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## WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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### CHAPTER XLIII.—Continued.

He took up the candle, and opening the little door at the foot of the winding stair, disappeared. Sir Giles and I sat in silence and darkness until he returned, carrying in his hand an old volume-bound book.

"I daresay you don't know this manuscript, sir," he said, turning to his father.

"I know nothing about it," answered Sir Giles. "What is it? Or what has it to do with the matter in hand?"

"Mr. Close found it in some corner or other, and used to read it to me when I was a little fellow. It is a description, and in most cases a history as well, of every weapon in the armoury. They had been much neglected, and a great many of the labels were gone, but those which were left referred to numbers in the book heading descriptions which corresponded exactly to the weapons on which they were found. With a little trouble he had succeeded in supplying the numbers where they were missing, for the descriptions are very minute."

He spoke in a tone of perfect self-possession. "Well, Geoffrey, I ask again, what has all this to do with it?" said his father.

"If Mr. Cumbermede will allow you to look at the label attached to the sheath in his hand, for fortunately it was a rule with Mr. Close to put a label on both sword and sheath, and if you will read me the number, I will read you the description in the book."

I handed the sheath to Sir Giles, who began to decipher the number on the ivory ticket.

"The label is quite a new one," I said.

"I have already accounted for that," said Brotherton. "I will leave it to yourself to decide whether the description corresponds."

Sir Giles read out the number, figure by figure, adding—

"But how are we to test the description? I don't know the thing, and it's not here."

"It is at the Moat," I replied; "but its future place is at Sir Giles's decision."

"Part of the description belongs to the scabbard you have in your hand, sir," said Brotherton. "The description of the sword itself I submit to Mr. Cumbermede."

"Till the other day I never saw the blade," I said.

"Likely enough," he retorted dryly, and proceeding, read the description of the half-basket hilt, inlaid with gold, and the broad blade, channelled near the hilt, and inlaid with ornaments and initials in gold.

"There is nothing in all that about the scabbard," said his father.

"Stop till we come to the history," he replied, and read on, as nearly as I can recall, to the following effect. I have never had an opportunity of copying the words themselves.

"This sword seems to have been expressly forged for Sir ———— (He read it *Sir So and So*). "whose initials are to be found on the blade. According to tradition, it was worn by him, for the first and only time, at the battle of Naseby, where he fought in the cavalry led by Sir Marmaduke Langdale. From some accident or other, Sir ———— found, just as the order to charge was given, that he could not draw his sword, and had to charge with only a pistol in his hand. In the flight which followed, he pulled up, and unbuckled his sword, but while attempting to ease it, a rash of the enemy startled him, and, looking about, he saw a roundhead riding straight at Sir Marmaduke, who that moment passed in the rear of his retiring troop—giving some directions to an officer by his side, and unaware of the nearness of danger. Sir ———— put spurs to his charger, rode at the trooper, and dealt him a downright blow on the pot-helmet with his sheathed weapon. The fellow tumbled from his horse, and Sir ———— found his scabbard split halfway up, but the edge of his weapon unturned. It is said he vowed it should remain sheathed for ever!—The person who has now unsheathed it," added Brotherton, "has done a great wrong to the memory of a loyal cavalier."

"The sheath halfway split was as familiar to my eyes as the face of my uncle," I said, turning to Sir Giles. "And in the only reference I ever heard my great-grandmother make to it, she mentioned the name of Sir Marmaduke. I recollect that much perfectly."

"But how could the sword be there and here at one and the same time?" said Sir Giles.

"That I do not pretend to explain," I said.

"Here at least is written testimony to our possession of it," said Brotherton in a conclusive tone.

"How then are we to explain Mr. Cumbermede's story?" said Sir Giles, evidently in good faith.

"With that I cannot consent to allow myself concerned. Mr. Cumbermede is, I am told, a writer of fiction."

"Geoffrey," said Sir Giles, "behave yourself like a gentleman."

