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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,

Author of "Alec Forbes," etc.

CHAPTER XLIV.—Continued.

When we had parted for the night, my brains began to go about, and the centre of their gyration was not Mary now, but Clara. What could have induced her to play me false? All my vanity, of which I had enough, was insufficient to persuade me that it could be out of revenge for the gradual diminution of my attentions to her. She had seen me pay none to Mary, I thought, except she had caught a glimpse from the next room of the little passage of the ring, and that I did not believe. Neither did I believe she had ever cared enough about me to be jealous of whatever attentions I might pay to another. But in all my conjectures, I had to confess myself utterly foiled. I could imagine no motive. Two possibilities alone, both equally improbable, suggested themselves—the one, that she did it for pure love of mischief, which, false as she was to me, I could not believe; the other, which likewise I rejected, that she wanted to ingratiate herself with Brotherton. I had still, however, scarcely a doubt that she had laid the sword on my bed. Trying to imagine a connection between this possible action and Mary's mistake, I built up a conjectural form of conjectural facts to this effect—that Mary had seen her go into my room; had taken it for the room she was to share with her, and had followed her either at once—in which case I supposed Clara to have gone out by the stair to the roof to avoid being seen—or afterwards, from some accident, without a light in her hand. But I do not care to set down more of my speculations, for none concerning this either were satisfactory to myself, and I remain almost as much in the dark to this day. In any case the fear remained that Clara must be ever on the borders of the discovery of Mary's secret, if indeed she did not know it already, which was a dreadful thought—more especially as I could place no confidence in her. I was glad to think, however, that they were to be parted so soon, and I had little fear of any correspondence between them.

The next morning Charley set out to way-lay them at a certain point on their homeward journey. I did not propose to accompany him. I preferred having him speak for me first, not knowing how much they might have heard to my discredit, for it was in all probability the matter had been kept from them. After he had started, however, I could not rest, and for pure restlessness sent Styles to fetch my mare. The loss of my sword was a trifle to me now, but the proximity of the place where I should henceforth be regarded as what I hardly dared to realize, was almost unendurable. As if I had actually been guilty of what was laid to my charge, I longed to hide myself in some impenetrable depth, and kept looking out impatiently for Styles' return. At length I caught sight of my Lilith's head rising white from the hollow in which the farm lay, and ran up to my room to make a little change in my attire. Just as I snatched my riding-whip from a hook by the window, I spied a horseman approaching from the direction of the park gates. Once more it was Mr. Coningham, riding hitherward from the windy trees. In no degree inclined to meet him, I hurried down the stair, and arriving at the very moment Styles drew up, sprung into the saddle, and would have galloped off in the opposite direction, confident that no horse of Mr. Coningham's could overtake my Lilith. But the moment I was in the saddle, I remembered there was a pile of books on the window-sill of my uncle's room, belonging to the library at the Hall, and I stopped a moment to give Styles the direction to take them home at once, and, having asked a word of Miss Pease, to request her, with my kind regards, to see them safely deposited amongst the rest. In consequence of this delay, just as I set off at full speed from the door, Mr. Coningham rode round the corner of the house.

"What a devil of a hurry you are in, Mr. Cumbermede!" he cried. "I was just coming to see you. Can't you spare me a word?"

I was forced to pull up, and reply as civilly as might be.

"I am only going for a ride," I said, "and will go part of your way with you if you like."

"Thank you. That will suit me admirably. I am going Gastford way. Have you ever been there?"

"No," I answered. "I have only just heard the name of the village."

"It is a pretty place. But there's the oddest old church you ever saw, within a couple of miles of it—alone in the middle of a forest—or at least it was a forest not long ago. It is mostly young trees now. There isn't a house within a mile of it, and the nearest stands as lonely as the church—quite a place to suit the fancy of a poet like you! Come along and

see it. You may as well go one way as another, if you only want a ride."

"How far is it?" I asked.

"Only seven or eight miles across country: I can take you all the way through lanes and fields."

Perplexed or angry I was always disinclined for speech; and it was only after things had arranged themselves in my mind, or I had mastered my indignation, that I would begin to feel communicative. But something prudential inside warned me that I could not afford to lose any friend I had; and although I was not prepared to confide my wrongs to Mr. Coningham, I felt I might some day be glad of his counsel.

CHAPTER XLV.

CUMBERDEN CHURCH.

My companion chatted away, lauded my mare, asked if I had seen Clara lately, and how the library was going on. I answered him carelessly, without even a hint at my troubles.



"He put his hand beneath it, and drew out a great rusty key."

"You seem out of spirits, Mr. Cumbermede. You've been taking too little exercise. Let's have a canter. It will do you good. Here's a nice bit of sward."

I was only too ready to embrace the excuse for dropping a conversation towards which I was unable to contribute my share.

Having reached a small roadside inn, we gave our horses a little refreshment; after which, crossing a field or two by jumping the stiles, we entered the loveliest lane I had ever seen. It was so narrow that there was just room for horses to pass each other, and covered with the greenest sward rarely trodden. It ran through the midst of a wilderness of tall hazels. They stood up on both sides of it, straight and trim as walls, high above our heads as we sat on our horses; and the lane was so serpentine, that we could never see further than a few yards ahead; while, towards the end, it kept turning so much in one direction that we seemed to be following the circumference of a little circle. It ceased at length at a small double-leaved gate of iron, to which we tied our horses before entering the churchyard. But instead of a neat burial place, which the whole approach would have given us to expect, we found a desert. The grass was of extraordinary coarseness, and mingled with quantities of vile-looking weeds. Several of the graves had not even a spot of green upon them, but were mere heaps of yellow earth in huge lumps, mixed with large stones. There was not above a score of graves

in the whole place, two or three of which only had gravestones on them. One lay open with the rough yellow lumps all about it, and completed the desolation. The church was nearly square—small, and shapeless, with but four latticed windows, two on one side, one on the other, and the fourth in the east end. It was built partly of bricks and partly of flint stones, the walls bowed and bent, and the roof waved and broken. Its old age had gathered none of the graces of age to soften its natural ugliness, or elevate its insignificance. Except a few lichens, there was not a mark of vegetation about it. Not a single ivy leaf grew on its spotted and wasted walls. It gave a hopeless, pagan expression to the whole landscape—for it stood on a rising ground from which we had an extensive prospect of height and hollow, cornfield and pasture and wood, away to the dim blue horizon.

