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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,

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CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE OLD CHEST.

I CANNOT help dwelling for a moment on the scene, although it is not of the slightest consequence to my story, when Sir Giles and Lady Brotherton entered the reading-room of the resuscitated library of Moldwarp Hall. It was a bright day of autumn. Outside all was brilliant. The latticed oriel looked over the lawn and the park, where the trees had begun to gather those rich hues which could hardly be the heralds of death if it were the ugly thing it appears. Beyond the fading woods rose a line of blue heights meeting the more ethereal blue of the sky, now faded to a colder and paler tint. The dappled skins of the fallow deer glimmered through the trees, and the whiter ones among them cast a light round them in the shadows. Through the trees that on one side descended to the meadow below, came the shine of the water where the little brook had spread into still pools. All without was bright with sunshine and clear air. But when you turned, all was dark, sombre, and rich like an autumn ten times faded. Through the open door of the next room on one side, you saw the shelves full of books, and from beyond, through the narrow uplifted door, came the glimmer of the weapons on the wall of the little armoury. Two ancient tapestry-covered settees, in which the ravages of moth and worm had been met by skilful repair of chisel and needle, a heavy table of oak, with carved sides, as black as ebony, and a few old, straight-backed chairs were the sole furniture.

Sir Giles expressed much pleasure, and Lady Brotherton, beginning to enter a little into my plans, was more gracious than hitherto.

"We must give a party as soon as you have finished, Mr. Cumbermede," she said; "and

"That will be some time yet," I interrupted, not desiring the invitation she seemed about to force herself to utter; "and I fear there are not many in this neighbourhood who will appreciate the rarity and value of the library—if the other rooms should turn out as rich as that one."

"I believe old books are expensive now-a-days," she returned. "They are more sought after, I understand."

We resumed our work with fresh vigour, and got on faster. Both Clara and Mary were assiduous in their help.

To go back for a little to my own old chest—we found it, as I have said, full of musty papers. After turning over a few, seeming to my uneducated eye, deeds and wills and such like, out of which it was evident I could gather no barest meaning without a labour I was not inclined to expend on them—for I had no pleasure in such details as involved nothing of the picturesque—I threw the one in my hand upon the heap already taken from the box, and to the indignation of Charley, who was absorbed in one of them, and had not spoken a word for at least a quarter of an hour, exclaimed—

"Come, Charley; I'm sick of the rubbish. Let's go and have a walk before supper."

"Rubbish!" he repeated; "I am ashamed of you!"

"I see Clara has been setting you on. I wonder what she's got in her head. I am sure I have quite a sufficient regard for family history and all that."

"Very like it!" said Charley—"calling such a chestful as this rubbish!"

"I am pleased enough to possess it," I said; "but if they had been such books as some of those at the Hall—"

"Look here then," he said, stooping over the chest, and with some difficulty hauling out a great folio which he had discovered below, but had not yet examined—"just see what you can make of that."

I opened the title page, rather eagerly. I stared. Could I believe my eyes? First of all on the top of it, in the neatest old hand, was written—"Guilfrid Cumbermede His Boke. 1630." Then followed what I will not write, lest this MS. should by any accident fall into the hands of bookhunters before my death. I jumped to my feet, gave a shout that brought Charley to his feet also, and danced about the empty room hugging the folio. "Have you lost your senses?" said Charley; but when he had a peep of the title page, he became as much excited as myself, and it was some time before he could settle down to the papers again. Like a bee over a flower-bed, I went dipping and sipping at my treasure. Every word of the well-known lines bore a flavour of ancient verity such as I had never before perceived in them. At length I looked up, and finding him as much absorbed as I had been myself,

"Well, Charley, what are you finding there?" I asked.

"Proof perhaps that you come of an older family than you think," he answered; "proof certainly that some part at least of the Moldwarp property was at one time joined to the Moat, and that you are of the same stock a branch of which was afterwards raised to the present baronetage. At least I have little doubt such is the case, though I can hardly say I am yet prepared to prove it."

"You don't mean I'm of the same blood as—as Geoffrey Brotherton?" I said. "I would rather not, if it's the same to you, Charley."

"I can't help it: that's the way things point," he answered, throwing down the parchment. "But I can't read more now. Let's go and have a walk. I'll stop at home to-morrow, and take a look over the whole set."

"I'll stop with you."

"No, you won't. You'll go and get on with your library. I shall do better alone. If I could only get a peep at the Moldwarp chest as well!"

"But the place may have been bought and

understand. It seems to me always as if she were—I will not say underhand, but as if she had some object in view—some design upon you—"

"Upon me!" exclaimed Charley, looking at me suddenly and with a face from which all the colour had fled.

