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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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CHAPTER LVII.

ANOTHER DREAM.

THE excitement of having something to do, had helped me over the morning, and the pleasure of thinking of what I had done, helped me through half the journey; but before I reached home, I was utterly exhausted. Then I had to drive round by the farm, and knock up Mrs. Herbert and Styles.

I could not bear the thought of my own room, and ordered a fire in my grandmother's, where they soon got me into bed. All I remember of that night is the following dream.

I found myself at the entrance of the ice-cave. A burning sun beat on my head, and at my feet flowed the brook which gathered its life from the decay of the ice. I stopped to drink; but, cool to the eye and hand and lips, it yet burned me within like fire. I would seek shelter from the sun inside the cave. I entered, and knew that the cold was all around! I even felt it; but somehow it did not enter into me. My brain, my very bones burned with fire. I went in and in. The blue atmosphere closed around me, and the colour entered into my soul till it seemed dyed with the potent blue. My very being swam and floated in a blue atmosphere of its own. My intention—I can recall it perfectly—was but to walk to the end, a few yards, then turn and again brave the sun; for I had a dim feeling of forsaking my work, of playing truant, or of being cowardly in thus avoiding the heat. Something else too was wrong, but I could not clearly tell what. As I went on, I began to wonder that I had not come to the end. The gray walls yet rose about me, and ever the film of dissolution flowed along their glassy faces to the tunnel below; still before me opened the depth of blue atmosphere, deepening as I went. After many windings the path began to branch, and soon I was lost in a labyrinth of passages, of which I knew not why I should choose one rather than another. It was useless now to think of returning. Arbitrarily I chose the narrowest way, and still went on.

A discoloration of the ice attracted my attention, and as I looked it seemed to retreat into the solid mass. There was something not ice within it which grew more and more distinct as I gazed, until at last I plainly distinguished the form of my grandmother, lying then as when my aunt made me touch her face. A few yards further on, lay the body of my uncle, as I saw him in his coffin. His face was dead white in the midst of the cold clear ice, his eyes closed, and his arms straight by his side. He lay like an alabaster king upon his tomb. It was he, I thought, but he would never speak to me no more—never look at me—never more awake. There lay all that was left of him—the cold frozen memory of what he had been and would never be again. I did not weep. I only knew somehow in my dream that life was all a wandering in a frozen cave, where the faces of the living were dark with the coming corruption, and the memories of the dead, cold and clear and hopeless evermore, alone were lovely.

I walked further; for the ice might possess yet more of the past—all that was left me of life. And again I stood and gazed, for, deep within, I saw the form of Charley—at rest now, his face bloodless, but not so death-like as my uncle's. His hands were laid palm to palm over his bosom, and pointed upwards as if praying for comfort where comfort was none: here at least were no flickerings of the rainbow fancies of faith and hope and charity! I gazed in comfortless content for a time on the repose of my weary friend, and then went on, inly moved to see what further the ice of the godless region might hold. Nor had I wandered far when I saw the form of Mary, lying like the rest, only that her hands were crossed on her bosom. I stood, wondering to find myself so little moved. But when the ice drew nigh me, and would have closed around me, my heart leaped for joy; and when the heat of my lingering life repelled it, my heart sunk within me, and I said to myself: "Death will not have me. I may not join her even in the land of cold forgetfulness: I may not even be nothing with her." The tears began to flow down my face, like the thin veil of water that kept ever flowing down the face of the ice; and as I wept, the water before me flowed faster and faster, till it rippled in a sheet down the icy wall. Faster and yet faster it flowed, falling, with the sound as of many showers, into the tunnel below, which rushed splashing and gurgling away from the foot of the vanishing wall. Faster and faster it flowed, until the solid mass fell in a foaming cataract, and swept in a torrent across the cave. I followed the retreating wall, through the seething water at its foot. Thinner and thinner grew the dividing mass; nearer and nearer came the form of my

