GEORGE MACDONALD

WILFRID CUMBERMEDE

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

I am—I will not say how old, but well past middle age. This much I feel compelled to mention, because it has long been my opinion that no man should attempt a history of himself until he has set foot upon the border land where the past and the future begin to blend in a consciousness somewhat independent of both, and hence interpreting both. Looking westward, from this vantage-ground, the setting sun is not the less lovely to him that he recalls a merrier time when the shadows fell the other way. Then they sped westward before him, as if to vanish, chased by his advancing footsteps, over the verge of the world. Now they come creeping towards him, lengthening as they come. And they are welcome. Can it be that he would ever have chosen a world without shadows? Was not the trouble of the shadowless noon the dreariest of all? Did he not then long for the curtained queen—the all-shadowy night? And shall he now regard with dismay the setting sun of his earthly life? When he looks back, he sees the farthest cloud of the sun-deserted east alive with a rosy hue. It is the prophecy of the sunset concerning the dawn. For the sun itself is ever a rising sun, and the morning will come though the

night should be dark.

In this 'season of calm weather,' when the past has receded so far that he can behold it as in a picture, and his share in it as the history of a man who had lived and would soon die; when he can confess his faults without the bitterness of shame, both because he is humble, and because the faults themselves have dropped from him; when his good deeds look poverty-stricken in his eyes, and he would no more claim consideration for them than expect knighthood because he was no thief; when he cares little for his reputation, but much for his character—little for what has gone beyond his control, but endlessly much for what yet remains in his will to determine; then, I think, a man may do well to write his own life.

'So,' I imagine my reader interposing, 'you profess to have arrived at this high degree of perfection yourself?'

I reply that the man who has attained this kind of indifference to the past, this kind of hope in the future, will be far enough from considering it a high degree of perfection. The very idea is to such a man ludicrous. One may eat bread without claiming the honours of an athlete; one may desire to be honest and not count himself a saint. My object in thus shadowing out what seems to me my present condition of mind, is merely to render it intelligible to my reader how an autobiography might come to be written without rendering the writer justly liable to the charge of that overweening, or self-conceit, which might be involved in the mere conception of the idea.

In listening to similar recitals from the mouths of elderly people, I have observed that many things which seemed to the persons principally concerned ordinary enough, had to me a wonder and a significance they did not perceive. Let me hope that some of the things I am about to relate may fare similarly, although, to be honest, I must confess I could not have undertaken the task, for a task it is, upon this chance alone: I do think some of my history worthy of being told, just for the facts' sake. God knows I have had small share of that worthiness. The weakness of my life has been that I would ever do some great thing; the saving of my life has been my utter failure. I have never done a great deed. If I had, I know that one of my temperament could not have escaped serious consequences. I have had more pleasure when a grown man in a certain discovery concerning the ownership of an apple of which I had taken the ancestral bite when a boy, than I can remember to have resulted from any action of my own during my whole existence. But I detest the notion of puzzling my reader in order to enjoy her fancied surprise, or her possible praise of a worthless ingenuity of concealment. If I ever appear to behave thus, it is merely that I follow the course of my own knowledge of myself and my affairs, without any desire to give either the pain or the pleasure of suspense, if indeed I may flatter myself with the hope of interesting her to such a degree that suspense should become possible.

When I look over what I have written, I find the tone so sombre—let me see: what sort of an evening is it on which I

commence this book? Ah! I thought so: a sombre evening. The sun is going down behind a low bank of grey cloud, the upper edge of which he tinges with a faded yellow. There will be rain before morning. It is late Autumn, and most of the crops are gathered in. A bluish fog is rising from the lower meadows. As I look I grow cold. It is not, somehow, an interesting evening. Yet if I found just this evening well described in a novel, I should enjoy it heartily. The poorest, weakest drizzle upon the window-panes of a dreary roadside inn in a country of slate-quarries, possesses an interest to him who enters it by the door of a book, hardly less than the pouring rain which threatens to swell every brook to a torrent. How is this? I think it is because your troubles do not enter into the book and its troubles do not enter into you, and therefore nature operates upon you unthwarted by the personal conditions which so often counteract her present influences. But I will rather shut out the fading west, the gathering mists, and the troubled consciousness of nature altogether, light my fire and my pipe, and then try whether in my first chapter I cannot be a boy again in such fashion that my companion, that is, my reader, will not be too impatient to linger a little in the meadows of childhood ere we pass to the corn-fields of riper years.

CHAPTER I. WHERE I FIND MYSELF

No wisest chicken, I presume, can recall the first moment when the chalk-oval surrounding it gave way, and instead of the cavern of limestone which its experience might have led it to expect, it found a world of air and movement and freedom and blue sky—with kites in it. For my own part, I often wished, when a child, that I had watched while God was making me, so that I might have remembered how he did it. Now my wonder is whether, when I creep forth into 'that new world which is the old,' I shall be conscious of the birth, and enjoy the whole mighty surprise, or whether I shall become gradually aware that things are changed and stare about me like the new-born baby. What will be the candle-flame that shall first attract my new-born sight? But I forget that speculation about the new life is not writing the history of the old.

I have often tried how far back my memory could go. I suspect there are awfully ancient shadows mingling with our memories; but, as far as I can judge, the earliest definite memory I have is the discovery of how the wind is made; for I saw the process going on before my very eyes, and there could be, and there was, no doubt of the relation of cause and effect in the matter. There were the trees swaying themselves about after the wildest

fashion, and there was the wind in consequence visiting my person somewhat too roughly. The trees were blowing in my face. They made the wind, and threw it at me. I used my natural senses, and this was what they told me. The discovery impressed me so deeply that even now I cannot look upon trees without a certain indescribable and, but for this remembrance, unaccountable awe. A grove was to me for many years a fountain of winds, and, in the stillest day, to look into a depth of gathered stems filled me with dismay; for the whole awful assembly might, writhing together in earnest and effectual contortion, at any moment begin their fearful task of churning the wind.

There were no trees in the neighbourhood of the house where I was born. It stood in the midst of grass, and nothing but grass was to be seen for a long way on every side of it. There was not a gravel path or a road near it. Its walls, old and rusty, rose immediately from the grass. Green blades and a few heads of daisies leaned trustingly against the brown stone, all the sharpness of whose fractures had long since vanished, worn away by the sun and the rain, or filled up by the slow lichens, which I used to think were young stones growing out of the wall. The ground was part of a very old dairy-farm, and my uncle, to whom it belonged, would not have a path about the place. But then the grass was well subdued by the cows, and, indeed, I think, would never have grown very long, for it was of that delicate sort which we see only on downs and in parks and on old grazing farms. All about the house—as far, at least, as my lowly eyes could

see—the ground was perfectly level, and this lake of greenery, out of which it rose like a solitary rock, was to me an unfailing mystery and delight. This will sound strange in the ears of those who consider a mountainous, or at least an undulating, surface essential to beauty; but nature is altogether independent of what is called fine scenery. There are other organs than the eyes, even if grass and water and sky were not of the best and loveliest of nature's shows.

The house, I have said, was of an ancient-looking stone, grey and green and yellow and brown. It looked very hard; yet there were some attempts at carving about the heads of the narrow windows. The carving had, however, become so dull and shadowy that I could not distinguish a single form or separable portion of design: still some ancient thought seemed ever flickering across them. The house, which was two stories in height, had a certain air of defence about it, ill to explain. It had no eaves, for the walls rose above the edge of the roof; but the hints at battlements were of the merest. The roof, covered with grey slates, rose very steep, and had narrow, tall dormer windows in it. The edges of the gables rose, not in a slope, but in a succession of notches, like stairs. Altogether, the shell to which, considered as a crustaceous animal, I belonged—for man is every animal according as you choose to contemplate him—had an old-world look about it—a look of the time when men had to fight in order to have peace, to kill in order to live. Being, however, a crustaceous animal, I, the heir of all the new impulses

of the age, was born and reared in closest neighbourhood with strange relics of a vanished time. Humanity so far retains its chief characteristics that the new generations can always flourish in the old shell.

The dairy was at some distance, so deep in a hollow that a careless glance would not have discovered it. I well remember my astonishment when my aunt first took me there; for I had not even observed the depression of surface: all had been a level green to my eyes. Beyond this hollow were fields divided by hedges, and lanes, and the various goings to and fro of a not unpeopled although quiet neighbourhood. Until I left home for school, however, I do not remember to have seen a carriage of any kind approach our solitary dwelling. My uncle would have regarded it as little short of an insult for any one to drive wheels over the smooth lawny surface in which our house dwelt like a solitary island in the sea.

Before the threshold lay a brown patch, worn bare of grass, and beaten hard by the descending feet of many generations. The stone threshold itself was worn almost to a level with it. A visitor's first step was into what would, in some parts, be called the house-place, a room which served all the purposes of a kitchen, and yet partook of the character of an old hall. It rose to a fair height, with smoke-stained beams above; and was floored with a kind of cement, hard enough, and yet so worn that it required a good deal of local knowledge to avoid certain jars of the spine from sudden changes of level. All the furniture

was dark and shining, especially the round table, which, with its bewildering, spider-like accumulation of legs, waited under the mullioned, lozenged window until meal-times, when, like an animal roused from its lair, it stretched out those legs, and assumed expanded and symmetrical shape in front of the fire in Winter, and nearer the door in Summer. It recalls the vision of my aunt, with a hand at each end of it, searching empirically for the level—feeling for it, that is, with the creature's own legs—before lifting the hanging-leaves, and drawing out the hitherto supernumerary legs to support them; after which would come a fresh adjustment of level, another hustling to and fro, that the new feet likewise might settle on elevations of equal height; and then came the snowy cloth or the tea-tray, deposited cautiously upon its shining surface.

The walls of this room were always whitewashed in the Spring, occasioning ever a sharpened contrast with the dark-brown ceiling. Whether that was even swept I do not know; I do not remember ever seeing it done. At all events, its colour remained unimpaired by paint or whitewash. On the walls hung various articles, some of them high above my head, and attractive for that reason if for no other. I never saw one of them moved from its place—not even the fishing-rod, which required the whole length betwixt the two windows: three rusty hooks hung from it, and waved about when a wind entered ruder than common. Over the fishing-rod hung a piece of tapestry, about a yard in width, and longer than that. It would have required a very

capable constructiveness indeed to supply the design from what remained, so fragmentary were the forms, and so dim and faded were the once bright colours. It was there as an ornament; for that which is a mere complement of higher modes of life, becomes, when useless, the ornament of lower conditions: what we call great virtues are little regarded by the saints. It was long before I began to think how the tapestry could have come there, or to what it owed the honour given it in the house.

On the opposite wall hung another object, which may well have been the cause of my carelessness about the former—attracting to itself all my interest. It was a sword, in a leather sheath. From the point, half way to the hilt, the sheath was split all along the edge of the weapon. The sides of the wound gaped, and the blade was visible to my prying eyes. It was with rust almost as dark a brown as the scabbard that infolded it. But the under parts of the hilt, where dust could not settle, gleamed with a faint golden shine. That sword was to my childish eyes the type of all mystery, a clouded glory, which for many long years I never dreamed of attempting to unveil. Not the sword Excalibur, had it been 'stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings,' could have radiated more marvel into the hearts of young knights than that sword radiated into mine. Night after night I would dream of danger drawing nigh—crowds of men of evil purpose—enemies to me or to my country; and ever in the beginning of my dream, I stood ready, foreknowing and waiting; for I had climbed and had taken the ancient power from the wall, and had girded it about

my waist—always with a straw rope, the sole band within my reach; but as it went on, the power departed from the dream: I stood waiting for foes who would not come; or they drew near in fury, and when I would have drawn my weapon, old blood and rust held it fast in its sheath, and I tugged at it in helpless agony; and fear invaded my heart, and I turned and fled, pursued by my foes until I left the dream itself behind, whence the terror still pursued me.

