arm towards the bosom of God.

In telling my—neither vision nor dream nor ecstasy, I cannot help it that the forms grow so much plainer and more definite in the words than they were in the revelation. Words always give either too much or too little shape: when you want to be definite, you find your words clumsy and blunt; when you want them for a vague shadowy image,

you straightway find them give a sharp and impertinent outline, refusing to lend themselves to your undefined though vivid thought. Forms themselves are hard enough to manage, but words are unmanageable. I must therefore trust to the heart of my reader.

I crept into the bosom of God, and along a great cloudy peace, which I could not understand, for it did not yet enter into me. At length I came to the heart of God, and through that my journey lay. The moment I entered it, the great peace appeared to enter mine, and I began to understand it. Something melted in my heart, and for a moment I thought I was dying, but I found I was being born again. My heart was empty of its old selfishness, and I loved Mary tenfold—nor longer in the least for my own sake, but all for her loveliness. The same moment I knew that the heart of God was a bridge, along which I was crossing the unspeakable eternal gulf that divided Mary and me. At length, somehow, I know not how, somewhere, I know not where, I was where she was. She knew nothing of my presence, turned neither face nor eye to me, stretched out no hand to give me the welcome of even a friend, and yet I not only knew, but felt that she was mine. I wanted nothing from her; desired the presence of her loveliness only that I might know it; hung about her life as a butterfly over the flower he loves; was satisfied that she should be. I had left my self behind in the heart of God, and now I was a pure essence, fit to rejoice in the essential. But alas! my whole being was not yet subject to its best. I began to long to be able to do something for her besides—I foolishly said *beyond* loving her. Back rushed my old self in the selfish thought: Some day—will she not know—and at least —? That moment the vision vanished. I was tossed—ah! let me hope, only to the other arm of God—but I lay in torture yet again. For a man may see visions manifold, and believe them all; and yet his faith shall not save him; something more is needed—he must have the presence of God in his soul, of which the Son of Man spoke, saying: "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." God in him, he will be able to love for very love's sake; God not in him, his best love will die into selfishness.

CHAPTER LX.

MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER.

THE morning then which had thus dawned upon me, was of ten overclouded heavily. Yet it was the morning and not the night; and one of the strongest proofs that it was the morning, lay in this, that again I could think in verse.

One day, after an hour or two of bitterness, I wrote the following. A man's trouble must have receded from him a little for the moment, if he describes any shape in it, so as to be able to give it form in words. I set it down with no hope of better than the vaguest sympathy. There came no music with this one.

If it be that a man and a woman
Are made for no mutual grief;
That each gives the pain to some other,
And neither can give the relief;

If thus the chain of the world
Is tied round the holy feet,
I scorn to shrink from facing
What my brothers and sisters meet.

But I cry when the wolf is tearing
At the core of my heart as now:
When I was the man to be tortured,
Why should the woman be *thou*?

I am not so ready to sink from the lofty into the abject now. If at times I yet feel that the whole creation is groaning and travailing, I know what it is for—its redemption from the dominion of its own death into that sole liberty which comes only of being filled and eternally possessed by God himself, its source and its life.

And now I found also that my heart began to be moved with a compassion towards my fellows such as I had never before experienced. I shall best convey what I mean by transcribing another little poem I wrote about the same time.

Once I sat on a crimson throne,
And I held the world in fee;
Below me I heard my brothers moan,
And I bent me down to see;—

Lovingly bent and looked on them,
But I had no inward pain;
I sat in the heart of my ruby gem,
Like a rainbow without the rain.

My throne is vanished; helpless I lie
At the foot of its broken stair;
And the sorrows of all humanity
Through my heart make a thoroughfare.

Let such things rest for a while: I have now to relate another incident—strange enough, but by no means solitary in the records of human experience. My reader will

probably think that of dreams and visions there has already been more than enough; but perhaps she will kindly remember that at this time I had no outer life at all. Whatever bore to me the look of existence was within me. All my days the tendency had been to an undue predominance of thought over action, and now that the springs of action were for a time dried up, what wonder was it if thought, lording it alone, should assume a reality beyond its right? Hence the life of the day was prolonged into the night; nor was there other than a small difference in their conditions, beyond the fact that the contrast of outer things was removed in sleep; whence the shapes which the waking thought had assumed, had space and opportunity, as it were, to thicken before the mental eye until they became dreams and visions.

But concerning what I am about to relate I shall offer no theory. Such mere operation of my own thoughts may be sufficient to account for it: I would only ask—does any one know what the mere operation of his own thoughts signifies? I cannot isolate myself, especially in those moments when the individual will is less awake, from the ocean of life and thought which not only surrounds me, but on which I am in a sense one of the floating bubbles.

I was asleep, but I thought I lay awake in bed—in the room where I still slept—that which had been my grannie's.—It was dark midnight, and the wind was howling about the gable and in the chimneys. The door opened, and some one entered. By the lamp she carried I knew my great-grandmother—just as she looked in life, only that now she walked upright and with ease. That I was dreaming is plain from the fact that I felt no surprise at seeing her.

"Wilfrid, come with me," she said, approaching the bedside. "Rise."

I obeyed like a child.

"Put your cloak on," she continued. "It is a stormy midnight, but we have not so far to go as you may think."

"I think nothing, grannie," I said. "I do not know where you want to take me."

"Come and see then, my son. You must at last learn what has been kept from you far too long."

