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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,
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CHAPTER XXV.—Continued.

"Ah! but, Mr. Cumbermede, there are other departments of the law which bring quicker returns than the bar. If you would put yourself in my hands now, you should be earning your bread at least within a couple of years or so."

"You are very kind," I returned heartily, for he spoke as if he meant what he said; "but you see I have a leaning to the one and not to the other. I should like to have a try first, at all events."

"Well, perhaps it's better to begin by following your bent. You may find the road take a turn, though."

"Perhaps. I will go on till it does, though."

While we talked, Clara had followed her father, and was now patting my mare's neck with a nice, plump, fair-fingered hand. The creature stood with her arched neck and head turned lovingly towards her.

"What a nice white thing you have got to ride!" she said. "I hope it is your own."

"Why do you hope that?" I asked.

"Because it's best to ride your own horse, isn't it?" she answered, looking up naively.

"Would you like to ride her?" I believe she has carried a lady, though not since she came into my possession."

Instead of answering me, she looked round at her father, who stood by smiling benignantly. Her look said—

"If papa would let me."

He did not reply, but seemed waiting. I resumed—

"Are you a good horse-woman, Miss Clara?" I said, with a feel after the recovery of old privileges.

"I must not sing my own praises, Mr. Wilfrid," she rejoined, "but I have ridden in Rotten Row, and I believe without any signal disgrace."

"Have you got a side-saddle?" I asked, dismounting.

Mr. Coningham spoke now.

"Don't you think Mr. Cumbermede's horse a little too frisky for you, Clara?" I said, with a feel

after the recovery of old privileges. "I know so little about you, I can't tell what you're fit for. She used to ride pretty well as a girl," he added, turning to me.

"I've not forgotten that," I said. "I shall walk by her side, you know."

"Shall you?" she said, with a sly look.

"Perhaps," I suggested, "your grandfather would let me have his horse, and then we might have a gallop across the park."

"The best way," said Mr. Coningham, "will be to let the gardener take your horse, while you come in and have some luncheon. We'll see about the mount after that. My horse has to carry me back in the evening, else I should be happy to join you. She's a fine creature, that of yours."

"She's the handiest creature!" I said—"a little skittish, but very affectionate, and has a fine mouth. Perhaps she ought to have a curb-bit for you, though, Miss Clara."

"We'll manage with the snaffle," she answered, with, I thought, another sly glance at me, out of eyes sparkling with suppressed merriment and expectation! Her father had gone to find the gardener, and as we stood waiting for him, she still stroked the mare's neck.

"Are you not afraid of taking cold," I said, "without your bonnet?"

"I never had a cold in my life," she returned.

"That is saying much. You would have me believe you are not made of the same clay as other people."

"Believe anything you like," she answered, carelessly.

"Then I do believe it," I rejoined.

She looked me in the face, took her hand from the mare's neck, stepped back half-a-foot, and looked round, saying—

"I wonder where that man can have got to. Oh, here he comes, and papa with him!"

We went across the trim little lawn, which lay waiting for the warm weather to burst in-

to a profusion of roses, and through a trellised porch entered a shadowy little hall, with heads of stags and foxes, an old-fashioned glass-doored bookcase, and hunting and riding-whips, whence we passed into a low-pitched drawing-room, redolent of dried rose-leaves and hyacinths. A little pug-dog, which seemed to have failed in swallowing some big dog's tongue, jumped up barking from the sheepskin mat, where he lay before the fire.

"Stupid pug!" said Clara. "You never know friends from foes! I wonder where my aunt is."

She left the room. Her father had not followed us. I sat down on the sofa, and began turning over a pretty book bound in red silk, one of the first of the annual tribe, which lay on the table. I was deep in one of its eastern stories when, hearing a slight movement, I looked up, and there sat Clara in a low chair by the window, working at a delicate bit of lace with a needle. She looked somehow as if she had been there an hour at least. I laid down the book with some exclamation.

"What is the matter, Mr. Cumbermede?" she asked, with the slightest possible glance up from the fine meshes of her work.

"I had not the slightest idea you were in the room."

"Of course not. How could a literary man with a Forget-me-not in his hand, be expected

"No, no, the evening;—and of course I was a little frightened, for I was not accustomed —"

"But you were never out alone at that hour,—in London?"

"Yes, I was quite alone. I had promised to meet—a friend at the corner of — You know that part, do you?"

"I beg your pardon. What part?"

"Oh—Mayfair. You know Mayfair, don't you?"

"You were going to meet a gentleman at the corner of Mayfair—were you?" I said, getting quite bewildered.

She jumped up, clapping her hands as gracefully as merrily, and crying—

"I wasn't going to meet any gentleman. There! Your six questions are answered. I won't answer a single other you choose to ask, except I please, which is not in the least likely."

She made me a low half-merry half-mocking courtesy and left the room.

The same moment, her father came in, following old Mr. Coningham, who gave me a kindly welcome, and said his horse was at my service, but he hoped I would lunch with him first. I gratefully consented, and soon luncheon was announced. Miss Coningham, Clara's aunt, was in the dining-room before us. A dry, antiquated woman, she greeted me with unexpected frankness. Lunch was half over

CHAPTER XXVI.

A RIDING LESSON.