There were many things more on those walls. A pair of spurs, of make modern enough, hung between two pewter dish-covers. Hanging book-shelves came next; for although most of my uncle's books were in his bed-room, some of the commoner were here on the wall, next to an old fowling-piece, of which both lock and barrel were devoured with rust. Then came a great pair of shears, though how they should have been there I cannot yet think, for there was no garden to the house, no hedges or trees to clip. I need not linger over these things. Their proper place is in the picture with which I would save words and help understanding if I could.

Of course there was a great chimney in the place; chiefly to be mentioned from the singular fact that just round its corner was a little door opening on a rude winding stair of stone. This appeared to be constructed within the chimney; but on the outside of the wall, was a half-rounded projection, revealing that the stair was not indebted to it for the whole of its accommodation. Whither the stair led, I shall have to disclose

in my next chapter. From the opposite end of the kitchen, an ordinary wooden staircase, with clumsy balustrade, led up to the two bed-rooms occupied by my uncle and my aunt; to a large lumber-room, whose desertion and almost emptiness was a source of uneasiness in certain moods; and to a spare bed-room, which was better furnished than any of ours, and indeed to my mind a very grand and spacious apartment. This last was never occupied during my childhood; consequently it smelt musty notwithstanding my aunt's exemplary housekeeping. Its bedsteads must have been hundreds of years old. Above these rooms again were those to which the dormer windows belonged, and in one of them I slept. It had a deep closet in which I kept my few treasures, and into which I used to retire when out of temper or troubled, conditions not occurring frequently, for nobody quarrelled with me, and I had nobody with whom I might have quarrelled.

When I climbed upon a chair, I could seat myself on the broad sill of the dormer window. This was the watch-tower whence I viewed the world. Thence I could see trees in the distance—too far off for me to tell whether they were churning wind or not. On that side those trees alone were between me and the sky.

One day when my aunt took me with her into the lumber-room, I found there, in a corner, a piece of strange mechanism. It had a kind of pendulum; but I cannot describe it because I had lost sight of it long before I was capable of discovering its use, and my recollection of it is therefore very vague—far too vague

to admit of even a conjecture now as to what it could have been intended for. But I remember well enough my fancy concerning it, though when or how that fancy awoke I cannot tell either. It seems to me as old as the finding of the instrument. The fancy was that if I could keep that pendulum wagging long enough, it would set all those trees going too; and if I still kept it swinging, we should have such a storm of wind as no living man had ever felt or heard of. That I more than half believed it, will be evident from the fact that, although I frequently carried the pendulum, as I shall call it, to the window sill, and set it in motion by way of experiment, I had not, up to the time of a certain incident which I shall very soon have to relate, had the courage to keep up the oscillation beyond ten or a dozen strokes; partly from fear of the trees, partly from a dim dread of exercising power whose source and extent were not within my knowledge. I kept the pendulum in the closet I have mentioned, and never spoke to any one of it.

CHAPTER II. MY UNCLE AND AUNT

We were a curious household. I remembered neither father nor mother; and the woman I had been taught to call *auntie* was no such near relation. My uncle was my father's brother, and my aunt was his cousin, by the mother's side. She was a tall, gaunt woman, with a sharp nose and eager eyes, yet sparing of speech. Indeed, there was very little speech to be heard in the house. My aunt, however, looked as if she could have spoken. I think it was the spirit of the place that kept her silent, for there were those eager eyes. She might have been expected also to show a bad temper, but I never saw a sign of such. To me she was always kind; chiefly, I allow, in a negative way, leaving me to do very much as I pleased. I doubt if she felt any great tenderness for me, although I had been dependent upon her care from infancy. In after-years I came to the conclusion that she was in love with my uncle; and perhaps the sense that he was indifferent to her save after a brotherly fashion, combined with the fear of betraying herself and the consciousness of her unattractive appearance, to produce the contradiction between her looks and her behaviour.

Every morning, after our early breakfast, my uncle walked away to the farm, where he remained until dinner-time. Often, when busy at my own invented games in the grass, I have caught

sight of my aunt, standing motionless with her hand over her eyes, watching for the first glimpse of my uncle ascending from the hollow where the farm-buildings lay; and occasionally, when something had led her thither as well, I would watch them returning together over the grass, when she would keep glancing up in his face at almost regular intervals, although it was evident they were not talking, but he never turned his face or lifted his eyes from the ground a few yards in front of him.

He was a tall man of nearly fifty, with grey hair, and quiet meditative blue eyes. He always looked as if he were thinking. He had been intended for the Church, but the means for the prosecution of his studies failing, he had turned his knowledge of rustic affairs to account, and taken a subordinate position on a nobleman's estate, where he rose to be bailiff. When my father was seized with his last illness, he returned to take the management of the farm. It had been in the family for many generations. Indeed that portion of it upon which the house stood, was our own property. When my mother followed my father, my uncle asked his cousin to keep house for him. Perhaps she had expected a further request, but more had not come of it.

When he came in, my uncle always went straight to his room; and having washed his hands and face, took a book and sat down in the window. If I were sent to tell him that the meal was ready, I was sure to find him reading. He would look up, smile, and look down at his book again; nor, until I had formally delivered my message, would he take further notice of me. Then he would rise,

lay his book carefully aside, take my hand, and lead me downstairs.

To my childish eyes there was something very grand about my uncle. His face was large-featured and handsome; he was tall, and stooped meditatively. I think my respect for him was founded a good deal upon the reverential way in which my aunt regarded him. And there was great wisdom, I came to know, behind that countenance, a golden speech behind that silence.

My reader must not imagine that the prevailing silence of the house oppressed me. I had been brought up in it, and never felt it. My own thoughts, if thoughts those conditions of mind could be called, which were chiefly passive results of external influences —whatever they were—thoughts or feelings, sensations, or dim, slow movements of mind—they filled the great pauses of speech; and besides, I could read the faces of both my uncle and aunt like the pages of a well-known book. Every shade of alteration in them I was familiar with, for their changes were not many.

Although my uncle's habit was silence, however, he would now and then take a fit of talking to me. I remember many such talks; the better, perhaps, that they were divided by long intervals. I had perfect confidence in his wisdom, and submission to his will. I did not much mind my aunt. Perhaps her deference to my uncle made me feel as if she and I were more on a level. She must have been really kind, for she never resented any petulance or carelessness. Possibly she sacrificed her own feeling to the love my uncle bore me; but I think it was rather that, because he cared

for me, she cared for me too.

Twice during every meal she would rise from the table with some dish in her hand, open the door behind the chimney, and ascend the winding stair.

CHAPTER III. AT THE TOP OF THE CHIMNEY-STAIR

I fear my reader may have thought me too long occupied with the explanatory foundations of my structure: I shall at once proceed to raise its walls of narrative. Whatever further explanations may be necessary, can be applied as buttresses in lieu of a broader base.

One Sunday—it was his custom of a Sunday—I fancy I was then somewhere about six years of age—my uncle rose from the table after our homely dinner, took me by the hand, and led me to the dark door with the long arrow-headed hinges, and up the winding stone stair which I never ascended except with him or my aunt. At the top was another rugged door, and within that, one covered with green baize. The last opened on what had always seemed to me a very paradise of a room. It was old-fashioned enough; but childhood is of any and every age, and it was not old-fashioned to me—only intensely cosy and comfortable. The first thing my eyes generally rested upon was an old bureau, with a book-case on the top of it, the glass-doors of which were lined with faded red silk. The next thing I would see was a small tent-bed, with the whitest of curtains, and enchanting fringes of white ball-tassels. The bed was covered with an equally charming counterpane of silk patchwork. The next object was the genius

of the place, in a high, close, easy-chair, covered with some dark stuff, against which her face, surrounded with its widow's cap, of ancient form, but dazzling whiteness, was strongly relieved. How shall I describe the shrunken, yet delicate, the gracious, if not graceful form, and the face from which extreme old age had not wasted half the loveliness? Yet I always beheld it with an indescribable sensation, one of whose elements I can isolate and identify as a faint fear. Perhaps this arose partly from the fact that, in going up the stair, more than once my uncle had said to me, 'You must not mind what grannie says, Willie, for old people will often speak strange things that young people cannot understand. But you must love grannie, for she is a very good old lady.'

'Well, grannie, how are you to-day?' said my uncle, as we entered, this particular Sunday.

I may as well mention at once that my uncle called her *grannie* in his own right and not in mine, for she was in truth my great-grandmother.

'Pretty well, David, I thank you; but much too long out of my grave,' answered grannie; in no sepulchral tones, however, for her voice, although weak and uneven, had a sound in it like that of one of the upper strings of a violin. The plaintiveness of it touched me, and I crept near her—nearer than, I believe, I had ever yet gone of my own will—and laid my hand upon hers. I withdrew it instantly, for there was something in the touch that made me—not shudder, exactly—but creep. Her hand was

smooth and soft, and warm too, only somehow the skin of it seemed dead. With a quicker movement than belonged to her years, she caught hold of mine, which she kept in one of her hands, while she stroked it with the other. My slight repugnance vanished for the time, and I looked up in her face, grateful for a tenderness which was altogether new to me.

'What makes you so long out of your grave, grannie?' I asked.

'They won't let me into it, my dear.'

'Who won't let you, grannie?'

'My own grandson there, and the woman down the stair.'

'But you don't really want to go—do you, grannie?'

'I do want to go, Willie. I ought to have been there long ago. I am very old; so old that I've forgotten how old I am. How old am I?' she asked, looking up at my uncle.

'Nearly ninety-five, grannie; and the older you get before you go the better we shall be pleased, as you know very well.'

'There! I told you,' she said with a smile, not all of pleasure, as she turned her head towards me. 'They won't let me go. I want to go to my grave, and they won't let me! Is that an age at which to keep a poor woman from her grave?'

'But it's not a nice place, is it, grannie?' I asked, with the vaguest ideas of what *the grave* meant. 'I think somebody told me it was in the churchyard.'

But neither did I know with any clearness what the church itself meant, for we were a long way from church, and I had never been there yet.

'Yes, it is in the churchyard, my dear.'

'Is it a house?' I asked.

'Yes, a little house; just big enough for one.'

'I shouldn't like that.'

'Oh yes, you would.'

'Is it a nice place, then?'

'Yes, the nicest place in the world, when you get to be so old as I am. If they would only let me die!'

'Die, grannie!' I exclaimed. My notions of death as yet were derived only from the fowls brought from the farm, with their necks hanging down long and limp, and their heads wagging hither and thither.

'Come, grannie, you mustn't frighten our little man,' interposed my uncle, looking kindly at us both.

'David!' said grannie, with a reproachful dignity, '*you* know what I mean well enough. You know that until I have done what I have to do, the grave that is waiting for me will not open its mouth to receive me. If you will only allow me to do what I have to do, I shall not trouble you long. Oh dear! oh dear!' she broke out, moaning and rocking herself to and fro, 'I am too old to weep, and they will not let me to my bed. I want to go to bed. I want to go to sleep.'

She moaned and complained like a child. My uncle went near and took her hand.