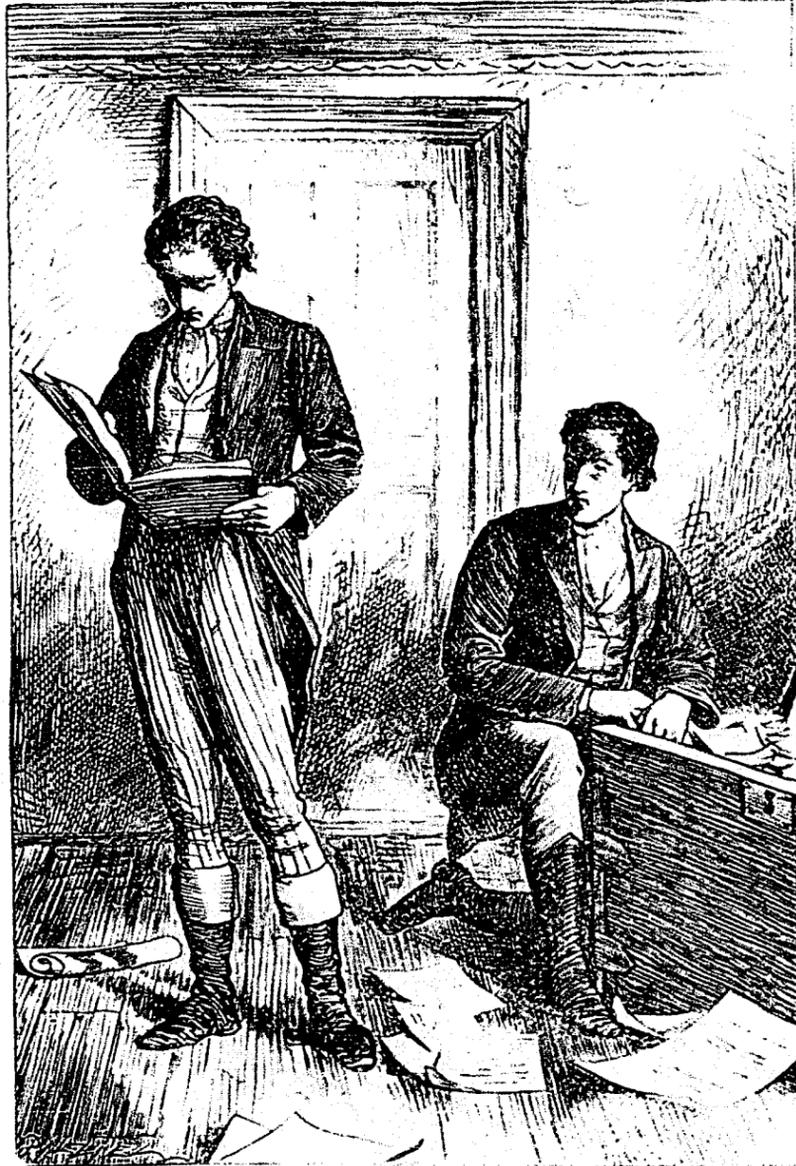
"No, no, Charley, not that," I answered, laughing. "I used the word impersonally. I will be more cautious. One would think we had been talking about a witch—or a demon-lady—you are so frightened at the notion of her having you in her eye."

He did not seem altogether relieved, and I caught an uneasy glance seeking my countenance.

"But isn't she charming?" I went on. "It is only to you I could talk about her so. And after all it may be only a fancy."

He kept his face downwards and aside, as if he were pondering and coming to no conclusion. The silence grew and grew until expectation ceased, and when I spoke again, it was of something different.

My reader may be certain from all this that I was not in love with Clara. Her beauty and



"Well, Charley, what are you finding there?" I asked.

sold many times. Just look here though," I said, as I showed him the crest on my watch and seal. "Mind you look at the top of your spoon the next time you eat soup at the Hall."

"That is unnecessary quite. I recognize the crest at once. How strangely these cryptographs come drifting along the tide, like the gilded ornaments of a wreck after the hull has gone down!"

"Or, like the mole or squint that reappears in successive generations, the legacy of some long-forgotten ancestor," I said—and several things unexplained occurred to me as possibly having a common solution.

"I find however," said Charley, "that the name of Cumbermede is not mentioned in your papers more than about a hundred years back—as far as I have yet made out."

"That is odd," I returned, "seeing that in the same chest we find that book with my name, surname and Christian, and the date 1630."

"It is strange," he acquiesced, "and will perhaps require a somewhat complicated theory to meet it."

We began to talk of other matters, and, naturally enough, soon came to Clara.

Charley was never ready to talk of her—in deed avoided the subject in a way that continued to perplex me.

"I confess to you, Charley," I said, "there is something about her I do not and cannot

liveliness, with a gaiety which not seldom assumed the form of grace, attracted me much, it is true; but nothing interfered more with the growth of any passion than a spirit of questioning, and that once aroused love begins to cease and pass into pain. Few, perhaps, could have arrived at the point of admiration I had reached without falling instantly therefrom into an abyss of absorbing passion; but with me, inasmuch as I searched every feeling in the hope of finding in it the everlasting, there was in the present case a reiterated check, if not indeed recoil; for I was not and could not make myself sure that Clara was upright;—perhaps the more commonplace word *straightforward* would express my meaning better.