By the time luncheon was over, the horses had been standing some minutes at the livery-gate, my mare with a side-saddle. We hastened to mount, Clara's eyes full of expectant frolic. I managed, as I thought, to get before her father, and had the pleasure of lifting her to the saddle. She was up ere I could feel her weight on my arm. When I gathered her again with my eyes, she was seated as calmly as if at her lace-needlework, only her eyes were sparkling. With the slightest help, she had her foot in the stirrup, and with a single movement had her skirt comfortable. I left her to mount the horse they had brought me, and when I looked from his back, the white mare was already flashing across the boles of the trees and Clara's dark skirt flying out behind like the drapery of a descending goddess in an allegorical picture. With a pang of terror I fancied the mare had run away with her, and sat for a moment afraid to follow, lest the sound of my horse's feet on the turf should make her gallop the faster. But the next moment she turned in her saddle, and I saw a face alive with pleasure and confidence. As she recovered her seat, she waved her hand to me, and I put my horse to his speed. I had not gone far however before I perceived a fresh cause of anxiety. She was making

straight for a wire fence. I had heard that horses could not see such a fence, and if Clara did not see it, or should be careless, the result would be frightful. I shouted after her, but she took no heed. Fortunately, however, there was right in front of them a gate, which I had not at first observed, into the bars of which had been watted some brushwood. "The mare will see that," I said to myself. But the words were hardly through my mind, before I saw them fly over it like a bird.

On the other side, she pulled up, and waited for me.

Now I had never jumped a fence in my life. I did not know that my mare could do such a thing, for I had never given her the chance. I was not, and never have become what would be considered an accomplished horseman. I scarcely know a word of stable-slang. I have never followed the hounds more than twice or three times in the course of my life. Not the less am I a true lover of horses—but I have been their companion more in work than in play. I have slept for miles on horse-

back, but even now I have not a sure seat over a fence.

I knew nothing of the animal I rode, but I was bound at least to make the attempt to follow my leader. I was too inexperienced not to put him to his speed instead of going gently up to the gate; and I had a bad habit of leaning forward in my saddle, besides knowing nothing of how to incline myself backwards as the horse alighted. Hence when I found myself on the other side, it was not on my horse's back, but on my own face. I rose uninjured, except in my self-esteem. I fear I was for the moment as much disconcerted as if I had been guilty of some moral fault. Nor did it help me much towards regaining my composure that Clara was shaking with suppressed laughter. Utterly stupid from mortification, I laid hold of my horse, which stood waiting for me beside the mare, and scrambled upon his back. But Clara, who with all her fun, was far from being ill-natured, fancied from my silence that I was hurt. Her merriment vanished. With quite an anxious expression on her face, she drew to my side saying—

"I hope you are not hurt?"

"Only my pride," I answered.

"Never mind that," she returned gaily.

"That will soon be itself again."

"I'm not so sure," I rejoined. "To make such a fool of myself before you!"

"Am I such a formidable person?" she said.

"Yes," I answered. "But I never jumped a fence in my life before."

"If you had been afraid," she said, "and had pulled up, I might have despised you. As it was, I only laughed at you. Where was the harm? You shirked nothing. You followed your leader. Come along, I will give you a lesson or two before we get back."

"Thank you," I said, beginning to recover my spirits a little. "I shall be a most ob-



A RIDING LESSON.

to know that a girl had come into the room?"

"Have you been at school all this time?" I asked, for the sake of avoiding a silence.

"All what time?"

"Say, since we parted in Switzerland."

"Not quite. I have been staying with an aunt for nearly a year. Have you been at college all this time?"

"At school and college. When did you come home?"

"This is not my home, but I came here yesterday."

"Don't you find the country dull after London?"

"I haven't had time yet."

"Did they give you riding lessons at school?"

"No. But my aunt took care of my morals in that respect. A girl might as well not be able to dance as ride now-a-days."

"Who rode with you in the park? Not the riding-master?"

With a slight flush on her face she retorted,

"How many more questions are you going to ask me? I should like to know that I may make up my mind how many of them to answer."

"Suppose we say six."

"Very well," she replied. "Now I shall answer your last question and count that the first. About nine o'clock, one—day—"

"Morning or evening?" I asked.

"Morning, of course—I walked out of — the house—"

"Your aunt's house?"

"Yes, of course, my aunt's house. Do let me go on with my story. It was getting a little dark,—"

"Getting dark at nine in the morning?"

"In the evening, I said."

"I beg your pardon, I thought you said the morning."

before Clara entered—in a perfectly fitting habit, her hat on, and her skirt thrown over her arm.

"Soho, Clara!" cried her father; "you want to take us by surprise—coming out all at once a town-bred lady, eh?"

"Why, where ever did you get that riding-habit, Clara?" said her aunt.

"In my box, aunt," said Clara.

"My word, child, but your father has kept you in pocket-money!" returned Miss Coningham.

"I've got a town-aunt as well as a country one," rejoined Clara, with an expression I could not quite understand, but out of which her laugh took only half the sting.

Miss Coningham reddened a little. I judged afterwards that Clara had been diplomatically allowing her just to feel what sharp claws she had for use if required.

But the effect of the change from loose white muslin to tight dark cloth was marvellous, and I was bewitched by it. So slight yet so round, so trim yet so pliant—she was grace itself. It seemed as if the former object of my admiration had vanished, and I had found another with such surpassing charms that the loss could not be regretted. I may just mention that the change appeared also to bring out a certain look of determination which I now recalled as having belonged to her when a child.

"Clara!" said her father in a very marked tone; whereupon it was Clara's turn to blush and be silent.

I started some new subject, in the blindest manner I could command. Clara recovered her composure, and I flattered myself she looked a little grateful when our eyes met. But I caught her father's eyes twinkling now and then as if from some source of merriment, and could not help fancying he was more amused than displeased with his daughter.