Mary. "I shall yet clasp her," I cried; "her dead form will kill me, and I too shall be enclosed in the friendly ice. I shall not be with her, alas; but neither shall I be without her, for I shall depart into the lovely nothingness." Thinner and thinner grew the dividing wall. The skirt of her shroud hung like a wet weed in the falling torrent. I knelt in the river, and crept nearer, with outstretched arms: when the vanishing ice set the dead form free, it should rest in those arms—the last gift of the life-dream—for then, surely, I *must* die. "Let me pass in the agony of a lonely embrace!" I cried. As I spoke she moved. I started to my feet, stung into life by the agony of a new hope. Slowly the ice released her, and gently she rose to her feet. The torrents of water ceased—they had flowed but to set her free. Her eyes were still closed, but she made one blind step towards me, and laid her left hand on my head, her right hand on my heart. Instantly, body and soul, I was cool as a summer eve after a thunder-shower. For a moment, precious as an æon, she held her hands upon me—then slowly opened her eyes. Out of them flashed the living soul of my Athanasia. She closed the lids again slowly over the lovely splendour; the water in which we stood rose around us; and on its last billow she floated away through the winding passage of the cave. I sought to follow her, but could not. I cried aloud and awoke.

But the burning heat had left me; I felt that I had passed a crisis, and had begun to recover—a conviction which would have been altogether unwelcome, but for the poor shadow of a reviving hope which accompanied it. Such a dream, come whence it might, could not but bring comfort with it. The hope grew, and was my sole medicine.

Before the evening I felt better, and, though still very feeble, managed to write to Marston, letting him know I was safe, and requesting him to forward any letters that might arrive.

The next day I rose, but was unable to work. The very thought of writing sickened me. Neither could I bear the thought of returning to London. I tried to read, but threw aside book after book, without being able to tell what one of them was about. If for a moment I seemed to enter into the subject, before I reached the bottom of the page, I found I had not an idea as to what the words meant or whither they tended. After many failures, unwilling to give myself up to idle brooding, I fortunately tried some of the mystical poetry of the seventeenth century: the difficulties of that I found rather stimulate than repel me; while, much as there was in the form to displease the taste, there was more in the matter to rouse the intellect. I found also some relief in resuming my mathematical studies: the abstraction of them acted as an anodyne. But the days dragged wearily.

As soon as I was able to get on horseback, the tone of mind and body began to return. I felt as if into me some sort of animal healing passed from Lilith; and who can tell in how many ways the lower animals may not minister to the higher?

One night I had a strange experience. I give it without argument, perfectly aware that the fact may be set down to the disordered state of my physical nature, and that without injustice.

I had not for a long time thought about one of the questions which had so much occupied Charley and myself—that of immortality. As to any communication between the parted, I had never, during his life, pondered the possibility of it, although I had always had an inclination to believe that such intercourse had in rare instances taken place: former periods of the world's history, when that blinding self-consciousness which is the bane of ours was yet undeveloped, must, I thought, have been far more favourable to its occurrence. Anyhow I was convinced that it was not to be gained by effort. I confess that, in the unthinking agony of grief after Charley's death, many a time when I woke in the middle of the night and could sleep no more, I sat up in bed and prayed him, if he heard me, to come to me, and let me tell him the truth—for my sake to let me know at least that he lived, for then I should be sure that one day all would be well. But if there was any hearing, there was no answer. Charley did not come; the prayer seemed to vanish in the darkness; and my more self-possessed meditations never justified the hope of any such being heard.

One night I was sitting in my grannie's room, which, except my uncle's, was now the only one I could bear to enter. I had been reading for some time very quietly, but had leaned back in my chair, and let my thoughts go wandering whither they would, when all at once I was possessed by the conviction that Charley was near me. I saw nothing; heard nothing; of the recognized senses of humanity not one gave me a hint of a presence; and yet my whole body was aware—so at least it seemed—of the proximity of another *I*. It was as if some nervous region commensurate with my frame, were now for the first time revealed by contact with an object suitable for its apprehension. Like Eliphaz, I felt the hair of my head stand up—not from terror, but simply, as it seemed, from the presence and its strangeness. Like others also of whom

I have read, who believed themselves in the presence of the disembodied, I could not speak. I tried, but as if the medium for sound had been withdrawn, and an empty gulf lay around me, no word followed, although my very soul was full of the cry—*Charley! Charley!* And alas! in a few moments, like the faint vanishing of an unrealized thought, leaving only the assurance that something half-born from out the unknown had been there, the influence faded and died. It passed from me like the shadow of a cloud, and once more I knew but my poor lonely self, returning to its candles, its open book, its burning fire.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

SUFFERING is perhaps the only preparation for suffering: still I was but poorly prepared for what followed.

