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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

AGAIN THE ICE-CAVE.

THE next morning he begged a holiday for me and Charley, of whose family he knew something although he was not acquainted with them. I was a little disappointed at Charley's being included in the request, not in the least from jealousy, but because I had set my heart on taking Clara to the cave in the ice, which I knew Charley would not like. But I thought we could easily arrange to leave him somewhere near until we returned. I spoke to Mr. Coningham about it, who entered into my small scheme with the greatest kindness. Charley confided to me afterwards that he did not take to him—he was too like an ape, he said. But the impression of his ugliness had with me quite worn off; and for his part, if I had been a favourite nephew, he could not have been more complaisant and hearty.

I felt very stiff when we set out, and altogether not quite myself; but the discomfort wore off as we went. Charley had Mr. Coningham's horse, and I walked by the side of Clara's, eager after any occasion, if but a pretence, of being useful to her. She was quite familiar with me, but seemed shy of Charley. He looked much more of a man than I; for not only, as I have said, had he grown much during his illness, but there was an air of troubled thoughtfulness about him which made him look considerably older than he really was; while his delicate complexion and large blue eyes had a kind of mystery about them that must have been very attractive.

When we reached the village, I told Charley that we wanted to go on foot to the cave, and hoped he would not mind waiting our return. But he refused to be left, declaring he should not mind going in the least; that he was quite well now, and ashamed of his behaviour on the former occasion; that, in fact, it must have been his approaching illness that caused it. I could not insist, and we set out. The footpath led us through fields of corn, with a bright sun overhead, and a sweet wind blowing. It was a glorious day of golden corn, gentle wind, and blue sky—with great masses of white snow, whiter than any cloud, held up in it.

We descended the steep bank; we crossed the wooden bridge over the little river; we crunched under our feet the hail-like crystals lying rough on the surface of the glacier; we reached the cave, and entered the blue abyss. I went first into the delicious, yet dangerous-looking blue. The cave had several sharp angles in it. When I reached the furthest corner I turned to look behind me. I was alone. I walked back and peeped round the last corner. Between that and the one beyond it stood Clara and Charley—staring at each other with faces of ghastly horror.

Clara's look certainly could not have been the result of any excess of imagination. But many women respond easily to influences they could not have originated. My conjecture is that the same horror had again seized upon Charley when he saw Clara; that it made his face, already deathlike, tenfold more fearful; that Clara took fright at his fear, her imagination opening like a crystal to the polarized light of reflected feeling; and thus they stood in the paralysis of a dismay which ever multiplied itself in the opposed mirrors of their countenances.

I too was in terror—for Charley, and certainly wasted no time in speculation. I went forward instantly, and put an arm round each. They woke up, as it were, and tried to laugh. But the laugh was worse than the stare. I hurried them out of the place.

We came upon Mr. Coningham round the next corner, amusing himself with the talk of the half-silly guide.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out again," I answered. "The air is oppressive."

"Nonsense," he said merrily. "The air is as pure as it is cold. Come, Clara; I want to explore the penetralia of this temple of Isis."

I believe he intended a pun.

Clara turned with him; Charley and I went out into the sunshine.

"You should not have gone, Charley. You have caught a chill again," I said.

"No, nothing of the sort," he answered. "Only it was too dreadful. That lovely face! To see it like that—and know that is what it is coming to!"

"You looked as horrid yourself," I returned.

"I don't doubt it. We all did. But why?"

"Why, just because of the blueness," I answered.

"Yes—the blueness, no doubt. That was all. But there it was, you know."

Clara came out smiling. All her horror had vanished. I was looking into the hole as she turned the last corner. When she first appeared, her face was "like one that hath been seven days drowned;" but as she advanced, the decay thinned, and the life grew, until at last she stepped from the mouth of the sepulchre in all the glow of her merry youth. It was a dumb show of the resurrection.

As we went back to the inn, Clara, who was walking in front with her father, turned her head and addressed me suddenly.

"You see it was all a sham, Wilfrid!" she said.

"What was a sham? I don't know what you mean," I rejoined.

"Why that," she returned, pointing with her hand. Then addressing her father, "Isn't that the Eiger," she asked—"the same we rode under yesterday?"

"To be sure it is," he answered.

She turned again to me.

"You see it is all a sham! Last night it pretended to be on the very edge of the road and hanging over our heads at an awful height. Now it has gone a long way back, is not so very high, and certainly does not hang over. I ought not to have been satisfied with that precipice. It took me in."

I did not reply at once. Clara's words appeared to me quite irreverent, and I recoiled from the very thought that there could be any sham in nature; but what to answer her I did not know. I almost began to dislike her; for it is often incapacity for defending the faith they love which turns men into persecutors.

Seeing me foiled, Charley advanced with the doubtful aid of a sophism to help me.

"Which is the sham, Miss Clara?" he asked.

"That Eiger mountain there."

"Ah! so I thought."

"Then you are of my opinion, Mr. Osborne?"

"You mean the mountain is shamming, don't you—looking far off when really it is near?"