"You don't find it enlivening, do you—eh?" said my companion.

"I never saw such a frightfully desolate spot," I said, "to have yet the appearance of a place of Christian worship. It looks as if there were a curse upon it. Are all those the

"It answered for a bait, at all events. You've had a good long ride, which was the best thing for you. Look what a wretched little vestry that is!"

It was but a corner of the east end, divided off by a faded red curtain.

"I suppose they keep a parish register here," he said. "Let's have a look."

Behind the curtain hung a dirty surplice and a gown. In the corner stood a desk like the schoolmaster's in a village school. There was a shelf with a few vellum-bound books on it, and nothing else, not even a chair, in the place.

"Yes; there they are!" he said, as he looked down one of the volumes from the shelf. "This one comes to a close in the middle of the last century. I dare say there is something in this now that would be interesting enough to somebody. Who knows how many properties it might make change hands?"

"Not many, I should think. Those matters are pretty well seen to now."

"By some one or other—not always the rightful heirs. Life is full of the strangest facts, Mr. Cumbermede. If I were a novelist now, like you, my experience would make me dare a good deal more in the way of invention than any novelist I happen to have read. Look there, for instance!"

He pointed to the top of the last page, or, rather, the last half of the cover. I read as follows:—

"MARRIAGES, 1748.

"Mr. Wilfrid Cumbermede Daryll, of the Parish of ———, second son of Sir Richard Daryll, of Moldwarp Hall, in the County of ———, and Mistress Elizabeth Woodruffe were married by a license, Jan. 15."

"I don't know the name of Daryll," I said.

"It was your own great-grandfather's name," he returned. "I happen to know that much."

"You knew this was here, Mr. Coningham," I said. "That is why you brought me."

"You are right. I did know it. Was I wrong in thinking it would interest you?"

"Certainly not. I am obliged to you. But why this mystery? Why not have told me what you wanted me to go for?"

"I will why you in turn. Why should I have wanted to show you now more than any other time what I have known for as many years almost as you have lived? You spoke of a ride—why shouldn't I give a direction to it that might pay you for your trouble? And why shouldn't I have a little amusement out of it if I pleased? Why shouldn't I enjoy your surprise at finding in a place you had hardly heard of and would certainly count most uninteresting, the record of a fact that concerned your own existence so nearly? There!"

"I confess it interests me more than you will easily think—inasmuch as it seems to offer to account for things that have greatly puzzled me for some time. I have of late met with several hints of a connection at one time or other between the Moat and the Hall, but these hints were so isolated that I could weave no theory to connect them. Now I dare say they will clear themselves up."

"Not a doubt of that, if you set about it in earnest."

"How did he come to drop his surname?"

"That has to be accounted for."

"It follows—does it not—that I am of the same blood as the present possessors of Moldwarp Hall?"

"You are—but the relation is not a close one," said Mr. Coningham. "Sir Giles was but distantly related to the stock of which you come."

"Then—but I must turn it over in my mind. I am rather in a maze."

"You have got some papers at the Moat?" he said—interrogatively.

"Yes; my friend Osborne has been looking over them. He found out this much—that there was some connection between the Moat and the Hall, but at a far earlier date than this points to, or any of the hints to which I just now referred. The other day when I dined at Sir Giles's, Mr. Alderforge said that Cumbermede was a name belonging to Sir Giles's ancestry—or something to that effect; but that again could have nothing to do with these papers, or with the Moat at all."

Here I stopped, for I could not bring myself to refer to the sword. It was not merely that the subject was too painful; of all things, I did not want to be cross-questioned by my lawyer-companion.

"It is not amongst those you will find anything of importance, I suspect. Did your great-grandmother—the same, no doubt, whose marriage is here registered—have no letters or papers behind her?"

"I've come upon a few letters. I don't know if there is anything more."

"You haven't read them, apparently."

"I have not. I've been always going to read them, but I haven't opened one of them yet."

"Then I recommend you—that is, if you care for an interesting piece of family history—to read those letters carefully, that is constructively."

"What do you mean?"

graves of suicides and murderers? It cannot surely be consecrated ground."

"It's not nice," he said. "I didn't expect you to like it. I only said it was odd."

"Is there any service held in it?" I asked.

"Yes—once a fortnight or so. The rector has another living a few miles off."

"Where can the congregation come from?"

"Hardly from anywhere. There ain't generally more than five or six, I believe. Let's have a look at the inside of it."

"The windows are much too high, and no foothold."

"We'll go in."

"Where can you get the key? It must be a mile off at least by your own account. There's no house nearer than that, you say?"

He made me no reply, but going to the only flat gravestone, which stood on short thick pillars, he put his hand beneath it, and drew out a great rusty key.

"Country lawyers know a secret or two," he said.

"Not always much worth knowing," I rejoined,—if the inside be no better than the outside."

"We'll have a look anyhow," he said, as he turned the key in the dry lock.

The door snarled on its hinges and disclosed a space drearier certainly, and if possible uglier than its promise.

"Really, Mr. Coningham," I said, "I don't see why you should have brought me to look at this place."