"I endeavour to do so," he returned with a sneer.

I kept silence.

"How can you suppose," the old man went on, "that Mr. Cumbermede would invent such a story? What object could he have?"

"He may have a mania for weapons like old Close—as well as for old books," he replied.

I thought of my precious folio. But I did not yet know how much additional force his insinuation with regard to the motive of my labours in the library would gain if it should be discovered that such a volume was in my possession.

"You may have remarked, sir," he went on, "that I did not read the name of the owner of the sword in any place where it occurred in the manuscript."

"I did. And I beg to know why you kept it back," answered Sir Giles.

"What do you think the name might be, sir?"

"How should I know? I am not an antiquarian."

"Sir Wilfrid Cumbermede. You will find the initials on the blade. Does that throw any light on the matter, do you think, sir?"

"Why that is your very own name!" cried Sir Giles, turning to me.

I bowed.

"It is a pity the sword shouldn't be yours."

"It is mine, Sir Giles—though, as I said, I am prepared to abide by your decision."

"And now I remember"—the old man resumed, after a moment's thought—"the other evening Mr. Alderforge—a man of great learning, Mr. Cumbermede—told us that the name of Cumbermede had at one time belonged to our family. It is all very strange. I confess I am utterly bewildered."

"At least you can understand, sir, how a man of imagination, like Mr. Cumbermede here, might desire to possess himself of a weapon which bears his initials, and belonged two hundred years ago to a baronet of the same name as himself—a circumstance which, notwithstanding it is by no means a common name, is not quite so strange as at first sight appears—that is, if all reports are true."

I did not in the least understand his drift; neither did I care to inquire into it now.

"Were you aware of this, Mr. Cumbermede?" asked his father.

"No, Sir Giles," I answered.

"Mr. Cumbermede has had the run of the place for weeks. I am sorry I was not at home. This book was lying all the time on the table in the room above, where poor old Close's work-bench and polishing-wheel are still standing."

"Mr. Brotherton, this gets beyond bearing," I cried. "Nothing but the presence of your father, to whom I am indebted for much kindness, protects you."

"Tut; tut!" said Sir Giles.

"Protects me, indeed!" exclaimed Brotherton. "Do you dream I should be by any code bound to accept a challenge from you?—Not, at least, I presume to think, before a jury had decided on the merits of the case."

My blood was boiling, but what could I do or say? Sir Giles rose, and was about to leave the room, remarking only—

"I don't know what to make of it."

"At all events, Sir Giles," I said hurriedly, "you will allow me to prove the truth of what I have asserted. I cannot, unfortunately, call my uncle or aunt, for they are gone; and I do not know where the servant who was with us when I took the sword away is now. But, if you will allow me, I will call Mrs. Wilson—to prove that I had the sword when I came to visit her on that occasion, and that on the morning after sleeping here I complained of its loss to her, and went away without it."

"It would but serve to show the hallucination was early developed. We should probably find that even then you were much attracted by the armoury," said Brotherton, with a judicial air, as if I were a culprit before a magistrate.

I had begun to see that, although the old man was desirous of being just, he was a little afraid of his son. He rose as the latter spoke, however, and going into the gallery, shouted over the balustrade—

"Some one send Mrs. Wilson to the library."

We removed to the reading-room, I carrying the scabbard which Sir Giles had returned to me as soon as he had read the label. Brotherton followed, having first gone up the little turnpike stair, doubtless to replace the manuscript.

Mrs. Wilson came, looking more pinched than ever, and stood before Sir Giles with her arms straight by her sides, like one of the ladies of Noah's ark. I will not weary my reader with a full report of the examination. She had seen me with a sword, but had taken no notice of its appearance. I might have taken it from the armoury, for I was in the library all the afternoon. She had left me there thinking I was a "gentlemanly" boy. I had said I had lost it, but she was sure she did not know how that could be. She was very sorry she had caused any trouble by asking me to the house, but Sir Giles would be pleased to remember that he had himself in-

troduced the boy to her notice. Little she thought, &c., &c.