'Come, come, dear grannie!' he said, 'you must not behave like this. You know all things are for the best.'

'To keep a corpse out of its grave!' retorted the old lady, almost fiercely, only she was too old and weak to be fierce. 'Why should you keep a soul that's longing to depart and go to its own people, lingering on in the coffin? What better than a coffin is this withered body? The child is old enough to understand me. Leave him with me for half an hour, and I shall trouble you no longer. I shall at least wait my end in peace. But I think I should die before the morning.'

Ere grannie had finished this sentence, I had shrunk from her again and retreated behind my uncle.

'There!' she went on, 'you make my own child fear me. Don't be frightened, Willie dear; your old mother is not a wild beast; she loves you dearly. Only my grand-children are so undutiful! They will not let my own son come near me.'

How I recall this I do not know, for I could not have understood it at the time. The fact is that during the last few years I have found pictures of the past returning upon me in the most vivid and unaccountable manner, so much so as almost to alarm me. Things I had utterly forgotten—or so far at least that when they return, they must appear only as vivid imaginations, were it not for a certain conviction of fact which accompanies them—are constantly dawning out of the past. Can it be that the decay of the observant faculties allows the memory to revive and gather force? But I must refrain, for my business is to narrate, not to speculate.

My uncle took me by the hand, and turned to leave the room.

I cast one look at grannie as he led me away. She had thrown her head back on her chair, and her eyes were closed; but her face looked offended, almost angry. She looked to my fancy as if she were trying but unable to lie down. My uncle closed the doors very gently. In the middle of the stair he stopped, and said in a low voice,

'Willie, do you know that when people grow very old they are not quite like other people?'

'Yes. They want to go to the churchyard,' I answered.

'They fancy things,' said my uncle. 'Grannie thinks you are her own son.'

'And ain't I?' I asked innocently.

'Not exactly,' he answered. 'Your father was her son's son. She forgets that, and wants to talk to you as if you were your grandfather. Poor old grannie! I don't wish you to go and see her without your aunt or me: mind that.'

Whether I made any promise I do not remember; but I know that a new something was mingled with my life from that moment. An air as it were of the tomb mingled henceforth with the homely delights of my life. Grannie wanted to die, and uncle would not let her. She longed for her grave, and they would keep her above-ground. And from the feeling that grannie ought to be buried, grew an awful sense that she was not alive—not alive, that is, as other people are alive, and a gulf was fixed between her and me which for a long time I never attempted to pass, avoiding as much as I could all communication with her, even when my

uncle or aunt wished to take me to her room. They did not seem displeased, however, when I objected, and not always insisted on obedience. Thus affairs went on in our quiet household for what seemed to me a very long time.

CHAPTER IV. THE PENDULUM

It may have been a year after this, it may have been two, I cannot tell, when the next great event in my life occurred. I think it was towards the close of an Autumn, but there was not so much about our house as elsewhere to mark the changes of the seasons, for the grass was always green. I remember it was a sultry afternoon. I had been out almost the whole day, wandering hither and thither over the grass, and I felt hot and oppressed. Not an air was stirring. I longed for a breath of wind, for I was not afraid of the wind itself, only of the trees that made it. Indeed, I delighted in the wind, and would run against it with exuberant pleasure, even rejoicing in the fancy that I, as well as the trees, could make the wind by shaking my hair about as I ran. I must run, however; whereas the trees, whose prime business it was, could do it without stirring from the spot. But this was much too hot an afternoon for me, whose mood was always more inclined to the passive than the active, to run about and toss my hair, even for the sake of the breeze that would result therefrom. I bethought myself. I was nearly a man now; I would be afraid of things no more; I would get out my pendulum, and see whether that would not help me. Not this time would I flinch from what consequences might follow. Let them be what they might, the pendulum should wag, and have a fair chance of doing its best.

I went up to my room, a sense of high emprise filling my little

heart. Composedly, yea solemnly, I set to work, even as some enchanter of old might have drawn his circle, and chosen his spell out of his iron-clasped volume. I strode to the closet in which the awful instrument dwelt. It stood in the furthest corner. As I lifted it, something like a groan invaded my ear. My notions of locality were not then sufficiently developed to let me know that grannie's room was on the other side of that closet. I almost let the creature, for as such I regarded it, drop. I was not to be deterred, however. I bore it carefully to the light, and set it gently on the window sill, full in view of the distant trees towards the west. I left it then for a moment, as if that it might gather its strength for its unwonted labours, while I closed the door, and, with what fancy I can scarcely imagine now, the curtains of my bed as well. Possibly it was with some notion of having one place to which, if the worst came to the worst, I might retreat for safety. Again I approached the window, and after standing for some time in contemplation of the pendulum, I set it in motion, and stood watching it.

It swung slower and slower. It wanted to stop. It should not stop. I gave it another swing. On it went, at first somewhat distractedly, next more regularly, then with slowly retarding movement. But it should not stop.

I turned in haste and got from the side of my bed the only chair in the room, placed it in the window, sat down before the reluctant instrument, and gave it a third swing. Then, my elbows on the sill, I sat and watched it with growing awe, but growing

determination as well. Once more it showed signs of refusal; once more the forefinger of my right hand administered impulse.

Something gave a crack inside the creature: away went the pendulum, swinging with a will. I sat and gazed, almost horror-stricken. Ere many moments had passed, the feeling of terror had risen to such a height that, but for the very terror, I would have seized the pendulum in a frantic grasp. I did not. On it went, and I sat looking. My dismay was gradually subsiding.

I have learned since that a certain ancestor—or was he only a great-uncle?—I forget—had a taste for mechanics, even to the craze of the perpetual motion, and could work well in brass and iron. The creature was probably some invention of his. It was a real marvel how, after so many years of idleness, it could now go as it did. I confess, as I contemplate the thing, I am in a puzzle, and almost fancy the whole a dream. But let it pass. At worst, something of which this is the sole representative residuum, wrought an effect on me which embodies its cause thus, as I search for it in the past. And why should not the individual life have its misty legends as well as that of nations? From them, as from the golden and rosy clouds of morning, dawns at last the true sun of its unquestionable history. Every boy has his own fables, just as the Romes and the Englands of the world have their Romuli and their Arthurs, their suckling wolves and their granite-sheathed swords. Do they not reflect each other? I tell the tale as 'tis left in me.

How long I sat thus gazing at the now self-impelled

instrument, I cannot say. The next point in the progress of the legend, is a gust of wind rattling the window in whose recess I was seated. I jumped from my chair in terror. While I had been absorbed in the pendulum, the evening had closed in; clouds had gathered over the sky, and all was gloomy about the house. It was much too dark to see the distant trees, but there could be no doubt they were at work. The pendulum had roused them. Another, a third, and a fourth gust rattled and shook the rickety frame. I had done it at last! The trees were busy away there in the darkness. I and my pendulum could make the wind.

The gusts came faster and faster, and grew into blasts which settled into a steady gale. The pendulum went on swinging to and fro, and the gale went on increasing in violence. I sat half in terror, half in delight, at the awful success of my experiment. I would have opened the window to let in the coveted air, but that was beyond my knowledge and strength. I could make the wind blow, but, like other magicians, I could not share in its benefits. I would go out and meet it on the open plain. I crept down the stair like a thief—not that I feared detention, but that I felt such a sense of the important, even the dread, about myself and my instrument, that I was not in harmony with souls reflecting only the common affairs of life. In a moment I was in the middle of a storm—for storm it very nearly was and soon became. I rushed to and fro in the midst of it, lay down and rolled in it, and laughed and shouted as I looked up to the window where the pendulum was swinging, and thought of the trees at work

away in the dark. The wind grew stronger and stronger. What if the pendulum should not stop at all, and the wind went on and on, growing louder and fiercer, till it grew mad and blew away the house? Ah, then, poor grannie would have a chance of being buried at last! Seriously, the affair might grow serious.

Such thoughts were passing in my mind, when all at once the wind gave a roar which made me spring to my feet and rush for the house. I must stop the pendulum. There was a strange sound in that blast. The trees themselves had had enough of it, and were protesting against the creature's tyranny. Their master was working them too hard. I ran up the stair on all fours: it was my way when I was in a hurry. Swinging went the pendulum in the window, and the wind roared in the chimney. I seized hold of the oscillating thing, and stopped it; but to my amaze and consternation, the moment I released it, on it went again. I must sit and hold it. But the voice of my aunt called me from below, and as I dared not explain why I would rather not appear, I was forced to obey. I lingered on the stair, half minded to return.

'What a rough night it is!' I heard my aunt say, with rare remark.

'It gets worse and worse,' responded my uncle. 'I hope it won't disturb grannie; but the wind must roar fearfully in her chimney.'

I stood like a culprit. What if they should find out that I was at the root of the mischief, at the heart of the storm!

'If I could believe all that I have been reading to-night about the Prince of the Power of the Air, I should not like this storm at

all,' continued my uncle, with a smile. 'But books are not always to be trusted because they are old,' he added with another smile. 'From the glass, I expected rain and not wind.'

'Whatever wind there is, we get it all,' said my aunt. 'I wonder what Willie is about. I thought I heard him coming down. Isn't it time, David, we did something about his schooling? It won't do to have him idling about this way all day long.'

'He's a mere child,' returned my uncle. 'I'm not forgetting him. But I can't send him away yet.'

'You know best,' returned my aunt.

Send me away! What could it mean? Why should I—where should I go? Was not the old place a part of me, just like my own clothes on my own body? This was the kind of feeling that woke in me at the words. But hearing my aunt push back her chair, evidently with the purpose of finding me, I descended into the room.

'Come along, Willie,' said my uncle. 'Hear the wind how it roars!'

'Yes, uncle; it does roar,' I said, feeling a hypocrite for the first time in my life. Knowing far more about the roaring than he did, I yet spoke like an innocent!

'Do you know who makes the wind, Willie?'

'Yes. The trees,' I answered.

My uncle opened his blue eyes very wide, and looked at my aunt. He had had no idea what a little heathen I was. The more a man has wrought out his own mental condition, the readier he

is to suppose that children must be able to work out theirs, and to forget that he did not work out his information, but only his conclusions. My uncle began to think it was time to take me in hand.

'No, Willie,' he said. 'I must teach you better than that.'

I expected him to begin by telling me that God made the wind; but, whether it was that what the old book said about the Prince of the Power of the Air returned upon him, or that he thought it an unfitting occasion for such a lesson when the wind was roaring so as might render its divine origin questionable, he said no more. Bewildered, I fancy, with my ignorance, he turned, after a pause, to my aunt.

'Don't you think it's time for him to go to bed, Jane?' he suggested.

My aunt replied by getting from the cupboard my usual supper —a basin of milk and a slice of bread; which I ate with less circumspection than usual, for I was eager to return to my room. As soon as I had finished, Nannie was called, and I bade them good-night.

'Make haste, Nannie,' I said. 'Don't you hear how the wind is roaring?'

