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WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

An Autobiographical Story.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD,
Author of "Alec Forbes," etc.

CHAPTER LV. (Continued.)

She started, stared at me for a moment, and held out her hand.

"I didn't know you, Mr. Cumbermede. How much older you look! I beg your pardon. Have you been ill?"

She spoke hurriedly, and kept looking over her shoulder now and then as if afraid of being seen talking to me.

"I have had a good deal to make me older since we met last, Miss Pease," I said. "I have hardly a friend left in the world but you—that is, if you will allow me to call you one."

"Certainly, certainly," she answered, but hurriedly, and with one of those uneasy glances. "Only you must allow, Mr. Cumbermede, that—that—that—"

The poor lady was evidently unprepared to meet me on the old footing, and, at the same time, equally unwilling to hurt my feelings.

"I should be sorry to make you run a risk for my sake," I said. "Please just answer me one question. Do you know what it is to be misunderstood—to be despised without deserving it?"

She smiled sadly, and nodded her head gently two or three times.

"Then have pity on me, and let me have a little talk with you."

Again she glanced apprehensively over her shoulder.

"You are afraid of being seen with me, and I don't wonder," I said.

"Mr. Geoffrey came up with us," she answered. "I left him at breakfast. He will be going across the park to his club directly."

"Then come with me the other way—into Hyde Park," I said.

With evident reluctance, she yielded and accompanied me.

As soon as we got within Stanhope Gate, I spoke.

"A certain sad event, of which you have no doubt heard, Miss Pease, has shut me out from all communication with the family of my friend Charley Osborne. I am very anxious for some news of his sister. She is all that is left of him to me now. Can you tell me anything about her?"

"She has been very ill," she replied.

"I hope that means that she is better," I said.

"She is better, and, I hear, going on the continent, as soon as the season will permit. But, Mr. Cumbermede, you must be aware that I am under considerable restraint in talking to you. The position I hold in Sir Giles's family, although neither a comfortable nor a dignified one—"

"I understand you perfectly, Miss Pease," I returned, "and fully appreciate the sense of propriety which causes your embarrassment. But the request I am about to make has nothing to do with them or their affairs whatever. I only want your promise to let me know if you hear anything of Miss Osborne."

"I cannot tell—what?"

"What use I may be going to make of the information you give me. In a word, you do not trust me."

"I neither trust nor distrust you, Mr. Cumbermede. But I am afraid of being drawn into a correspondence with you."

"Then I will ask no promise. I will hope in your generosity. Here is my address. I pray you, as you would have helped him who fell among thieves, to let me know anything you hear about Mary Osborne."

She took my card, and turned at once, saying,

"Mind, I make no promise."

"I imagine none," I answered. "I will trust in your kindness."

And so we parted.

Unsatisfactory as the interview was, it yet gave me a little hope. I was glad to hear Mary was going abroad, for it must do her good. For me, I would endure and labour and hope. I gave her to God, as Shakespeare says somewhere, and set myself to my work. When her mind was quieter about Charley, somehow or other I might come near her again. I could not see how.

I took my way across the Green Park.

I do not believe we notice the half the coincidences that float past us on the stream of events. Things which would fill us with astonishment, and probably with foreboding, look us in the face and pass us by, and we know nothing of them.

As I walked along in the direction of the Mall, I became aware of a tall man coming towards me, stooping as if with age, while the length of his stride indicated a more vigorous period. He passed without lifting his head, but in the partial view of the wan and furrowed countenance I could not fail to recognize Charley's father. Such a worn unhappiness was there depicted, that the indignation which still lingered in my bosom went out in compassion. If his sufferings might but

teach him that to brand the truth of the kingdom with the private mark of opinion, must result in persecution and cruelty! He mounted the slope with strides at once eager and aimless, and I wondered whether any of the surmounting compunctions had yet begun to overshadow the complacency of his faith; whether he had yet begun to doubt if it pleased the Son of Man that a youth should be driven from the gates of truth, because he failed to recognize her image in the faces of the janitors.

Aimless, also, I turned into the Mall, and again I started at the sight of a known figure. Was it possible?—Could it be my Lilith betwixt the shafts of a public cabriolet? Fortunately it was empty. I hailed it, and jumped up, telling the driver to take me to my chambers. My poor Lilith! She was working like one who had never been loved! So far as I knew, she had never been in harness before. She was badly groomed and thin, but much of her old spirit remained. I soon entered in to negotiations with the driver, whose property she was, and made her my own once more, with a delight I could ill express in plain prose—for my friends were indeed few. I wish I could draw a picture of the lovely creature, when at length, having concluded