Anxious to get the books arranged before they all left me, for I knew I should have but little heart for it after they were gone, I grudging Charley the forenoon he wanted amongst my papers, and prevailed upon him to go with me the next day as usual. Another fortnight, which was almost the limit of their stay, would, I thought, suffice; and giving up everything else, Charley and I worked from morning till night, with much though desultory assistance from the ladies. I contrived to keep the carpenter and housemaid in work, and by the end of the week began to see the intrude of order "scattering the rear of darkness thin."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MARY OSBORNE.

ALL this time the acquaintance between Mary Osborne and myself had not improved. Save as the sister of my friend, I had not, I repeat, found her interesting. She did not seem at all to fulfil the promise of her childhood. Hardly once did she address me; and when I spoke to her, would reply with a simple, dull directness, which indicated nothing beyond the fact of the passing occasion. Rightly or wrongly, I concluded that the more indulgence she cherished for Charley, the less she felt for his friend—that to him she attributed the endlessly sad declension of her darling brother. Once on her face I surprised a look of unutterable sorrow resting on Charley's; but the moment she saw that I observed her, the look died out, and her face stiffened into its usual dullness and negation. On me, she turned only the unlightened disc of her soul. Mrs. Osborne, whom I seldom saw, behaved with much more kindness, though hardly more cordiality. It was only that she allowed her bright indulgence for Charley to cast the shadow of his image over the faults of his friend; and except by the sadness that dwelt in every line of her sweet face, she did not attract me. I was ever aware of an inward judgment which I did not believe I deserved, and I would turn from her look with a sense of injury which greater love would have changed into keen pain.

Once, however, I did meet a look of sympathy from Mary. On the second Monday of the fortnight I was more anxious than ever to reach the end of my labours, and was in the court, accompanied by Charley, as early as eight o'clock. From the hall a dark passage led past the door of the dining-room to the garden. Through the dark tube of the passage we saw the bright green of a lovely bit of sward, and upon it Mary and Clara radiant in white morning dresses. We joined them.

"Here come the slave-drivers!" remarked Clara.

"Already!" said Mary, in a low voice, which I thought had a tinge of dismay in its tone.

"Never mind, Polly," said her companion—"we're not going to bow to their will and pleasure. We'll have our walk in spite of them!"

As she spoke she threw a glance at us which seemed to say—"You may come if you like," then turned to Mary with another which said—"We shall see whether they prefer old books or young ladies!"

Charley looked at me—interrogatively.

"Do as you like, Charley," I said.

"I will do as you do," he answered.

"Well," I said, "I have no right—"

"Oh, bother!" said Clara—"You're so innocent always with your rights and wrongs! Are you coming, or are you not?"

"Yes, I'm coming," I replied, convicted by Clara's directness, for I was quite ready to go.

We crossed the court, and strolled through the park, which was of great extent, in the direction of a thick wood, covering a rise towards the east. The morning air was perfectly still; there was a little dew on the grass, which shone rather than sparkled; the sun was burning through a light fog, which grew deeper as we approached the wood; the decaying leaves filled the air with their sweet, mournful scent. Through the wood went a wide opening or glade, stretching straight and far towards the east, and along this we walked, with that exhilaration which the fading autumn so strangely bestows. For some distance the ground ascended softly, but the view was finally closed in by a more abrupt swell, over the brow of which the mist hung in dazzling brightness.

Notwithstanding the gaiety of animal spirits produced by the season, I felt unusually depressed that morning. Already, I believe, I was beginning to feel the home-born sadness of the soul whose wings are weary and whose foot can find no firm soil on which to rest. Sometimes I think the wonder is that so many men are never sad. I doubt if Charley would have suffered so but for the wrongs his father's selfish religion had done him; which perhaps were therefore so far well, inasmuch as otherwise he might not have cared enough about religion even to doubt concerning it. But in my case now, it may have been only the unsatisfying presence of Clara, haunted by a dim regret that I could not love her more than I did. For with regard to her, my soul was like one who in a dream of delight sees outspread before him a wide river, wherein he makes haste to plunge that he may disport himself in the fine element; but, wading eagerly, alas! finds not a single pool deeper than his knees.

"What's the matter with you, Wilfrid?" said Charley, who, in the midst of some gay talk, suddenly perceived my silence—"You seem to lose all your spirits away from your precious library. I do believe you grudge every moment not spent upon those ragged old books."

"I wasn't thinking of that, Charley; I was wondering what lies beyond that mist."

"I see!—A chapter of the Pilgrim's Progress! Here we are—Mary, you're Christiana, and, Clara, you're Mercy. Wilfrid, you're—"