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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

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CHAPTER XLII.

A TALK ABOUT SUICIDE.

Is the same excited mood, but repressing it with all the energy I could gather, I returned to the Hall, and made my way to the library. There Charley soon joined me.

"Why didn't you come to breakfast?" he asked.

"I've been home, and changed my clothes," I answered. "I couldn't well appear in a tail-coat. It's bad enough to have to wear such an ugly thing by candle-light."

"What's the matter with you?" he asked again, after an interval of silence, which I judge from the question must have been rather a long one.

"What is the matter with me, Charley?"

"I can't tell. You don't seem yourself, somehow."

I do not know what answer I gave him, but I knew myself what was the matter with me well enough. The form and face of the maiden of my dream, the Athanasia lost that she might be found, blending with the face and form of Mary Osborne, filled my imagination so that I could think of nothing else. Gladly would I have been rid of even Charley's company, that, while my hands were busy with the books, my heart might brood at will now upon the lovely dream, now upon the lovely vision to which I awoke from it, and which, had it not glided into the forms of the foregone dream and possessed it with itself, would have vanished it altogether. At length I was aware of light steps and sweet voices in the next room, and Mary and Clara presently entered.

How came it that the face of the one had lost the half of its radiance, and the face of the other had gathered all that the former had lost. Mary's countenance was as still as ever; there was not in it a single ray of light beyond its usual expression; but I had become more capable of reading it, for the coalescence of the face of my dream with her dreaming face had given me its key; and I was now so far from indifferent, that I was afraid to look for fear of betraying the attraction I now found it exercise over me. Seldom surely has a man been so long familiar with and careless of any countenance to find it all at once an object of absorbing interest! The very fact of its want of revelation added immensely to its power over me now—for was I not in its secret? Did I not know what a lovely soul hid behind that unexpressive countenance? Did I not know that it was as the veil of the holy of holies, at times reflecting only the light of the seven golden lamps in the holy place; at others almost melted away in the rush of the radiance unspeakable from the hidden and holier side—the region whence come the revelations. To draw through it if but once the feeblest glimmer of the light I had but once beheld, seemed an ambition worthy of a life. Knowing her power of reticence, however, and of withdrawing from the outer courts into the penetralia of her sanctuary, guessing also at something of the aspect in which she regarded me, I dared not now make any such attempt. But I resolved to seize what opportunity might offer of convincing her that I was not so far out of sympathy with her as to be unworthy of holding closer converse; and I now began to feel distressed at what had given me little trouble before, namely, that she should suppose me the misleader of her brother, while I knew that, however far I might be from an absolute belief in things which she seemed never to have doubted, I was yet in some measure the means of keeping him from flinging aside the last cords which held him to the faith of his fathers. But I would not lead in any such direction, partly from the fear of hypocrisy, partly from horror at the idea of making capital of what little faith I had. But Charley himself afforded me an opportunity which I could not, whatever my scrupulosity, well avoid.

"Have you ever looked into that little book, Charley?" I said, finding in my hands an early edition of the *Christian Morals* of Sir Thomas Browne. I wanted to say something, that I might not appear distraught.

"No," he answered, with indifference, as he glanced at the title page. "Is it anything particular?"

"Everything he writes, however whimsical in parts, is well worth more than mere reading," I answered. "It is a strangely latinized style, but has its charm notwithstanding."

He was turning over the leaves as he spoke. Receiving no response, I looked up. He seemed to have come upon something which had attracted him.

"What have you found?" I asked.

"Here's a chapter on the easiest way of putting a stop to it all," he answered.

"What do you mean?"

"He was a medical man—wasn't he? I'm ashamed to say I know nothing about him."

"Yes, certainly he was."

"Then he knew what he was about."

"As well probably as any man of his profession at the time."

"He recommends drowning," said Charley, without raising his eyes from the book.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean for suicide."

"Nonsense. He was the last man to favour that. You must make a mistake. He was a thoroughly Christian man."

"I know nothing about that. Hear this."

He read the following passages from the beginning of the thirteenth section of the second part.

"With what shift and pains we come into the world, we remember not; but 'tis commonly found no easy matter to get out of it. Many have studied to exasperate the ways of death, but fewer hours have been spent to soften that necessity."

"Ovid, the old heroes, and the Stoicks, who were so afraid of drowning, as dreading thereby the extinction of their soul, which they conceived to be a fire,

By this time, either attracted by the stately flow of Sir Thomas's speech, or by the tone of our disputation, the two girls had drawn nearer, and were listening.

"What do you mean, Charley?" I said, perceiving, however, the hold I had by my further quotation given him.

"First of all, he tells you the easiest way of dying, and then informs you that it ends all your troubles. He is too cunning to say in so many words that there is no hereafter, but what else can he wish you to understand when he says that in dying we have the advantage over the evil spirits who cannot by death get rid of their sufferings? I will read this book," he added, closing it, and putting it in his pocket.

"I wish you would," I said; "for although I confess you are logically right in your conclusions, I know Sir Thomas did not mean anything of the sort. He was only misled by his love of antithesis into a hasty and illogical remark. The whole tone of his book is against such a conclusion. Besides, I do not doubt he was thinking only of good people, for whom he believed all suffering over at their death."



My hand trembled more than here as I put it on the third finger.

stood probably in fear of an easier way of death; wherein the water, entering the possessions of air, makes a temperate suffocation, and kills, as it were, without a fever. Surely many, who have had the spirit to destroy themselves, have not been ingenious in the contrivance thereof."—"Cato is much to be pitied, who mangled himself with poniards; and Hannibal seems more subtle, who carried his delivery, not in the point but the pommel of his sword."

"Poison, I suppose," he said, as he ended the extract.