In fact the spiteful creature, propitiating her natural sense of justice by hinting instead of plainly suggesting injurious conclusions, was paying me back for my imagined participation in the impertinences of Clara. She had besides, as I learned afterwards, greatly resented the trouble I had caused of late.

Brotherton struck in as soon as his father had ceased questioning her.

"At all events, if he believed the sword was his, why did he not go and represent the case to you, sir, and request justice from you? Since then he has had opportunity enough. His tale has taken too long to hatch."

"This is all very paltry," I said.

"Not so paltry as your contriving to sleep in the house in order to carry off your host's property in the morning—after studying the place to discover which room would suit your purpose best!"

Here I lost my presence of mind. A horror shook me lest something might come out to injure Mary, and I shivered at the thought of her name being once mentioned along with mine. If I had taken a moment to reflect, I must have seen that I should only add to the danger by what I was about to say. But her form was so inextricably associated in my mind with all that had happened then, that it seemed as if the slightest allusion to any event of that night would inevitably betray her; and in the tremor which, like an electric shock, passed through me from head to foot, I blurted out words importing that I had never slept in the house in my life.

"Your room was got ready for you, anyhow, Master Cumbermede," said Mrs. Wilson.

"It does not follow that I occupied it," I returned.

"I can prove that false," said Brotherton; but probably lest he should be required to produce his witness, only added:—"At all events, he was seen in the morning, carrying the sword across the court before any one had been admitted."

I was silent; for I now saw too clearly that I had made a dreadful blunder, and that any attempt to carry assertion further, or even to explain away my words, might be to challenge the very discovery I would have given my life to ward off.

As I continued silent, steeling myself to endure, and saying to myself that disgrace was not dishonour, Sir Giles again rose, and turned to leave the room. Evidently he was now satisfied that I was unworthy of confidence.

"One moment, if you please, Sir Giles," I said. "It is plain to me there is some mystery about this affair, and it does not seem as if I should be able to clear it up. The time may come, however, when I can. I did wrong, I see now, in attempting to right myself, instead of representing my case to you. But that does not alter the fact that the sword was and is mine, however appearances may be to the contrary. In the meantime, I restore you the scabbard, and as soon as I reach home, I shall send my man with the disputed weapon."

"It will be your better way," he said, as he took the sheath from my hand.

Without another word, he left the room. Mrs. Wilson also retired. Brotherton alone remained. I took no further notice of him, but followed Sir Giles through the armoury. He came after me, step for step, at a little distance, and as I stepped out into the gallery, said, in a tone of insulting politeness:

"You will send the sword as soon as may be quite convenient, Mr. Cumbermede? Or shall I send and fetch it?"

I turned and faced him in the dim light which came up from the hall.

"Mr. Brotherton, if you knew that book and those weapons as early as you have just said, you cannot help knowing that at that time the sword was not there."

"I decline to reopen the question," he said.

A fierce word leaped to my lips, but repressing it I turned away once more, and walked slowly down the stair, across the hall, and out of the house.

### CHAPTER XLIV.

#### I PART WITH MY SWORD.

I MADE haste out of the park, but wandered up and down my own field for half-an-hour, thinking in what shape to put what had occurred before Charley. My perplexity rose not so much from the difficulty involved in the matter itself, as from my inability to fix my thoughts. My brain was for the time like an ever-revolving kaleidoscope, in which, however, there was but one fair colour—the thought of Mary. Having at length succeeded in arriving at some conclusion, I went home, and would have despatched Styles at once with the sword, had not Charley already sent him off to the stable, so that I must wait.

"What has kept you so long, Wilfrid?" Charley asked as I entered.

"I've had a tremendous row with Brotherton," I answered.

"The brute! Is he there? I'm glad I was gone. What was it all about?"

"About that sword. It was very foolish of me to take it without saying a word to Sir Giles."