It was roaring louder than ever, and there was the pendulum swinging away in the window. Nannie took no notice of it, and, I presume, only thought I wanted to get my head under the bed-clothes, and so escape the sound of it. Anyhow, she did make haste, and in a very few minutes I was, as she supposed, snugly

settled for the night. But the moment she shut the door I was out of bed, and at the window. The instant I reached it, a great dash of rain swept against the panes, and the wind howled more fiercely than ever. Believing I had the key of the position, inasmuch as, if I pleased, I could take the pendulum to bed with me, and stifle its motions with the bed-clothes—for this happy idea had dawned upon me while Nannie was undressing me—I was composed enough now to press my face to a pane, and look out. There was a small space amidst the storm dimly illuminated from the windows below, and the moment I looked—out of the darkness into this dim space, as if blown thither by the wind, rushed a figure on horseback, his large cloak flying out before him, and the mane of the animal he rode streaming out over his ears in the fierceness of the blast. He pulled up right under my window, and I thought he looked up, and made threatening gestures at me; but I believe now that horse and man pulled up in sudden danger of dashing against the wall of the house. I shrank back, and when I peeped out again he was gone. The same moment the pendulum gave a click and stopped; one more rattle of rain against the windows, and then the wind stopped also. I crept back to my bed in a new terror, for might not this be the Prince of the Power of the Air, come to see who was meddling with his affairs? Had he not come right out of the storm, and straight from the trees? He must have something to do with it all! Before I had settled the probabilities of the question, however, I was fast asleep.

I awoke—how long after, I cannot tell—with the sound of voices in my ears. It was still dark. The voices came from below. I had been dreaming of the strange horseman, who had turned out to be the awful being concerning whom Nannie had enlightened me as going about at night to buy little children from their nurses, and make bagpipes of their skins. Awaked from such a dream, it was impossible to lie still without knowing what those voices down below were talking about. The strange one must belong to the being, whatever he was, whom I had seen come out of the storm; and of whom could they be talking but me? I was right in both conclusions.

With a fearful resolution I slipped out of bed, opened the door as noiselessly as I might, and crept on my bare, silent feet down the creaking stair, which led, with open balustrade, right into the kitchen, at the end furthest from the chimney. The one candle at the other end could not illuminate its darkness, and I sat unseen, a few steps from the bottom of the stair, listening with all my ears, and staring with all my eyes. The stranger's huge cloak hung drying before the fire, and he was drinking something out of a tumbler. The light fell full upon his face. It was a curious, and certainly not to me an attractive face. The forehead was very projecting, and the eyes were very small, deep set, and sparkling. The mouth—I had almost said muzzle—was very projecting likewise, and the lower jaw shot in front of the upper. When the man smiled the light was reflected from what seemed to my eyes an inordinate multitude of white teeth. His

ears were narrow and long, and set very high upon his head. The hand which he every now and then displayed in the exigencies of his persuasion, was white, but very large, and the thumb was exceedingly long. I had weighty reasons for both suspecting and fearing the man; and, leaving my prejudices out of the question, there was in the conversation itself enough besides to make me take note of dangerous points in his appearance. I never could lay much claim to physical courage, and I attribute my behaviour on this occasion rather to the fascination of terror than to any impulse of self-preservation: I sat there in utter silence, listening like an ear-trumpet. The first words I could distinguish were to this effect:—

'You do not mean,' said the enemy, 'to tell me, Mr Cumbermede, that you intend to bring up the young fellow in absolute ignorance of the decrees of fate?'

'I pledge myself to nothing in the matter,' returned my uncle, calmly, but with something in his tone which was new to me.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed the other. 'Excuse me, sir, but what right can you have to interfere after such a serious fashion with the young gentleman's future?'

'It seems to me,' said my uncle, 'that you wish to interfere with it after a much more serious fashion. There are things in which ignorance may be preferable to knowledge.'

'But what harm could the knowledge of such a fact do him?'

'Upset all his notions, render him incapable of thinking about anything of importance, occasion an utter—'

But *can* anything be more important?' interrupted the visitor.

My uncle went on without heeding him.

'Plunge him over head and ears in—'

'Hot water, I grant you,' again interrupted the enemy, to my horror; 'but it wouldn't be for long. Only give me your sanction, and I promise you to have the case as tight as a drum before I ask you to move a step in it.'

'But why should you take so much interest in what is purely our affair?' asked my uncle.

'Why, of course you would have to pay the piper,' said the man.

This was too much! *Pay* the man that played upon me after I was made into bagpipes! The idea was too frightful.

'I must look out for business, you know; and, by Jove! I shall never have such a chance, if I live to the age of Methuselah.'

'Well, you shall not have it from me.'

'Then,' said the man, rising, 'you are more of a fool than I took you for.'

'Sir!' said my uncle.

'No offence; no offence, I assure you. But it is provoking to find people so blind—so wilfully blind—to their own interest. You may say I have nothing to lose. Give me the boy, and I'll bring him up like my own son; send him to school and college, too—all on the chance of being repaid twice over by—'

I knew this was all a trick to get hold of my skin. The man said it on his way to the door, his ape-face shining dim as he turned

it a little back in the direction of my uncle, who followed with the candle. I lost the last part of the sentence in the terror which sent me bounding up the stair in my usual four-footed fashion. I leaped into my bed, shaking with cold and agony combined. But I had the satisfaction presently of hearing the *thud* of the horse's hoofs upon the sward, dying away in the direction whence they had come. After that I soon fell asleep.

I need hardly say that I never set the pendulum swinging again. Many years after, I came upon it when searching for a key, and the thrill which vibrated through my whole frame announced a strange and unwelcome presence long before my memory could recall its origin.

It must not be supposed that I pretend to remember all the conversation I have just set down. The words are but the forms in which, enlightened by facts which have since come to my knowledge, I clothe certain vague memories and impressions of such an interview as certainly took place.

In the morning, at breakfast, my aunt asked my uncle who it was that paid such an untimely visit the preceding night.

'A fellow from Minstercombe' (the county town), 'an attorney —what did he say his name was? Yes, I remember. It was the same as the steward's over the way. Coningham, it was.'

'Mr Coningham has a son there—an attorney too, I think,' said my aunt.

My uncle seemed struck by the reminder, and became meditative.

‘That explains his choosing such a night to come in. His father is getting an old man now. Yes, it must be the same.’

‘He’s a sharp one, folk say,’ said my aunt, with a pointedness in the remark which showed some anxiety.

‘That he cannot conceal, sharp as he is,’ said my uncle, and there the conversation stopped.

The very next evening my uncle began to teach me. I had a vague notion that this had something to do with my protection against the machinations of the man Coningham, the idea of whom was inextricably associated in my mind with that of the Prince of the Power of the Air, darting from the midst of the churning trees, on a horse whose streaming mane and flashing eyes indicated no true equine origin. I gave myself with diligence to the work my uncle set me.

CHAPTER V. I HAVE LESSONS

It is a simple fact that up to this time I did not know my letters. It was, I believe, part of my uncle's theory of education that as little pain as possible should be associated with merely intellectual effort: he would not allow me, therefore, to commence my studies until the task of learning should be an easy one. Henceforth, every evening, after tea, he took me to his own room, the walls of which were nearly covered with books, and there taught me.

One peculiar instance of his mode I will give, and let it stand rather as a pledge for the rest of his system than an index to it. It was only the other day it came back to me. Like Jean Paul, he would utter the name of God to a child only at grand moments; but there was a great difference in the moments the two men would have chosen. Jean Paul would choose a thunder-storm, for instance; the following will show the kind of my uncle's choice. One Sunday evening he took me for a longer walk than usual. We had climbed a little hill: I believe it was the first time I ever had a wide view of the earth. The horses were all loose in the fields; the cattle were gathering their supper as the sun went down; there was an indescribable hush in the air, as if Nature herself knew the seventh day; there was no sound even of water, for here the water crept slowly to the far-off sea, and the slant sunlight shone back from just one bend of a canal-like river; the hay-stacks and ricks

of the last year gleamed golden in the farmyards; great fields of wheat stood up stately around us, the glow in their yellow brought out by the red poppies that sheltered in the forest of their stems; the odour of the grass and clover came in pulses; and the soft blue sky was flecked with white clouds tinged with pink, which deepened until it gathered into a flaming rose in the west, where the sun was welling out oceans of liquid red.

I looked up in my uncle's face. It shone in a calm glow, like an answering rosy moon. The eyes of my mind were opened: I saw that he felt something, and then I felt it too, His soul, with the glory for an interpreter, kindled mine.

He, in turn, caught the sight of my face, and his soul broke forth in one word:—

God! Willie; God!' was all he said; and surely it was enough.

It was only then in moments of strong repose that my uncle spoke to me of God.

Although he never petted me, that is, never showed me any animal affection, my uncle was like a father to me in this, that he was about and above me, a pure benevolence. It is no wonder that I should learn rapidly under his teaching, for I was quick enough, and possessed the more energy that it had not been wasted on unpleasant tasks.

Whether from indifference or intent I cannot tell, but he never forbade me to touch any of his books. Upon more occasions than one he found me on the floor with a folio between my knees; but he only smiled and said—

'Ah, Willie! mind you don't crumple the leaves.'

About this time also I had a new experience of another kind, which impressed me almost with the force of a revelation.

I had not yet explored the boundaries of the prairie-like level on which I found myself. As soon as I got about a certain distance from home, I always turned and ran back. Fear is sometimes the first recognition of freedom. Delighting in liberty, I yet shrunk from the unknown spaces around me, and rushed back to the shelter of the home-walls. But as I grew older I became more adventurous; and one evening, although the shadows were beginning to lengthen, I went on and on until I made a discovery. I found a half-spherical hollow in the grassy surface. I rushed into its depth as if it had been a mine of marvels, threw myself on the ground, and gazed into the sky as if I had now for the first time discovered its true relation to the earth. The earth was a cup, and the sky its cover.

There were lovely daisies in this hollow—not too many to spoil the grass—and they were red-tipped daisies. There was besides, in the very heart of it, one plant of the finest pimpernels I have ever seen, and this was my introduction to the flower. Nor were these all the treasures of the spot. A late primrose, a tiny child, born out of due time, opened its timid petals in the same hollow. Here then we regathered red-tipped daisies, large pimpernels, and one tiny primrose. I lay and looked at them in delight—not at all inclined to pull them, for they were where I loved to see them. I never had much inclination to gather flowers.

I see them as a part of a whole, and rejoice in them in their own place without any desire to appropriate them. I lay and looked at these for a long time. Perhaps I fell asleep. I do not know. I have often waked in the open air. All at once I looked up and saw a vision.

My reader will please to remember that up to this hour I had never seen a lady. I cannot by any stretch call my worthy aunt a lady; and my grandmother was too old, and too much an object of mysterious anxiety, to produce the impression, of a lady upon me. Suddenly I became aware that a lady was looking down on me. Over the edge of my horizon, the circle of the hollow that touched the sky, her face shone like a rising moon. Sweet eyes looked on me, and a sweet mouth was tremulous with a smile. I will not attempt to describe her. To my childish eyes she was much what a descended angel must have been to eyes of old, in the days when angels did descend, and there were Arabs or Jews on the earth who could see them. A new knowledge dawned in me. I lay motionless, looking up with worship in my heart. As suddenly she vanished. I lay far into the twilight, and then rose and went home, half bewildered, with a sense of heaven about me which settled into the fancy that my mother had come to see me. I wondered afterwards that I had not followed her; but I never forgot her, and, morning, midday, or evening, whenever the fit seized me, I would wander away and lie down in the hollow, gazing at the spot where the lovely face had arisen, in the fancy, hardly in the hope, that my moon might once more arise and

bless me with her vision.