"Yes, that's the story, if you remember," I answered; "but I don't see that Sir Thomas is favouring suicide. Not at all. What he writes there is merely a speculation on the comparative ease of different modes of dying. Let me see it."

I took the book from his hands, and, glancing over the essay, read the closing passage.

"But to learn to die is better than to study the ways of dying. Death will find some ways to untie or cut the most Gordian knots of life, and make men's miseries as mortal as themselves: whereas evil spirits, as undying substances, are inseparable from their calamities; and, therefore, they everlastingly struggle under their angustias, and bound up with immortality can never get out of themselves."

"There! I told you so!" cried Charley. "Don't you see? He is the most cunning arguer—beats Despair in the 'Fairy Queen' hollow!"

"But I don't see, supposing he does believe in immortality, why you should be so anxious about his orthodoxy on the other point. Didn't Dr. Donne, as good a man as any, I presume, argue on the part of the suicide?"

"I have not read Dr. Donne's essay, but I suspect the obliquity of it has been much exaggerated."

"Why should you? I never saw any argument worth the name on the other side. We have plenty of expressions of horror—but these are no argument. Indeed, the mass of the vulgar are so afraid of dying, that, apparently in terror lest suicide should prove infectious, they treat in a brutal manner the remains of the man who has only had the courage to free himself from a burden too hard for him to bear. It is all selfishness—nothing else. They love their paltry selves so much, that they count it a greater sin to kill oneself than to kill another man—which seems to be absolutely devilish. Therefore, the *vox populi*, whether it be the *vox Dei* or not, is not nonsense merely, but absolute wickedness. Why shouldn't a man kill himself?"

Clara was looking on rather than listening, and her interest seemed that of amusement only. Mary's eyes were wide-fixed on the face of Charley, evidently tortured to find that to the other enormities of his unbelief was to be added the justification of suicide. His habit of arguing was doubtless well enough known to her to leave room for the mitigating possibility that he might be arguing only for

argument's sake, but what he said could not but be shocking to her upon any supposition.

I was not ready with an answer. Clara was the first to speak.

"It's a cowardly thing, anyhow," she said.

"How do you make that out, Miss Clara?" asked Charley. "I'm aware it's the general opinion, but I don't see it myself."

"It's surely cowardly to run away in that fashion."

"For my part," returned Charley, "I feel that it requires more courage than I've got, and hence it comes, I suppose, that I admire any one who has the pluck."

"What vulgar words you use, Mr. Charles!" said Clara.

"Besides," he went on, heedless of her remark, "a man may want to escape—not from his duties—he mayn't know what they are—but from his own weakness and shame."

"But Charley, dear," said Mary, with a great light in her eyes, and the rest of her face as still as a sunless pond, "you don't think of the sin of it. I know you are only talking, but some things oughtn't to be talked of lightly."

"What makes it a sin? It's not mentioned in the ten commandments," said Charley.

"Surely it's against the will of God, Charley, dear."

"He hasn't said anything about it, anyhow. And why should I have a thing forced upon me whether I will or no, and then be pulled up for throwing it away when I found it troublesome?"

"Surely I don't quite understand you, Charley."

"Well, if I must be more explicit—I was never asked whether I chose to be or not. I never had the conditions laid before me. Here I am, and I can't help myself—so far, I mean, as that here I am."

"But life is a good thing," said Mary, evidently struggling with an almost overpowering horror.

"I don't know that. My impression is that if I had been asked—"

"But that couldn't be, you know."

"Then it wasn't fair. But why couldn't I be made for a moment or two, long enough to have the thing laid before me, and be asked whether I would accept it or not? My impression is that I would have said—No, thank you;—that is if it was fairly put."

I hastened to offer a remark, in the hope of softening the pain such flippancy must cause her.

"And my impression is, Charley," I said, "that if such had been possible—"

"Of course," he interrupted, "the God you believe in could have made me for a minute or two. He can, I suppose, unmake me now when he likes."

"Yes; but could he have made you all at once capable of understanding his plans, and your own future? Perhaps that is what he is doing now—making you, by all you are going through, capable of understanding them. Certainly the question could not have been put to you before you were able to comprehend it, and this may be the only way to make you able. Surely a being who *could* make you had a right to risk the chance, if I may be allowed such an expression, of your being satisfied in the end with what he saw to be good—so good indeed that, if we accept the New Testament story, he would have been willing to go through the same troubles himself for the same end."

"No, no; not the same troubles," he objected. "According to the story to which you refer, Jesus Christ was free from all that alone makes life unendurable—the bad inside you, that will come outside whether you will or no."

"I admit your objection. As to the evil coming out, I suspect it is better it should come out, so long as it is there. But the end is not yet; and still I insist the probability is, that if you could know it all now, you would say with submission, if not with hearty concurrence—'Thy will be done.'"

"I have known people who could say that without knowing it all now, Mr. Cumbermede," said Mary.

I had often called her by her Christian name, but she had never accepted the familiarity.

"No doubt," said Charley, "but I'm not one of those."

"If you would but give in," said his sister, "you would—in the end, I mean—say, 'It is well.' I am sure of that."

"Yes—perhaps I might—after all the suffering had been forced upon me, and was over at last—when I had been thoroughly exhausted and cowed, that is."

"Which wouldn't satisfy any thinking soul, Charley—much less God," I said. "But if there be a God at all—"

Mary gave a slight inarticulate cry.

"Dear Miss Osborne," I said, "I beg you will not misunderstand me. I cannot be sure about it as you are—I wish I could—but I am not disputing it in the least; I am only trying to make my argument as strong as I can. I was going to say to Charley—not to you—that if there be a God, he would not have compelled us to be, except with the absolute foreknowledge that when we knew all about it, we would certainly declare ourselves