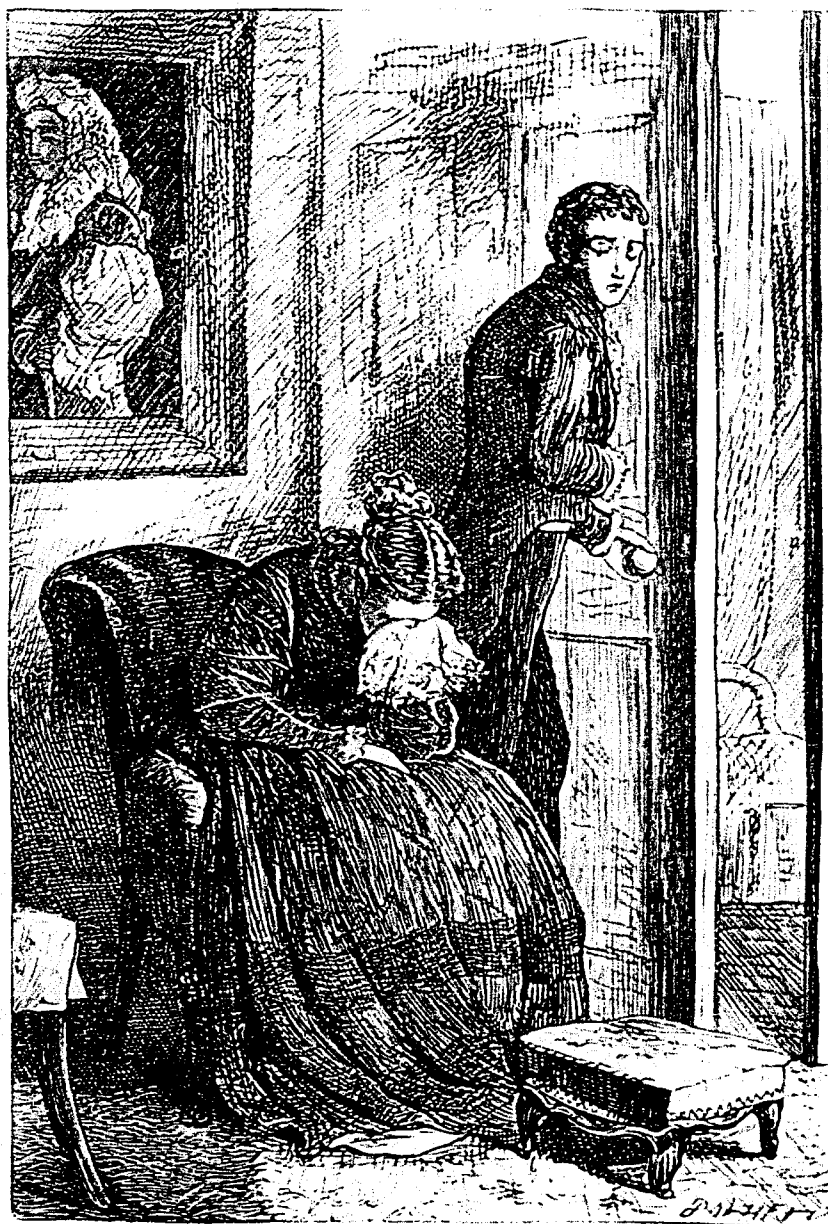
forth joys and sorrows which in a real history must walk shadowed under the veil of modesty; for the soul still less than the body, will consent to be revealed to all eyes. Hence, although most of my books have seemed true to some, they have all seemed visionary to most.

A year passed away, during which I never left London. I heard from Miss Pease—that Miss Osborne, although much better, was not going to return until after another winter. I wrote and thanked her, and heard no more. It may seem I accepted such ignorance with strange indifference; but even to the reader for whom alone I am writing, I cannot, as things are, attempt to lay open all my heart. I have not written and cannot write how I thought, projected, brooded, and dreamed—all about her; how I hoped when I wrote that she might read; how I questioned what I had written, to find whether it would look to her what I had intended it to appear.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE LAST VISION.

I HAD engaged to accompany one of Charley's barrister friends, in whose society I had found



"I will go away till you can bear the sight of me."

my bargain, I approached her, and called her by her name! She turned her head sideways towards me with a low whinny of pleasure, and when I walked a little way, walked wearily after me. I took her myself to livery stables near me, and wrote for Styles. His astonishment when he saw her was amusing.

"Good Lord! Miss Lilith!" was all he could say—for some moments.

In a few days she had begun to look like herself, and I sent her home with Styles. I should hardly like to say how much the recovery of her did to restore my spirits; I could not help regarding it as a good omen.