Hence I suppose came another habit of mine, that of watching in the same hollow, and in the same posture, now for the sun, now for the moon, but generally for the sun. You might have taken me for a fire-worshipper, so eagerly would I rise when the desire came upon me, so hastily in the clear grey of the morning would I dress myself, lest the sun should be up before me, and I fail to catch his first lance-like rays dazzling through the forest of grass on the edge of my hollow world. Bare-footed I would scud like a hare through the dew, heedless of the sweet air of the morning, heedless of the few bird-songs about me, heedless even of the east, whose saffron might just be burning into gold, as I ran to gain the green hollow whence alone I would greet the morning. Arrived there, I shot into its shelter, and threw myself panting on the grass, to gaze on the spot at which I expected the rising glory to appear. Ever when I recall the custom, that one lark is wildly praising over my head, for he sees the sun for which I am waiting. He has his nest in the hollow beside me. I would sooner have turned my back on the sun than disturbed the home of his high-priest, the lark. And now the edge of my horizon begins to burn; the green blades glow in their tops; they are melted through with light; the flashes invade my eyes; they gather; they grow, until I hide my face in my hands. The sun is up. But on my hands and my knees I rush after the retreating shadow, and, like a child at play with its nurse, hide in its curtain. Up and up comes the peering sun; he will find me; I cannot hide from him; there is

in the wide field no shelter from his gaze. No matter then. Let him shine into the deepest corners of my heart, and shake the cowardice and the meanness out of it.

I thus made friends with Nature. I had no great variety even in her, but the better did I understand what I had. The next Summer I began to hunt for glow-worms, and carry them carefully to my hollow, that in the warm, soft, moonless nights they might illumine it with a strange light. When I had been very successful, I would call my uncle and aunt to see. My aunt tried me by always having something to do first. My uncle, on the other hand, would lay down his book at once, and follow me submissively. He could not generate amusement for me, but he sympathized with what I could find for myself.

'Come and see my cows,' I would say to him.

I well remember the first time I took him to see them. When we reached the hollow, he stood for a moment silent. Then he said, laying his hand on my shoulder,

'Very pretty, Willie! But why do you call them cows?'

'You told me last night,' I answered, 'that the road the angels go across the sky is called the milky way—didn't you, uncle?'

'I never told you the angels went that way, my boy.'

'Oh! didn't you? I thought you did.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Oh! I remember now: I thought if it was a way, and nobody but the angels could go in it, that must be the way the angels did go.'

'Yes, yes, I see! But what has that to do with the glow-worms?'

'Don't you see, uncle? If it be the milky way, the stars must be the cows. Look at my cows, uncle. Their milk is very pretty milk, isn't it?'

'Very pretty, indeed, my dear—rather green.'

'Then I suppose if you could put it in auntie's pan, you might make another moon of it?'

'That's being silly now,' said my uncle; and I ceased, abashed.

'Look, look, uncle!' I exclaimed, a moment after; 'they don't like being talked about, my cows.'

For as if a cold gust of wind had passed over them, they all dwindled and paled. I thought they were going out.

'Oh dear, oh dear!' I cried, and began dancing about with dismay. The next instant the glow returned, and the hollow was radiant.

'Oh, the dear light!' I cried again. 'Look at it, uncle! Isn't it lovely?'

He took me by the hand. His actions were always so much more tender than his words!

'Do you know who is the light of the world, Willie?'

'Yes, well enough. I saw him get out of bed this morning.'

My uncle led me home without a word more. But next night he began to teach me about the light of the world, and about walking in the light. I do not care to repeat much of what he taught me in this kind, for like my glow-worms it does not like to be talked about. Somehow it loses colour and shine when one talks.

I have now shown sufficiently how my uncle would seize opportunities for beginning things. He thought more of the beginning than of any other part of a process.

'All's well that begins well,' he would say. I did not know what his smile meant as he said so.

I sometimes wonder how I managed to get through the days without being weary. No one ever thought of giving me toys. I had a turn for using my hands; but I was too young to be trusted with a knife. I had never seen a kite, except far away in the sky: I took it for a bird. There were no rushes to make water-wheels of, and no brooks to set them turning in. I had neither top nor marbles. I had no dog to play with. And yet I do not remember once feeling weary. I knew all the creatures that went creeping about in the grass, and although I did not know the proper name for one of them, I had names of my own for them all, and was so familiar with their looks and their habits, that I am confident I could in some degree interpret some of the people I met afterwards by their resemblances to these insects. I have a man in my mind now who has exactly the head and face, if face it can be called, of an ant. It is not a head, but a helmet. I knew all the butterflies—they were mostly small ones, but of lovely varieties. A stray dragon-fly would now and then delight me; and there were hunting-spiders and wood-lice, and queerer creatures of which I do not yet know the names. Then there were grasshoppers, which for some time I took to be made of green leaves, and I thought they grew like fruit on the trees till

they were ripe, when they jumped down, and jumped for ever after. Another child might have caught and caged them; for me, I followed them about, and watched their ways.

In the Winter, things had not hitherto gone quite so well with me. Then I had been a good deal dependent upon Nannie and her stories, which were neither very varied nor very well told. But now that I had begun to read, things went better. To be sure, there were not in my uncle's library many books such as children have now-a-days; but there were old histories, and some voyages and travels, and in them I revelled. I am perplexed sometimes when I look into one of these books—for I have them all about me now—to find how dry they are. The shine seems to have gone out of them. Or is it that the shine has gone out of the eyes that used to read them? If so, it will come again some day. I do not find that the shine has gone out of a beetle's back; and I can read *The Pilgrim's Progress* still.

CHAPTER VI. I COBBLE

All this has led me, after a roundabout fashion, to what became for some time the chief delight of my Winters—an employment, moreover, which I have taken up afresh at odd times during my life. It came about thus. My uncle had made me a present of an old book with pictures in it. It was called *The Preceptor*—one of Dodsley's publications. There were wonderful folding plates of all sorts in it. Those which represented animals were of course my favourites. But these especially were in a very dilapidated condition, for there had been children before me somewhere; and I proceeded, at my uncle's suggestion, to try to mend them by pasting them on another piece of paper. I made bad work of it at first, and was so dissatisfied with the results, that I set myself in earnest to find out by what laws of paste and paper success might be secured. Before the Winter was over, my uncle found me grown so skilful in this manipulation of broken leaves —for as yet I had not ventured further in any of the branches of repair—that he gave me plenty of little jobs of the sort, for amongst his books there were many old ones. This was a source of great pleasure. Before the following Winter was over, I came to try my hand at repairing bindings, and my uncle was again so much pleased with my success that one day he brought me from the county town some sheets of parchment with which to attempt the fortification of certain vellum-bound volumes which

were considerably the worse for age and use. I well remember how troublesome the parchment was for a long time; but at last I conquered it, and succeeded very fairly in my endeavours to restore to tidiness the garments of ancient thought.

But there was another consequence of this pursuit which may be considered of weight in my history. This was the discovery of a copy of the Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*—much in want of skilful patching, from the title-page, with its boar smelling at the rose-bush, to the graduated lines and the *Finis*. This book I read through from boar to finis—no small undertaking, and partly, no doubt, under its influences, I became about this time conscious of a desire after honour, as yet a notion of the vaguest. I hardly know how I escaped the taking for granted that there were yet knights riding about on war-horses, with couched lances and fierce spurs, everywhere as in days of old. They might have been roaming the world in all directions, without my seeing one of them. But somehow I did not fall into the mistake. Only with the thought of my future career, when I should be a man and go out into the world, came always the thought of the sword which hung on the wall. A longing to handle it began to possess me, and my old dream returned. I dared not, however, say a word to my uncle on the subject. I felt certain that he would slight the desire, and perhaps tell me I should hurt myself with the weapon; and one whose heart glowed at the story of the battle between him on the white horse with carnation mane and tail, in his armour of blue radiated with gold, and him on the black-spotted brown,

in his dusky armour of despair, could not expose himself to such an indignity.

CHAPTER VII. THE SWORD ON THE WALL

Where possession was impossible, knowledge might yet be reached: could I not learn the story of the ancient weapon? How came that which had more fitly hung in the hall of a great castle, here upon the wall of a kitchen? My uncle, however, I felt, was not the source whence I might hope for help. No better was my aunt. Indeed I had the conviction that she neither knew nor cared anything about the useless thing. It was her tea-table that must be kept bright for honour's sake. But there was grannie!

My relations with her had continued much the same. The old fear of her lingered, and as yet I had had no inclination to visit her room by myself. I saw that my uncle and aunt always behaved to her with the greatest kindness and much deference, but could not help observing also that she cherished some secret offence, receiving their ministrations with a certain condescension which clearly enough manifested its origin as hidden cause of complaint and not pride. I wondered that my uncle and aunt took no notice of it, always addressing her as if they were on the best possible terms; and I knew that my uncle never went to his work without visiting her, and never went to bed without reading a prayer by her bedside first. I think Nannie told me this.

She could still read a little, for her sight had been short,

and had held out better even than usual with such. But she cared nothing for the news of the hour. My uncle had a weekly newspaper, though not by any means regularly, from a friend in London, but I never saw it in my grandmother's hands. Her reading was mostly in the *Spectator*, or in one of De Foe's works. I have seen her reading Pope.

The sword was in my bones, and as I judged that only from grannie could I get any information respecting it, I found myself beginning to inquire why I was afraid to go to her. I was unable to account for it, still less to justify it. As I reflected, the kindness of her words and expressions dawned upon me, and I even got so far as to believe that I had been guilty of neglect in not visiting her oftener and doing something for her. True, I recalled likewise that my uncle had desired me not to visit her except with him or my aunt, but that was ages ago, when I was a very little boy and might have been troublesome. I could even read to her now if she wished it. In short, I felt myself perfectly capable of entering into social relations with her generally. But if there was any flow of affection towards her, it was the sword that had broken the seal of its fountain.

One morning at breakfast I had been sitting gazing at the sword on the wall opposite me. My aunt had observed the steadiness of my look.

'What are you staring at, Willie?' she said. 'Your eyes are fixed in your head. Are you choking?'

The words offended me. I got up and walked out of the room.

As I went round the table I saw that my uncle and aunt were staring at each other very much as I had been staring at the sword. I soon felt ashamed of myself, and returned, hoping that my behaviour might be attributed to some passing indisposition. Mechanically I raised my eyes to the wall. Could I believe them? The sword was gone—absolutely gone! My heart seemed to swell up into my throat; I felt my cheeks burning. The passion grew within me, and might have broken out in some form or other, had I not felt that would at once betray my secret. I sat still with a fierce effort, consoling and strengthening myself with the resolution that I would hesitate no longer, but take the first chance of a private interview with grannie. I tried hard to look as if nothing had happened, and when breakfast was over, went to my own room. It was there I carried on my pasting operations. There also at this time I drank deep in the 'Pilgrim's Progress;' there were swords, and armour, and giants, and demons there: but I had no inclination for either employment now.

My uncle left for the farm as usual, and to my delight I soon discovered that my aunt had gone with him. The ways of the house were as regular as those of a bee-hive. Sitting in my own room I knew precisely where any one must be at any given moment; for although the only clock we had was oftener standing than going, a perfect instinct of time was common to the household, Nannie included. At that moment she was sweeping up the hearth and putting on the kettle. In half an hour she would have tidied up the kitchen, and would have gone to prepare the

vegetables for cooking: I must wait. But the sudden fear struck me that my aunt might have taken the sword with her—might be going to make away with it altogether. I started up, and rushed about the room in an agony. What could I do? At length I heard Nannie's pattens clatter out of the kitchen to a small outhouse where she pared the potatoes. I instantly descended, crossed the kitchen, and went up the winding stone stair. I opened grannie's door, and went in.