"Not at all. When it looked last night as if it hung right over our heads, it was shamming. See it now—far away there!"

"But which then is the sham, and which is the true? It looked near yesterday and now it looks far away. Which is which?"

"It must have been a sham yesterday; for although it looked near, it was very dull and dim, and you could only see the sharp outline of it."

"Just so I argue on the other side: The mountain must be shamming now, for although it looks so far off, it yet shows a most contradictory clearness—not only of outline but of surface."

"Aha!" thought I, "Miss Clara has found her match. They both know he is talking nonsense, yet she can't answer him. What she was saying was nonsense too, but I can't answer it either—not yet."

I felt proud of both of them, but of Charley in especial, for I had had no idea he could be so quick.

"What ever put such an answer in your head, Charley?" I exclaimed.

"Oh! it's not quite original," he returned. "I believe it was suggested by two or three lines I read in a review just before we left home. They took a hold of me rather."

He repeated half of the now well-known little poem of Shelley, headed *Passage of the Apennines*. He had forgotten the name of the writer, and it was many years before I fell in with them myself.

"The Apennine in the light of day
Is a mighty mountain dim and gray,
Which between the earth and sky doth lay;
But when night comes, a chaos dread
On the dim starlight then is spread,
And the Apennine walks abroad with the [storm]."

In the middle of it I saw Clara begin to titter, but she did not interrupt him. When he had finished, she said with a grave face, too grave for seriousness:

"Will you repeat the third line—I think it was, Mr. Osborne?"

He did so.

"What kind of eggs did the Apennine lay, Mr. Osborne?" she asked, still perfectly serious.

Charley was abashed to find she could take advantage of probably a provincialism to turn into ridicule such fine verses. Before he could recover himself, she had planted another blow or two.

"And where is its nest? Between the earth and the sky is vague. But then to be sure it must want a good deal of room. And after all, a mountain is a strange fowl, and who knows where it might lay? Between earth and sky is quite definite enough? Besides, the bird-nesting boys might be dangerous if they knew where it was. It would be such a find for them!"

My champion was defeated. Without attempting a word in reply, he hung back and dropped behind. Mr. Coningham must have heard the whole, but he offered no remark. I saw that Charley's sensitive nature was hurt, and my heart was sore for him.

"That's too bad of you, Clara," I said.

"What's too bad of me, Wilfrid?" she returned.

I hesitated a moment, then answered—

"To make game of such verses. Any one with half a soul must see they were fine."

"Very wrong of you, indeed, my dear," said Mr. Coningham from behind, in a voice that sounded as if he were smothering a laugh; but when I looked round, his face was grave.

"Then I suppose that half soul I haven't got," returned Clara.

"Oh! I didn't mean that," I said, lamely enough. "But there's no logic in that kind of thing, you know."

"You see, papa," said Clara, "what you are accountable for. Why didn't you make them teach me logic?"

Her father smiled a pleased smile. His daughter's naivete would, in his eyes, make up for any lack of logic.

"Mr. Osborne," continued Clara, turning back, "I beg your pardon. I am a woman, and you men don't allow us to learn logic. But at the same time you must confess you were making a bad use of yours. You know it was all nonsense you were trying to pass off on me for wisdom."

He was by her side the instant she spoke to him. A smile grew upon his face: I could see it growing, just as you see the sun growing behind a cloud. In a moment it broke out in radiance.

"I confess," he said. "I thought you were too hard on Wilfrid; and he hadn't anything at hand to say for himself."

"And you were too hard upon me, weren't you? Two to one is not fair play—is it now?"

"No; certainly not."

"And that justified a little false play on my part?"

"No, it did not," said Charley, almost fiercely. "Nothing justifies false play."

"Not even yours, Mr. Osborne?" replied Clara, with a stately coldness quite marvellous in one so young; and leaving him, she came again to my side. I peeped at Mr. Coningham, curious to see how he regarded all this wrangling with his daughter. He appeared at once amused and satisfied. Clara's face was in a glow, clearly of anger at the discourteous manner in which Charley had spoken.

"You mustn't be angry with Charley, Clara," I said.

"He is very rude," she replied, indignantly.

"What he said was rude, I allow, but Charley himself is anything but rude. I haven't looked at him, but I am certain he is miserable about it already."

"So he ought to be. To speak like that to a lady, when her very friendliness put her off her guard! I never was treated so in all my life."

She spoke so loud that she must have meant Charley to hear her. But when I looked back, I saw that he had fallen a long way behind, and was coming on very slowly, with dejected look and his eyes on the ground. Mr. Coningham did not interfere by word or sign.

When we reached the inn he ordered some refreshment, and behaved to us both as if we were grown men. Just a touch of familiarity was the sole indication that we were not grown men. Boys are especially grateful for respect from their superiors, for it helps them to respect themselves; but Charley sat silent and gloomy. As he would not ride back, and Mr. Coningham preferred walking too, I got into the saddle and rode by Clara's side.