And now, the first bitterness of my misery having died a natural death, I sought again some of the friends I had made through Charley, and experienced from them great kindness. I began also to go into society a little, for I had found that invention is ever ready to lose the forms of life if it be not kept under the ordinary pressure of its atmosphere. As it is, I doubt much if any of my books are more than partially true to those forms, for I have ever heeded them too little; but I believe I have been true to the heart of man. But that heart I have ever regarded more as the fountain of aspiration than the grave of fruition. The discomfiture of enemies and a happy marriage never seemed to me ends of sufficient value to close a history withal—I mean a fictitious history wherein one may set

considerable satisfaction, to his father's house—to spend the evening with some friends of the family. The gathering was chiefly for talk, and was a kind of thing I disliked, finding its aimlessness and flicker depressing. Indeed, partly from the peculiar circumstances of my childhood, partly from what I had suffered, I always found my spirits highest when alone. Still, the study of humanity apart, I felt that I ought not to shut myself out from my kind but endure some little irksomeness, if only for the sake of keeping alive that surface friendliness which has its value in the nourishment of the deeper affections. On this particular occasion, however, I yielded the more willingly that, in the revival of various memories of Charley, it had occurred to me that I once heard him say that his sister had a regard for one of the ladies of the family.

There were not many people in the drawing-room when we arrived, and my friend's mother alone was there to entertain them. With her I was chatting when one of her daughters entered, accompanied by a lady in mourning. For one moment I felt as if on the borders of insanity. My brain seemed to surge like the waves of a wind-tormented tide, so that I dared not make a single step forward lest my limbs should disobey me. It was indeed Mary Osborne; but oh, how changed! The rather full face had grown delicate and thin, and the fine pure com-

plexion if possible finer and purer, but certainly more ethereal and evanescent. It was as if suffering had removed some substance unapt,* and rendered her body a better fitting garment for her soul. Her face, which had before required the softening influences of sleep and dreams to give it the plasticity necessary for complete expression, was now full of a repressed expression, if I may be allowed the phrase—a latent something ever on the tremble, ever on the point of breaking forth. It was as if the nerves had grown finer, more tremulous, or, rather, more vibrative. Touched to finer issues they could never have been, but suffering had given them a more responsive thrill. In a word she was the Athanasia of my dream, not the Mary Osborne of the Moldwarp library.

Conquering myself at last, and seeing a favourable opportunity, I approached her. I think the fear lest her father should enter, gave me the final impulse; otherwise I could have been contented to gaze on her for hours in motionless silence.

"May I speak to you, Mary?" I said. She lifted her eyes and her whole face towards mine, without a smile, without a word. Her features remained perfectly still, but, like the outbreak of a fountain, the tears rushed into her eyes and overflowed in silent weeping. Not a sob, not a convulsive movement accompanied their flow.

"Is your father here?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I thought you were abroad somewhere—I did not know where."

Again she shook her head. She dared not speak, knowing that if she made the attempt she must break down.

"I will go away till you can bear the sight of me," I said.

She half-stretched out a thin white hand, but whether to detain me or bid me farewell I do not know, for it dropped again on her knee.

The rooms rapidly filled, and in a few minutes I could not see the corner where I had left her. I endured everything for a while, and then made my way back to it; but she was gone, and I could find her nowhere. A lady began to sing. When the applause which followed her performance was over, my friend, who happened to be near me, turned abruptly and said,

"Now, Cumbermede, sing!"

The truth was, that since I had loved Mary Osborne, I had attempted to cultivate a certain small gift of song which I thought I possessed. I dared not touch any existent music, for I was certain I should break down, but having a faculty—some what thin, I fear—for writing songs, and finding that a shadowy air always accompanied the birth of the words, I had presumed to study music a little, in the hope of becoming able to fix the melody—the twin sister of the song. I had made some progress, and had grown able to write down a simple thought. There was little presumption then, venturing my voice, limited as was its scope, upon a trifle of my own. Tempted by the opportunity of realizing hopes consciously wild, I obeyed my friend, and, sitting down to the instrument in some trepidation, sang the following verses:—

I dreamed that I woke from a dream,
And the house was full of light;
At the window two angel Sorrows
Held back the curtains of night.

The door was wide, and the house
Was full of the morning wind;
At the door two armed warders
Stood silent, with faces blind.

I ran to the open door,
For the wind of the world was sweet;
The warders with crossing weapons
Turned back my issuing feet.

I ran to the shining windows—
There the winged Sorrows stood;
Silent they held the curtains,
And the light fell through in a flood.

I clomb to the highest window—
Ah! there, with shadowed brow,
Stood one lonely radiant Sorrow,
And that, my love, was thou.

I could not have sung this in public but that no one would suspect it was my own, or was in the least likely to understand a word of it—except her for whose ears and heart it was intended.

As soon as I had finished, I rose and once more went searching for Mary. But as I looked, sadly fearing she was gone, I heard her voice close behind me.

"Are those verses your own, Mr. Cumbermede?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

I turned trembling. "Her lovely face was looking up at me."

"Yes," I answered. "as much my own as that I believe they are not to be found anywhere. But they were given to me rather than made by me."

"Would you let me have them? I am not sure that I understand them."

"I am not sure that I understand them my-

* Spencer's "Hymns in Honour of Beattie."