She was seated in her usual place. Never till now had I felt how old she was. She looked up when I entered, for although she had grown very deaf, she could feel the floor shake. I saw by her eyes, which looked higher than my head, that she had expected a taller figure to follow me. When I turned from shutting the door, I saw her arms extended with an eager look, and could see her hands trembling ere she folded them about me, and pressed my head to her bosom.

'O Lord!' she said, 'I thank thee. I will try to be good now. O Lord, I have waited, and thou hast heard me. I will believe in thee again!'

From that moment I loved my grannie, and felt I owed her something as well as my uncle. I had never had this feeling about my aunt.

'Grannie!' I said, trembling from a conflict of emotions; but before I could utter my complaint, I had burst out crying.

'What have they been doing to you, child?' she asked, almost fiercely, and sat up straight in her chair. Her voice, although

feeble and quavering, was determined in tone. She pushed me back from her and sought the face I was ashamed to show. 'What have they done to you, my boy?' she repeated, ere I could conquer my sobs sufficiently to speak.

'They have taken away the sword that—'

'What sword?' she asked quickly. 'Not the sword that your great-grandfather wore when he followed Sir Marmaduke?'

'I don't know, grannie.'

'Don't know, boy? The only thing your father took when he —. Not the sword with the broken sheath? Never! They daren't do it! I will go down myself. I must see about it at once.'

'Oh, grannie, don't!' I cried in terror, as she rose from her chair. 'They'll not let me ever come near you again, if you do.'

She sat down again. After seeming to ponder for a while in silence, she said:—

'Well, Willie, my dear, you're more to me than the old sword. But I wouldn't have had it handled with disrespect for all that the place is worth. However, I don't suppose they can—. What made them do it, child? They've not taken it down from the wall?'

'Yes, grannie. I think it was because I was staring at it too much, grannie. Perhaps they were afraid I would take it down and hurt myself with it. But I was only going to ask you about it. Tell me a story about it, grannie.'

All my notion was some story, I did not think whether true or false, like one of Nannie's stories.

'That I will, my child—all about it—all about it. Let me see.'

Her eyes went wandering a little, and she looked perplexed.

'And they took it from you, did they? Poor child! Poor child!'

'They didn't take it from me, grannie. I never had it in my hands.'

'Wouldn't give it you then? Oh dear! Oh dear!'

I began to feel uncomfortable—grannie looked so strange and lost. The old feeling that she ought to be buried because she was dead returned upon me; but I overcame it so far as to be able to say:

'Won't you tell me about it then, grannie? I want so much to hear about the battle.'

'What battle, child? Oh yes! I'll tell you all about it some day, but I've forgot now, I've forgot it all now.'

She pressed her hand to her forehead, and sat thus for some time, while I grew very frightened. I would gladly have left the room and crept down-stairs, but I stood fascinated, gazing at the withered face half-hidden by the withered hand. I longed to be anywhere else, but my will had deserted me, and there I must remain. At length grannie took her hand from her eyes, and seeing me, started.

'Ah, my dear!' she said,' I had forgotten you. You wanted me to do something for you: what was it?'

'I wanted you to tell me about the sword, grannie.'

'Oh yes, the sword!' she returned, putting her hand again to her forehead. 'They took it away from you, did they? Well, never mind. I will give you something else—though I don't say it's as

good as the sword.'

She rose, and taking an ivory-headed stick which leaned against the side of the chimney-piece, walked with tottering steps towards the bureau. There she took from her pocket a small bunch of keys, and having, with some difficulty from the trembling of her hands, chosen one and unlocked the sloping cover, she opened a little drawer inside, and took out a gold watch with a bunch of seals hanging from it. Never shall I forget the thrill that went through my frame. Did she mean to let me hold it in my own hand? Might I have it as often as I came to see her? Imagine my ecstasy when she put it carefully in the two hands I held up to receive it, and said:

'There, my dear! You must take good care of it, and never give it away for love or money. Don't you open it—there's a good boy, till you're a man like your father. He *was* a man! He gave it to me the day we were married, for he had nothing else, he said, to offer me. But I would not take it, my dear. I liked better to see him with it than have it myself. And when he left me, I kept it for you. But you must take care of it, you know.'

'Oh, thank you, grannie!' I cried, in an agony of pleasure. 'I *will* take care of it—indeed I will. Is it a real watch, grannie—as real as uncle's?'

'It's worth ten of your uncle's, my dear. Don't you show it him, though. He might take that away too. Your uncle's a very good man, my dear, but you mustn't mind everything he says to you. He forgets things. I never forget anything. I have plenty of time

to think about things. I never forget.'

'Will it go, grannie?' I asked, for my uncle was a much less interesting subject than the watch.

'It won't go without being wound up; but you might break it. Besides, it may want cleaning. It's several years since it was cleaned last. Where will you put it now?'

'Oh! I know where to hide it safe enough, grannie,' I exclaimed. 'I'll take care of it. You needn't be afraid, grannie.'

The old lady turned, and with difficulty tottered to her seat. I remained where I was, fixed in contemplation of my treasure. She called me. I went and stood by her knee.

'My child, there is something I want very much to tell you, but you know old people forget things—'

'But you said just now that you never forgot anything, grannie.'

'No more I do, my dear; only I can't always lay my hands upon a thing when I want it.'

'It was about the sword, grannie,' I said, thinking to refresh her memory.

'No, my dear; I don't think it was about the sword exactly—though that had something to do with it. I shall remember it all by-and-by. It will come again. And so must you, my dear. Don't leave your old mother so long alone. It's weary, weary work, waiting.'

'Indeed I won't, grannie,' I said. 'I will come the very first time I can. Only I mustn't let auntie see me, you know.—You don't want to be buried now, do you, grannie?' I added; for I had begun

to love her, and the love had cast out the fear, and I did not want her to wish to be buried.

'I am very, very old; much too old to live, my dear. But I must do you justice before I can go to my grave. *Now* I know what I wanted to say. It's gone again. Oh dear! Oh dear! If I had you in the middle of the night, when everything comes back as if it had been only yesterday, I could tell you all about it from beginning to end, with all the ins and outs of it. But I can't now—I can't now.'

She moaned and rocked herself to and fro.

'Never mind, grannie,' I said cheerfully, for I was happy enough for all eternity with my gold watch; 'I will come and see you again as soon as ever I can.' And I kissed her on the white cheek.

'Thank you, my dear. I think you had better go now. They may miss you, and then I should never see you again—to talk to, I mean.'

'Why won't they let me come, and see you, grannie?' I asked.

'That's what I wanted to tell you, if I could only see a little better,' she answered, once more putting her hand to her forehead. 'Perhaps I shall be able to tell you next time. Go now, my dear.'

I left the room, nothing loth, for I longed to be alone with my treasure. I could not get enough of it in grannie's presence even. Noiseless as a bat I crept down the stair. When I reached the door at the foot I stood and listened. The kitchen was quite silent. I stepped out. There was no one there. I scudded across and up the

other stair to my own room, carefully shutting the door behind me. Then I sat down on the floor on the other side of the bed, so that it was between me and the door, and I could run into the closet with my treasure before any one entering should see me.

The watch was a very thick round one. The back of it was crowded with raised figures in the kind of work called *repoussée*. I pored over these for a long time, and then turned to the face. It was set all round with shining stones—diamonds, though I knew nothing of diamonds then. The enamel was cracked, and I followed every crack as well as every figure of the hours. Then I began to wonder what I could do with it next. I was not satisfied. Possession I found was not bliss: it had not rendered me content. But it was as yet imperfect: I had not seen the inside. Grannie had told me not to open it: I began to think it hard that I should be denied thorough possession of what had been given to me, I believed I should be quite satisfied if I once saw what made it go. I turned it over and over, thinking I might at least find how it was opened. I have little doubt if I had discovered the secret of it, my virtue would have failed me. All I did find, however, was the head of a curious animal engraved on the handle. This was something. I examined it as carefully as the rest, and then finding I had for the time exhausted the pleasures of the watch, I turned to the seals. On one of them was engraved what looked like letters, but I could not read them. I did not know that they were turned the wrong way. One of them was like a W. On the other seal—there were but two and a curiously-contrived key—I

found the same head as was engraved on the handle—turned the other way of course. Wearied at length, I took the precious thing into the dark closet, and laid it in a little box which formed one of my few possessions. I then wandered out into the field, and went straying about until dinner-time, during which I believe I never once lifted my eyes to the place where the sword had hung, lest even that action should betray the watch.

From that day my head, and as much of my heart as might be, were filled with the watch. And, alas! I soon found that my bookmending had grown distasteful to me, and for the satisfaction of employment, possession was a poor substitute. As often as I made the attempt to resume it, I got weary, and wandered almost involuntarily to the closet to feel for my treasure in the dark, handle it once more, and bring it out into the light. Already I began to dree the doom of riches, in the vain attempt to live by that which was not bread. Nor was this all. A certain weight began to gather over my spirit—a sense almost of wrong. For although the watch had been given me by my grandmother, and I never doubted either her right to dispose of it or my right to possess it, I could not look my uncle in the face, partly from a vague fear lest he should read my secret in my eyes, partly from a sense of something out of joint between him and me. I began to fancy, and I believe I was right, that he looked at me sometimes with a wistfulness I had never seen in his face before. This made me so uncomfortable that I began to avoid his presence as much as possible. And although I tried to please him with my lessons,

I could not learn them as hitherto.

One day he asked me to bring him the book I had been repairing.

'It's not finished yet, uncle,' I said.

'Will you bring it me just as it is. I want to look for something in it.'

I went and brought it with shame. He took it, and having found the passage he wanted, turned the volume once over in his hands, and gave it me back without a word.

Next day I restored it to him finished and tidy. He thanked me, looked it over again, and put it in its place. But I fairly encountered an inquiring and somewhat anxious gaze. I believe he had a talk with my aunt about me that night.

The next morning, I was seated by the bedside, with my secret in my hand, when I thought I heard the sound of the door-handle, and glided at once into the closet. When I came out in a flutter of anxiety, there was no one there. But I had been too much startled to return to what I had grown to feel almost a guilty pleasure.

The next morning after breakfast, I crept into the closet, put my hand unerringly into the one corner of the box, found no watch, and after an unavailing search, sat down in the dark on a bundle of rags, with the sensations of a ruined man. My world was withered up and gone. How the day passed, I cannot tell. How I got through my meals, I cannot even imagine. When I look back and attempt to recall the time, I see but a cloudy waste of misery crossed by the lightning-streaks of a sense of injury. All

that was left me now was a cat-like watching for the chance of going to my grandmother. Into her ear I would pour the tale of my wrong. She who had been as a haunting discomfort to me, had grown to be my one consolation.

My lessons went on as usual. A certain pride enabled me to learn them tolerably for a day or two; but when that faded, my whole being began to flag. For some time my existence was a kind of life in death. At length one evening my uncle said to me, as we finished my lessons far from satisfactorily—

'Willie, your aunt and I think it better you should go to school. We shall be very sorry to part with you, but it will be better. You will then have companions of your own age. You have not enough to amuse you at home.'

He did not allude by a single word to the affair of the watch. Could my aunt have taken it, and never told him? It was not likely.

I was delighted at the idea of any change, for my life had grown irksome to me.

'Oh, thank you, uncle!' I cried, with genuine expression.

I think he looked a little sad; but he uttered no reproach.