"So it was," he returned. "I can't think how you could be so foolish!"

I could, well enough. What with the dream and the waking, I could think little about anything else; and only since the consequences had overtaken me, saw how unwisely I had acted. I now told Charley the greater part of the affair—omitting the false step I had made in saying I had not slept in the house; and also, still with the vague dread of leading to some discovery, omitting to report the treachery of Clara; for, if Charley should talk to her or Mary about it, which was possible enough, I saw several points where the danger would be very close. I simply told him that I had found Brotherton in the armoury, and reported what following between us. I did not at all relish having now in my turn secrets from Charley, but my conscience did not trouble me about it, seeing it was for his sister's sake; and when I saw the rage of indignation into which he flew, I was, if possible, yet more certain I was right. I told him I must go and find Styles that he might take the sword at once; but he started up, saying he would carry it back himself, and at the same time take his leave of Sir Giles, whose house of course he could never enter again after the way I had been treated in it. I saw this would lead to a rupture with the whole family, but I should not regret that, for there could be no advantage to Mary either in continuing her intimacy, such as it was, with Clara, or in making further acquaintance with Brotherton. The time of their departure was also close at hand, and might be hastened without necessarily involving much of the unpleasant. Also, if Charley broke with them at once, there would be the less danger of his coming to know that I had not given him all the particulars of my discomfiture; if he were to find I had told a falsehood, how could I explain to him why I had done so? This arguing on probabilities, made me feel like a culprit who has to protect himself by concealment; but I will not dwell upon my discomfort in the half-duplicity thus forced upon me. I could not help it. I got down the sword, and together we looked at it for the first and last time. I found the description contained in the book perfectly correct. The upper part was inlaid with gold in a Greekish pattern crossed by the initials W. C. I gave it up to Charley with a sigh of submission to the inevitable, and having accompanied him to the park-gate, roamed my field again until his return.

He rejoined me in a far quieter mood, and for a moment or two I was silent with the terror of learning that he had become acquainted with my unhappy blunder. After a little pause, he said:

"I'm very sorry I didn't see Brotherton. I should have liked just a word or two with him."

"It's just as well not," I said. "You would only have made another row. Didn't you see any of them?"

"I saw the old man. He seemed really cut up about it, and professed great concern. He didn't even refer to you by name—and spoke only in general terms. I told him you were incapable of what was laid to your charge; that I had not the slightest doubt of your claim to the sword,—your word being enough for me—and that I trusted time would right you. I went too far there, however, for I haven't the slightest hope of anything of the sort."

"How did he take all that?"

"He only smiled—incredulously and sadly,—so that I couldn't find it in my heart to tell him all my mind. I only insisted on my own perfect confidence in you.—I'm afraid I made a poor advocate, Wilfrid. Why should I mind his grey hairs where justice was concerned? I am afraid I was false to you, Wilfrid."

"Nonsense; you did just the right thing, old boy. Nobody could have done better."

"Do you think so? I am so glad! I have been feeling ever since as if I ought to have gone into a rage, and shaken the dust of the place from my feet for a witness against the whole nest of them. But somehow I couldn't—what with the honest face and the sorrowful look of the old man."

"You are always too much of a partizan, Charley; I don't mean so much in your actions—for this very one disproves that—but in your notions of obligation. You forget that you had to be just to Sir Giles as well as to me, and that he must be judged—not by the absolute facts of the case, but by what appeared to him to be the facts. He could not help misjudging me. But you ought to help misjudging him. So you see your behaviour was guided by an instinct or a soul, or what you will, deeper than your judgment."

"That may be—but he ought to have known you better than believe you capable of misconduct."

"I don't know that. He had seen very little of me. But I daresay he puts it down to kleptomania. I think he will be kind enough to give the ugly thing a fine name for my sake. Besides he must hold either by his son or by me."

"That's the worst that can be said on my side of the question. He must by this time be aware that that son of his is nothing better than a low scoundrel."