As she spoke, she led the way down the stair, through the kitchen, and out into the dark night. I remember the wind blowing my cloak about, but I remember nothing more until I found myself in the winding hazel-walled lane, leading to Umberden Church. My grannie was leading me by one withered hand; in the other she held the lamp, over the flame of which the wind had no power. She led me into the churchyard, took the key from under the tombstone, unlocked the door of the church, put the lamp into my hand, pushed me gently in, and shut the door behind me. I walked to the vestry, and set the lamp on the desk, with a vague feeling that I had been there before, and that I had now to do something at this desk. Above it I caught sight of the row of vellum-bound books, and remembered that one of them contained something of importance to me. I took it down. The moment I opened it, I remembered with distinctness the fatal discrepancy in the entry of my grannie's marriage. I found the place; to my astonishment the date of the year was now the same as that on the preceding page—1747. That instant I awoke in the first gush of the sunrise.

I could not help feeling even a little excited by my dream, and the impression of it grew upon me; I wanted to see the book again. I could not rest. Something seemed constantly urging me to go and look at it. Half to get the thing out of my head, I sent Styles to fetch Lilith, and for the first time since the final assurance of my loss, mounted her. I rode for Umberden Church.

It was long after noon before I had made up my mind, and when, having tied Lilith to the gate, I entered the church, one red ray from the setting sun was nestling in the very roof. Knowing what I should find, yet wishing to see it again, I walked across to the vestry, feeling rather uncomfortable at the thought of prying thus alone into the parish register.

I could almost have persuaded myself that I was dreaming still; and, in looking back, I can hardly in my mind separate the dreaming from the waking vision.

Of course I found just what I had expected—1748, not 1747—at the top of the page, and was about to replace the register, when the thought occurred to me, that if the dream had been potent enough to bring me hither, it might yet mean something. I lifted the cover again. There the entry stood undeniably plain. This time, however, I noted two other little facts concerning it.

I will just remind my reader that the entry was crushed in between the date of the year and the next entry—plainly enough to the eye; and that there was no attestation to the entries of 1747. The first additional fact—and clearly an important one—was, that in the summing up of 1748, before the signature, which stood near the bottom of the cover, a figure had been altered. Originally it stood: "In all six couple," but the six had been altered to a seven—corresponding with the

actual number. This appeared proof positive that the first entry on the cover was a forged insertion. And how clumsily it had been managed!

"What could my grannie be about?" I said to myself.

It never occurred to me then that it might have been intended to look like a forgery.

Still I kept staring at it, as if, by very force of staring, I could find out something. There was not the slightest sign of erasure or alteration beyond the instance I have mentioned. Yet—and here was my second note—when I compared the whole of the writing on the cover with the writing on the preceding page, though it seemed the same hand, it seemed to have got stiffer and shakier, as if the writer had grown old between. Finding nothing very suggestive in this, however, I fell into a dreamy mood, watching the red light, as it faded, up in the old, dark, distorted roof of the desolate church—with my hand lying on the book.

I have always had a bad habit of pulling and scratching at any knot or roughness in the paper of the book I happen to be reading; and now, almost unconsciously, with my forefinger I was pulling at an edge of parchment which projected from the joint of the cover. When I came to myself and proceeded to close the book, I found it would not shut properly, because of a piece which I had curled up. Seeking to restore it to its former position, I fancied I saw a line or edge running all down the joint, and looking closer saw that these last entries in place of being upon a leaf of the book pasted to the cover in order to strengthen the binding, as I had supposed, were indeed upon a leaf which was pasted to the cover, but one not otherwise connected with the volume.

I now began to feel a more lively interest in the behaviour of my dream-grannie. Here might lie something to explain the hitherto inexplicable. I proceeded to pull the leaf gently away. It was of parchment, much thinner than the others, which were of vellum. I had withdrawn only a small portion when I saw there was writing under it. My heart began to beat faster. But I would not be rash. My old experience with parchment in the mending of my uncle's books came to my aid. If I pulled at the dry skin as I had been doing, I might not only damage it, but destroy the writing under it. I could do nothing without water, and I did not know where to find any. It would be better to ride to the village of Gastford, somewhere about two miles off, put up there, and arrange for future proceedings.

I did not know the way, and for a long time could see no one to ask. The consequence was that I made a wide round, and it was nearly dark before I reached the village. I thought it better for the present to feed Lilith, and then make the best of my way home.

The next evening—I felt so like a thief that I sought the thievish security of the night—having provided myself with what was necessary, and borrowed a horse for Styles, I set out again.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE PARISH REGISTER.

THE sky clouded as we went; it grew very dark, and the wind began to blow. It threatened a storm. I told Styles a little of what I was about—just enough to impress on him the necessity for prudence. The wind increased, and by the time we gained the copse, it was roaring, and the slender hazels bending like a field of corn.

"You will have enough to do with two horses," I said.

"I don't mind it, sir," Styles answered. "A word from me will quiet Miss Lilith; and for the other, I've known him pretty well for two years past."

I left them tolerably sheltered in the winding lane, and betook myself alone to the church. Cautiously I opened the door, and felt my way from pew to pew, for it was quite dark. I could just distinguish the windows from the walls, and nothing more. As soon as I reached the vestry, I struck a light, got down the volume, and proceed to moisten the parchment with a wet sponge. For some time the water made little impression on the old parchment, of which but one side could be exposed to its influences, and I began to fear I should be much longer in gaining my end than I had expected. The wind roared and howled about the trembling church, which seemed too weak with age to resist such an onslaught; but when at length the skin began to grow soft and yield to my gentle efforts at removal, I became far too much absorbed in the simple operation, which had to be performed with all the gentleness and nicety of a surgical one, to heed the uproar about me. Slowly the glutinous adhesion gave way, and slowly the writing revealed itself. In mingled hope and doubt I restrained my curiosity; and as one teases oneself sometimes by dallying with a letter of the greatest interest, not until I had folded down the parchment clear of what was manifestly an entry, did I bring my candle close to it, and set myself to read it. Then, indeed, I found I had