My aunt and he had already arranged everything. The next day but one, I saw, for the first time, a carriage drive up to the door of the house. I was waiting for it impatiently. My new clothes had all been packed in a little box. I had not put in a single toy: I cared for nothing I had now. The box was put up beside the driver. My aunt came to the door where I was waiting for my uncle.

'Mayn't I go and say good-bye to grannie?' I asked.

'She's not very well to-day,' said my aunt. 'I think you had better not. You will be back at Christmas, you know.'

I was not so much grieved as I ought to have been. The loss of my watch had made the thought of grannie painful again.

'Your uncle will meet you at the road,' continued my aunt, seeing me still hesitate. 'Good-bye.'

I received her cold embrace without emotion, clambered into the chaise, and looking out as the driver shut the door, wondered what my aunt was holding her apron to her eyes for, as she turned away into the house. My uncle met us and got in, and away the chaise rattled, bearing me towards an utterly new experience; for hardly could the strangest region in foreign lands be more unknown to the wandering mariner than the faces and ways of even my own kind were to me. I had never played for one half-hour with boy or girl. I knew nothing of their play-things or their games. I hardly knew what boys were like, except, outwardly, from the dim reflex of myself in the broken mirror in my bed-room, whose lustre was more of the ice than the pool, and, inwardly, from the partly exceptional experiences of my own nature, with which even I was poorly enough acquainted.

CHAPTER VIII. I GO TO SCHOOL, AND GRANNIE LEAVES IT

It is an evil thing to break up a family before the natural period of its dissolution. In the course of things, marriage, the necessities of maintenance, or the energies of labour guiding 'to fresh woods and pastures new,' are the ordered causes of separation.

Where the home is happy, much injury is done the children in sending them to school, except it be a day-school, whither they go in the morning as to the labours of the world, but whence they return at night as to the heaven of repose. Conflict through the day, rest at night, is the ideal. A day-school will suffice for the cultivation of the necessary public or national spirit, without which the love of the family may degenerate into a merely extended selfishness, but which is itself founded upon those family affections. At the same time, it must be confessed that boarding-schools are, in many cases, an antidote to some of the evil conditions which exist at home.

To children whose home is a happy one, the exile to a school must be bitter. Mine, however, was an unusual experience. Leaving aside the specially troubled state in which I was when thus carried to the village of Aldwick, I had few of the finer elements of the ideal home in mine. The love of my childish

heart had never been drawn out. My grandmother had begun to do so, but her influence had been speedily arrested. I was, as they say of cats, more attached to the place than the people, and no regrets whatever interfered to quell the excitement of expectation, wonder, and curiosity which filled me on the journey. The motion of the vehicle, the sound of the horses' hoofs, the travellers we passed on the road—all seemed to partake of the exuberant life which swelled and overflowed in me. Everything was as happy, as excited, as I was.

When we entered the village, behold it was a region of glad tumult! Were there not three dogs, two carts, a maid carrying pails of water, and several groups of frolicking children in the street—not to mention live ducks, and a glimpse of grazing geese on the common? There were also two mothers at their cottage-doors, each with a baby in her arms. I knew they were babies, although I had never seen a baby before. And when we drove through the big wooden gate, and stopped at the door of what had been the manor-house but was now Mr Elder's school, the aspect of the building, half-covered with ivy, bore to me a most friendly look. Still more friendly was the face of the master's wife, who received us in a low dark parlour, with a thick soft carpet and rich red curtains. It was a perfect paradise to my imagination. Nor did the appearance of Mr Elder at all jar with the vision of coming happiness. His round, rosy, spectacled face bore in it no premonitory suggestion of birch or rod, and although I continued at his school for six years, I never saw him use either. If a boy

required that kind of treatment, he sent him home. When my uncle left me, it was in more than contentment with my lot. Nor did anything occur to alter my feeling with regard to it. I soon became much attached to Mrs Elder. She was just the woman for a schoolmaster's wife—as full of maternity as she could hold, but childless. By the end of the first day I thought I loved her far more than my aunt. My aunt had done her duty towards me; but how was a child to weigh that? She had taken no trouble to make me love her; she had shown me none of the signs of affection, and I could not appreciate the proofs of it yet.

I soon perceived a great difference between my uncle's way of teaching and that of Mr Elder. My uncle always appeared aware of something behind which pressed upon, perhaps hurried, the fact he was making me understand. He made me feel, perhaps too much, that it was a mere step towards something beyond. Mr Elder, on the other hand, placed every point in such a strong light that it seemed in itself of primary consequence. Both were, if my judgment after so many years be correct, admirable teachers —my uncle the greater, my school-master the more immediately efficient. As I was a manageable boy to the very verge of weakness, the relations between us were entirely pleasant.

There were only six more pupils, all of them sufficiently older than myself to be ready to pet and indulge me. No one who saw me mounted on the back of the eldest, a lad of fifteen, and driving four of them in hand, while the sixth ran alongside as an outrider—could have wondered that I should find school better

than home. Before the first day was over, the sorrows of the lost watch and sword had vanished utterly. For what was possession to being possessed? What was a watch, even had it been going, to the movements of life? To peep from the wicket in the great gate out upon the village street, with the well in the middle of it, and a girl in the sunshine winding up the green dripping bucket from the unknown depths of coolness, was more than a thousand watches. But this was by no means the extent of my new survey of things. One of the causes of Mr Elder's keeping no boy who required chastisement was his own love of freedom, and his consequent desire to give the boys as much liberty out of school hours as possible. He believed in freedom. 'The great end of training,' he said to me many years after, when he was quite an old man, 'is liberty; and the sooner you can get a boy to be a law to himself, the sooner you make a man of him. This end is impossible without freedom. Let those who have no choice, or who have not the same end in view, do the best they can with such boys as they find: I chose only such as could bear liberty. I never set up as a reformer—only as an educator. For that kind of work others were more fit than I. It was not my calling.' Hence Mr Elder no more allowed labour to intrude upon play, than play to intrude upon labour. As soon as lessons were over, we were free to go where we would and do what we would, under certain general restrictions, which had more to do with social proprieties than with school regulations. We roamed the country from tea-time till sun-down; sometimes in the Summer long after that.

Sometimes also on moonlit nights in Winter, occasionally even when the stars and the snow gave the only light, we were allowed the same liberty until nearly bedtime. Before Christmas came, variety, exercise, and social blessedness had wrought upon me so that when I returned home, my uncle and aunt were astonished at the change in me. I had grown half a head, and the paleness, which they had considered a peculiar accident of my appearance, had given place to a rosy glow. My flitting step too had vanished: I soon became aware that I made more noise than my aunt liked, for in the old house silence was in its very temple. My uncle, however, would only smile and say—

'Don't bring the place about our ears, Willie, my boy. I should like it to last my time.'

'I'm afraid,' my aunt would interpose, 'Mr Elder doesn't keep very good order in his school.'

Then I would fire up in defence of the master, and my uncle would sit and listen, looking both pleased and amused.

I had not been many moments in the house before I said—

'Mayn't I run up and see grannie, uncle?'

'I will go and see how she is,' my aunt said, rising.

She went, and presently returning, said

'Grannie seems a little better. You may come. She wants to see you.'

I followed her. When I entered the room and looked expectantly towards her usual place, I found her chair empty. I turned to the bed. There she was, and I thought she looked much

the same; but when I came nearer, I perceived a change in her countenance. She welcomed me feebly, stroked my hair and my cheeks, smiled sweetly, and closed her eyes. My aunt led me away.

When bedtime came, I went to my own room, and was soon fast asleep. What roused me I do not know, but I awoke in the midst of the darkness, and the next moment I heard a groan. It thrilled me with horror. I sat up in bed and listened, but heard no more. As I sat listening, heedless of the cold, the explanation dawned upon me, for my powers of reflection and combination had been developed by my enlarged experience of life. In our many wanderings, I had learned to choose between roads and to make conjectures from the *lie* of the country. I had likewise lived in a far larger house than my home. Hence it now dawned upon me, for the first time, that grannie's room must be next to mine, although approached from the other side, and that the groan must have been hers. She might be in need of help. I remembered at the same time how she had wished to have me by her in the middle of the night, that she might be able to tell me what she could not recall in the day. I got up at once, dressed myself, and stole down the one stair, across the kitchen, and up the other. I gently opened grannie's door and peeped in. A fire was burning in the room. I entered and approached the bed. I wondered how I had the courage; but children more than grown people are moved by unlikely impulses. Grannie lay breathing heavily. I stood for a moment. The faint light flickered over her white face. It was

the middle of the night, and the tide of fear inseparable from the night began to rise. My old fear of her began to return with it. But she lifted her lids, and the terror ebbed away. She looked at me, but did not seem to know me. I went nearer.

'Grannie,' I said, close to her ear, and speaking low; 'you wanted to see me at night—that was before I went to school. I'm here, grannie.'

The sheet was folded back so smooth that she could hardly have turned over since it had been arranged for the night. Her hand was lying upon it. She lifted it feebly and stroked my cheek once more. Her lips murmured something which I could not hear, and then came a deep sigh, almost a groan. The terror returned when I found she could not speak to me.

'Shall I go and fetch auntie?' I whispered.

She shook her head feebly, and looked wistfully at me. Her lips moved again. I guessed that she wanted me to sit beside her. I got a chair, placed it by the bedside, and sat down. She put out her hand, as if searching for something. I laid mine in it. She closed her fingers upon it and seemed satisfied. When I looked again, she was asleep and breathing quietly. I was afraid to take my hand from hers lest I should wake her. I laid my head on the side of the bed, and was soon fast asleep also.

I was awaked by a noise in the room. It was Nannie laying the fire. When she saw me she gave a cry of terror.

'Hush, Nannie!' I said; 'you will wake grannie:' and as I spoke I rose, for I found my hand was free.

‘Oh, Master Willie!’ said Nannie, in a low voice; ‘how did you come here? You sent my heart into my mouth.’

‘Swallow it again, Nannie,’ I answered, ‘and don’t tell auntie. I came to see grannie, and fell asleep. I’m rather cold. I’ll go to bed now. Auntie’s not up, is she?

‘No. It’s not time for anybody to be up yet.’

Nannie ought to have spent the night in grannie’s room, for it was her turn to watch; but finding her nicely asleep as she thought, she had slipped away for just an hour of comfort in bed. The hour had grown to three. When she returned the fire was out.

When I came down to breakfast the solemn look upon my uncle’s face caused me a foreboding of change.

‘God has taken grannie away in the night, Willie,’ said he, holding the hand I had placed in his.

‘Is she dead?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he answered.

‘Oh, then, you will let her go to her grave now, won’t you?’ I said—the recollection of her old grievance coming first in association with her death, and occasioning a more childish speech than belonged to my years.

‘Yes. She’ll get to her grave now,’ said my aunt, with a trembling in her voice I had never heard before.

‘No,’ objected my uncle. ‘Her body will go to the grave, but her soul will go to heaven.’

‘Her soul!’ I said. ‘What’s that?’

‘Dear me, Willie! don’t you know that?’ said my aunt. ‘Don’t

you know you've got a soul as well as a body?'

'I'm sure *I* haven't,' I returned. 'What was grannie's like?'

'That I can't tell you,' she answered.

'Have you got one, auntie?'

'Yes.'

'What is yours like then?'

'I don't know.'

'But,' I said, turning to my uncle, 'if her body goes to the grave, and her soul to heaven, what's to become of poor grannie—without either of them, you see?'