Having gathered strength, and a certain quietness which I could not mistake for peace, I returned to London towards the close of the spring. I had in the interval heard nothing of Mary. The few letters Marston had sent on had been almost exclusively from my publishers. But the very hour I reached my lodgings came a note, which I opened trembling, for it was in the handwriting of Miss Pease.

"DEAR SIR,—I cannot, I think, be wrong in giving you a piece of information which will be in the newspapers to-morrow morning. Your old acquaintance, and my young relative, Mr. Brotherton, was married this morning, at St. George's, Hanover Square, to your late friend's sister, Miss Mary Osborne. They have just left for Dover on their way to Switzerland.

"Your sincere well-wisher,

"JANE PEASE."

Even at this distance of time, I should have to exhort myself to write with calmness, were it not that the utter despair of conveying my feelings, if indeed my soul had not for the time passed beyond feeling into some abyss unknown to human consciousness, renders it unnecessary. This despair of communication has two sources—the one simply the conviction of the impossibility of expressing *any* feeling, much more such feeling as mine then was—and is; the other the conviction that only to the heart of love can the sufferings of love speak. The attempt of a lover to move, by the presentation of his own suffering, the heart of her who loves him not, is as unavailing as it is unmanly. The poet who sings most wailfully of the torments of the lover's hell, is but a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal in the ears of her who has at best only a general compassion to meet the song withal—possibly only an individual vanity which crowns her with his woes as with the trophies of a conquest. True, he is understood and worshipped by all the other wailful souls in the first infernal circle, as one of the great men of their order—able to put into words full of sweet torment the dire hopelessness of their misery; but for such the singer, singing only for ears eternally deaf to his song, cares nothing; or if for a moment he receive consolation from their sympathy, it is but a passing weakness which the breath of an indignant self-condemnation—even contempt, the next moment sweeps away. In God alone there must be sympathy and cure; but I had not then—have I indeed yet found what that cure is? I am at all events now able to write with calmness. If suffering destroyed itself, as some say, mine ought to have disappeared long ago; but to that I can neither pretend nor confess.

For the first time, after all I had encountered, I knew what suffering could be. It is still at moments an agony as of hell to recall this and the other thought that then stung me like a white-hot arrow: the shafts have long been drawn out, but the barbed heads are still there. I neither stormed nor maddened. I only felt a freezing hand lay hold of my heart, and gripe it closer and closer till I should have sickened, but that the pain ever stung me into fresh life; and ever since I have gone about the world with that hard lump somewhere in my bosom into which the griping hand and the griped heart have grown and stiffened.

I fled at once back to my solitary house, looking for no relief in its solitude, only the negative comfort of escaping the eyes of men. I could not bear the sight of my fellow-creatures. To say that the world had grown black to me, is as nothing. I ceased—I will not say to believe in God, for I never dared say that mighty thing—but I ceased to hope in God. The universe had grown a negation which yet forced its presence upon me—a death that bred worms. If there were a God anywhere, this universe could be nothing more than his forsaken moth-eaten garment. He was a God who did not care. Order was all an invention of phosphorescent human brains; light itself the mocking smile of a Jupiter over his writhing sacrifices. At times I laughed at the tortures of my own heart, saying to it, "Writhe on, worm; thou deservest thy writhing in that thou writhest. Godless creature, why dost thou not laugh

with me? Am I not merry over thee and the world—in that ye are both rottenness to the core?" The next moment my heart and I would come together with a shock, and I knew it was myself that scorned myself.