As we approached the house, Charley crept up to the other side of Clara's horse, and laid his hand on his mane. When he spoke, Clara started, for she was looking the other way and had not observed his approach.

"Miss Clara," he said, "I am very sorry I was so rude. Will you forgive me?"

Instead of being hard to reconcile, as I had feared from her outburst of indignation, she leaned forward and laid her hand on his. He looked up in her face, his own suffused with a colour I had never seen in it before. His great blue eyes lightened with thankfulness, and began to fill with tears. How she looked, I could not see. She withdrew her hand, and Charley dropped behind again. In a little while he came up to my side, and began talking. He soon got quite merry, but Clara in her turn was silent.

I doubt if anything would be worth telling but for what comes after. History itself would be worthless but for what it cannot tell, namely, its own future. Upon this ground my reader must excuse the apparent triviality of the things I am now relating.

When we were alone in our room that night—for ever since Charley's illness we two had had a room to ourselves—Charley said,

"I behaved like a brute this morning, Wilfrid."

"No, Charley; you were only a little rude from being over eager. If she had been seriously advocating dishonesty, you would have been quite right to take it up so; and you thought she was."

"Yes; but it was very silly of me. I dare say it was because I had been so dishonest myself just before. How dreadful it is that I am always taking my own side, even when I do what I am ashamed of in another. I sup-

pose I think I have got my horse by the head, and the other has not."

"I don't know. That may be it," I answered. "I'm afraid I can't think about it to-night, for I don't feel well. What if it should be your turn to nurse me now, Charley?"

He turned quite pale, his eyes opened wide, and he looked at me anxiously.

Before morning I was aching all over: I had rheumatic fever.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHARLEY NURSES ME.

I SAW no more of Clara. Mr. Coningham came to bid me good-bye, and spoke very kindly. Mr. Forest would have got a nurse for me, but Charley begged so earnestly to be allowed to return the service I had done for him, that he yielded.

I was in great pain for more than a week. Charley's attentions were unremitting. In fact he nursed me more like a woman than a boy; and made me think with some contrition how poor my ministrations had been. Even after the worst was over, if I but moved, he was at my bedside in a moment. Certainly no nurse could have surpassed him. I could bear no one to touch me but him; from any one else I dreaded torture; and my medicine was administered to the very moment by my own old watch, which had been brought to do its duty at least respectfully.

One afternoon, finding me tolerably comfortable, he said:

"Shall I read something to you, Wilfrid?"

He never called me Willie, as most of my friends did.

"I should like it," I answered.

"What shall I read?" he asked.

"Haven't you something in your head," I rejoined, "when you proposed it?"

"Well, I had; but I don't know if you would like it."

"What did you think of, then?"

"I thought of a chapter in the New Testament."

"How could you think I should not like that?"

"Because I never saw you say your prayers."

"That is quite true. But you don't think I never say my prayers although you never see me do it?"

The fact was, my uncle, amongst his other peculiarities, did not approve of teaching children to say their prayers. But he did not therefore leave me without instruction in the matter of praying—either the idlest or the most availing of human actions. He would say: "When you want anything, ask for it, Willie; and if it is worth your having, you will have it. But don't fancy you are doing God any service by praying to him. He likes you to pray to him because he loves you, and wants you to love him. And whatever you do, don't go saying a lot of words you don't mean. If you think you ought to pray, say your Lord's Prayer, and have done with it." I had no theory myself on the matter; but when I was in misery on the wild mountains, I had indeed prayed to God; and had even gone so far as to hope, when I got what I prayed for, that he had heard my prayer.

Charley made no reply.

"It seems to me better that sort of thing shouldn't be seen, Charley," I persisted.

"Perhaps, Wilfrid; but I was taught to say my prayers regularly."

"I don't think much of that either," I answered. "But I've said a good many prayers since I've been here, Charley. I can't say I'm sure it's any use, but I can't help trying after something—I don't know what—something I want, and don't know how to get."

"But it's only the prayer of faith that's heard. Do you believe, Wilfrid?"

"I don't know. I haven't said I don't. I wish I could say I do. But I daresay things will be considered."

"Wouldn't it be grand if it was true, Wilfrid?"

"What, Charley?"

"That God actually let his creatures see him—and—all that came of it, you know."

"It would be grand indeed! But supposing it true, how could we be expected to believe it like them that saw him with their own eyes? I couldn't be required to believe just as if I could have no doubt about it. It wouldn't be fair. Only—perhaps we haven't got the clew by the right end."

"Perhaps not. But sometimes I hate the whole thing. And then again I feel as if I must read all about it; not that I care for it exactly, but because a body must do something—because—I don't know how to say it—because of the misery, you know."

"I don't know that I do know—quite. But now you have started the subject, I thought that was great nonsense Mr. Forest was talking about the authority of the church the other day."

"Well, I thought so, too. I don't see what right they have to say so and so, if they didn't hear him speak. As to what he meant, they may be right or they may be wrong. If they have the gift of the Spirit, as they say—how am I to tell they have? All imposters claim