Such being my mood, it will cause no surprise if I say that I too was tempted to suicide; the wonder would have been if it had been otherwise. The soft keen curves of that fatal dagger, which had not only slain Charley but all my hopes—for had he lived this horror could not have been—grew almost lovely in my eyes. Until now it had looked cruel, fiendish, hateful; but now I would lay it before me and contemplate it. In some griefs there is a wonderful power of self-contemplation, which indeed forms their only solace; the moment it can set the sorrow away from itself sufficiently to regard it, the tortured heart begins to repose; but suddenly, like a waking tiger, the sorrow leaps again into its lair, and the agony commences anew. The dagger was the type of my grief and its torture: might it not, like the brazen serpent, be the cure for the sting of its living counterpart? But alas! where was the certainty? Could I slay *myself*? This outer breathing form I could dismiss—but the pain was not *there*. I was not mad, and I knew that a deeper death than that could give, at least than I had any assurance that could give, alone could bring repose. For, impossible as I had always found it actually to believe in immortality, I now found it equally impossible to believe in annihilation. And even if annihilation should be the final result, who could tell but it might require ages of a horrible slow-decaying dream-consciousness to kill the living thing which felt itself other than its body?

Until now, I had always accepted what seemed the natural and universal repugnance to absolute dissolution, as the strongest argument on the side of immortality;—for why should a man shrink from that which belonged to his nature? But now annihilation seemed the one lovely thing, the one sole only lonely thought in which lay no blackness of burning darkness. Oh for one eternal unconscious sleep!—the nearest likeness we can cherish of that inconceivable nothingness—ever denied by the very thinking of it—by the vain attempt to realize that whose very existence is the knowing nothing of itself! Could that dagger have insured me such repose, or had there been any draught of Lethe, utter Lethe, whose blessed poison would have assuredly dissipated like a fume this conscious, self-tormenting *me*, I should not now be writhing anew, as in the clutches of an old grief, clasping me like a corpse, stung to stimulated life by the galvanic battery of recollection. Vivid as it seems—all I suffer as I write is but a faint phantasm of what I then endured.

I learned therefore that to some minds the argument for immortality drawn from the apparently universal shrinking from annihilation must be ineffectual, seeing they themselves do not shrink from it. Convince a man that there is no God—or, for I doubt if that be altogether possible—make it, I will say, impossible for him to hope in God—and it cannot be that annihilation should seem an evil. If there is no God, annihilation is the one thing to be longed for with all that might of longing which is the mainspring of human action. In a word, it is not immortality the human heart cries out after, but that immortal eternal thought whose life is its life, whose wisdom is its wisdom, whose ways and whose thoughts shall—must one day—become its ways and its thoughts. Dissociate immortality from the living Immortality and it is not a thing to be desired—not a thing that can on those terms, or even on the fancy of those terms, be desired.

But such thoughts as these were far enough from me then. I lived because I despaired of death. I ate by a sort of blind animal instinct, and so lived. The time had been I would despise myself for being able to eat in the midst of emotion; but now I cared so little for the emotion even, that eating or not eating had nothing to do with the matter. I ate because meat was set before me; I slept because sleep came upon me. It was a horrible time. My life seemed only a vermiculate one, a crawling about of half-thoughts—half-feelings through the corpse of a decaying existence. The heart of being was withdrawn from me, and my life was but the vacant pericardium in which it had once throbbled out and sucked in the red fountains of life and gladness.

I would not be thought to have fallen to this all but bottomless depth only because I had lost Mary. Still less was it because of the fact that in her, around whom had gathered all the devotion with which the man in me could regard woman, I had lost all woman-kind. It was the loss of Mary, as I then judged it, not, I repeat, the fact that I had lost her. It was that she had lost herself. Thence it was, I say, that I lost my hope in God. For, if there were a God, how could he let purity be clasped in the arms of defilement? How could he marry my Athanasia—not to a corpse, but to a plague? Here was the man who had done more to ruin her brother than any but her father, and God had given her to