My uncle had been thinking while we talked.

'That can't be the way to represent the thing, Jane; it puzzles the child. No, Willie; grannie's body goes to the grave, but grannie herself is gone to heaven. What people call her soul is just grannie herself.'

'Why don't they say so, then?'

My uncle fell a-thinking again. He did not, however, answer this last question, for I suspect he found that it would not be good for me to know the real cause—namely, that people hardly believed it, and therefore did not say it. Most people believe far more in their bodies than in their souls. What my uncle did say was—

'I hardly know. But grannie's gone to heaven anyhow.'

'I'm so glad!' I said. 'She will be more comfortable there. She was too old, you know, uncle.'

He made no reply. My aunt's apron was covering her face, and

when she took it away, I observed that those eager almost angry eyes were red with weeping. I began to feel a movement at my heart, the first fluttering physical sign of a waking love towards her. 'Don't cry, auntie,' I said. 'I don't see anything to cry about. Grannie has got what she wanted.'

She made me no answer, and I sat down to my breakfast. I don't know how it was, but I could not eat it. I rose and took my way to the hollow in the field. I felt a strange excitement, not sorrow. Grannie was actually dead at last. I did not quite know what it meant. I had never seen a dead body. Neither did I know that she had died while I slept with my hand in hers. Nannie, seeing something peculiar, had gone to her the moment I left the room, and had found her quite cold. Had we been a talking family, I might have been uneasy until I had told the story of my last interview with her; but I never thought of saying a word about it. I cannot help thinking now that I was waked up and sent to the old woman, my great-grandmother, in the middle of the night, to help her to die in comfort. Who knows? What we can neither prove nor comprehend forms, I suspect, the infinitely larger part of our being.

When I was taken to see what remained of grannie, I experienced nothing of the dismay which some children feel at the sight of death. It was as if she had seen something just in time to leave the look of it behind her there, and so the final expression was a revelation. For a while there seems to remain this one link between some dead bodies and their living spirits.

But my aunt, with a common superstition, would have me touch the face. That, I confess, made me shudder: the cold of death is so unlike any other cold! I seemed to feel it in my hand all the rest of the day.

I saw what seemed grannie—I am too near death myself to consent to call a dead body the man or the woman—laid in the grave for which she had longed, and returned home with a sense that somehow there was a barrier broken down between me and my uncle and aunt. I felt as near my uncle now as I had ever been. That evening he did not go to his own room, but sat with my aunt and me in the kitchen-hall. We pulled the great high-backed oaken settle before the fire, and my aunt made a great blaze, for it was very cold. They sat one in each corner, and I sat between them, and told them many things concerning the school. They asked me questions and encouraged my prattle, seeming well pleased that the old silence should be broken. I fancy I brought them a little nearer to each other that night. It was after a funeral, and yet they both looked happier than I had ever seen them before.

CHAPTER IX. I SIN AND REPENT

The Christmas holidays went by more rapidly than I had expected. I betook myself with enlarged faculty to my book-mending, and more than ever enjoyed making my uncle's old volumes tidy. When I returned to school, it was with real sorrow at parting from my uncle; and even towards my aunt I now felt a growing attraction.

I shall not dwell upon my school history. That would be to spin out my narrative unnecessarily. I shall only relate such occurrences as are guide-posts in the direction of those main events which properly constitute my history.

I had been about two years with Mr Elder. The usual holidays had intervened, upon which occasions I found the pleasures of home so multiplied by increase of liberty and the enlarged confidence of my uncle, who took me about with him everywhere, that they were now almost capable of rivalling those of school. But before I relate an incident which occurred in the second Autumn, I must say a few words about my character at this time.

My reader will please to remember that I had never been driven, or oppressed in any way. The affair of the watch was quite an isolated instance, and so immediately followed by the change and fresh life of school that it had not left a mark behind. Nothing had yet occurred to generate in me any fear before the face of

man. I had been vaguely uneasy in relation to my grandmother, but that uneasiness had almost vanished before her death. Hence the faith natural to childhood had received no check. My aunt was at worst cold; she had never been harsh; while over Nannie I was absolute ruler. The only time that evil had threatened me, I had been faithfully defended by my guardian uncle. At school, while I found myself more under law, I yet found myself possessed of greater freedom. Every one was friendly and more than kind. From all this the result was that my nature was unusually trusting.

We had a whole holiday, and, all seven, set out to enjoy ourselves. It was a delicious morning in Autumn, clear and cool, with a great light in the east, and the west nowhere. Neither the autumnal tints nor the sharpening wind had any sadness in those young years which we call the old years afterwards. How strange it seems to have—all of us—to say with the Jewish poet: I have been young, and now am old! A wood in the distance, rising up the slope of a hill, was our goal, for we were after hazel-nuts. Frolicking, scampering, leaping over stiles, we felt the road vanish under our feet. When we gained the wood, although we failed in our quest we found plenty of amusement; that grew everywhere. At length it was time to return, and we resolved on going home by another road—one we did not know.

After walking a good distance, we arrived at a gate and lodge, where we stopped to inquire the way. A kind-faced woman informed us that we should shorten it much by going through the park, which, as we seemed respectable boys, she would allow us

to do. We thanked her, entered, and went walking along a smooth road, through open sward, clumps of trees and an occasional piece of artful neglect in the shape of rough hillocks covered with wild shrubs, such as brier and broom. It was very delightful, and we walked along merrily. I can yet recall the individual shapes of certain hawthorn trees we passed, whose extreme age had found expression in a wild grotesqueness which would have been ridiculous but for a dim, painful resemblance to the distortion of old age in the human family.

After walking some distance, we began to doubt whether we might not have missed the way to the gate of which the woman had spoken. For a wall appeared, which, to judge from the tree-tops visible over it, must surround a kitchen garden or orchard; and from this we feared we had come too nigh the house. We had not gone much further before a branch, projecting over the wall, from whose tip, as if the tempter had gone back to his old tricks, hung a rosy-cheeked apple, drew our eyes and arrested our steps. There are grown people who cannot, without an effort of the imagination, figure to themselves the attraction between a boy and an apple; but I suspect there are others the memories of whose boyish freaks will render it yet more difficult for them to understand a single moment's contemplation of such an object without the endeavour to appropriate it. To them the boy seems made for the apple, and the apple for the boy. Rosy, round-faced, spectacled Mr Elder, however, had such a fine sense of honour in himself that he had been to a rare degree successful in

developing a similar sense in his boys, and I do believe that not one of us would, under any circumstances, except possibly those of terrifying compulsion, have pulled that apple. We stood in rapt contemplation for a few moments, and then walked away. But although there are no degrees in Virtue, who will still demand her uttermost farthing, there are degrees in the virtuousness of human beings.

As we walked away, I was the last, and was just passing from under the branch when something struck the ground at my heel. I turned. An apple must fall some time, and for this apple that some time was then. It lay at my feet. I lifted it and stood gazing at it—I need not say with admiration. My mind fell a-working. The adversary was there, and the angel too. The apple had dropped at my feet; I had not pulled it. There it would lie wasting, if some one with less right than I—said the prince of special pleaders—was not the second to find it. Besides, what fell in the road was public property. Only this was not a public road, the angel reminded me. My will fluttered from side to side, now turning its ear to my conscience, now turning away and hearkening to my impulse. At last, weary of the strife, I determined to settle it by a just contempt of trifles—and, half in desperation, bit into the ruddy cheek.

The moment I saw the wound my teeth had made, I knew what I had done, and my heart died within me. I was self-condemned. It was a new and an awful sensation—a sensation that could not be for a moment endured. The misery was too intense to leave

room for repentance even. With a sudden resolve born of despair, I shoved the type of the broken law into my pocket and followed my companions. But I kept at some distance behind them, for as yet I dared not hold further communication with respectable people. I did not, and do not now, believe that there was one amongst them who would have done as I had done. Probably also not one of them would have thought of my way of deliverance from unendurable self-contempt. The curse had passed upon me, but I saw a way of escape.

A few yards further, they found the road we thought we had missed. It struck off into a hollow, the sides of which were covered with trees. As they turned into it they looked back and called me to come on. I ran as if I wanted to overtake them, but the moment they were out of sight, left the road for the grass, and set off at full speed in the same direction as before. I had not gone far before I was in the midst of trees, overflowing the hollow in which my companions had disappeared, and spreading themselves over the level above. As I entered their shadow, my old awe of the trees returned upon me—an awe I had nearly forgotten, but revived by my crime. I pressed along, however, for to turn back would have been more dreadful than any fear. At length, with a sudden turn, the road left the trees behind, and what a scene opened before me! I stood on the verge of a large space of greensward, smooth and well-kept as a lawn, but somewhat irregular in surface. From all sides it rose towards the centre. There a broad, low rock seemed to grow out of it, and

upon the rock stood the lordliest house my childish eyes had ever beheld. Take situation and all, and I have scarcely yet beheld one to equal it. Half castle, half old English country seat, it covered the rock with a huge square of building, from various parts of which rose towers, mostly square also, of different heights. I stood for one brief moment entranced with awful delight. A building which has grown for ages, the outcome of the life of powerful generations, has about it a majesty which, in certain moods, is overpowering. For one brief moment I forgot my sin and its sorrow. But memory awoke with a fresh pang. To this lordly place I, poor miserable sinner, was a debtor by wrong and shame. Let no one laugh at me because my sin was small: it was enough for me, being that of one who had stolen for the first time, and that without previous declension, and searing of the conscience. I hurried towards the building, anxiously looking for some entrance.

I had approached so near that, seated on its rock, it seemed to shoot its towers into the zenith, when, rounding a corner, I came to a part where the height sank from the foundation of the house to the level by a grassy slope, and at the foot of the slope espied an elderly gentleman, in a white hat, who stood with his hands in his breeches-pockets, looking about him. He was tall and stout, and carried himself in what seemed to me a stately manner. As I drew near him I felt somewhat encouraged by a glimpse of his face, which was rubicund and, I thought, good-natured; but, approaching him rather from behind, I could not

see it well. When I addressed him he started,

'Please, sir,' I said, 'is this your house?'

'Yes, my man; it is my house,' he answered, looking down on me with bent neck, his hands still in his pockets.

'Please, sir,' I said, but here my voice began to tremble, and he grew dim and large through the veil of my gathering tears. I hesitated.

'Well, what do you want?' he asked, in a tone half jocular, half kind.

I made a great effort and recovered my self-possession.

'Please, sir,' I repeated, 'I want you to box my ears.'

'Well, you are a funny fellow! What should I box your ears for, pray?'

'Because I've been very wicked,' I answered; and, putting my hand into my pocket, I extracted the bitten apple, and held it up to him.

'Ho! ho!' he said, beginning to guess what I must mean, but hardly the less bewildered for that; 'is that one of my apples?'

'Yes, sir. It fell down from a branch that hung over the wall. I took it up, and—and—I took a bite of it, and—and—I'm so sorry!'

Here I burst into a fit of crying which I choked as much as I could. I remember quite well how, as I stood holding out the apple, my arm would shake with the violence of my sobs.

'I'm not fond of bitten apples,' he said. 'You had better eat it up now.'

This brought me to myself. If he had shown me sympathy, I should have gone on crying.

'I would rather not. Please box my ears.'

'I don't want to box your ears. You're welcome to the apple. Only don't take what's not your own another time.' 'But, please, sir, I'm so miserable!'

'Home with you! and eat your apple as you go,' was his unconsoling response.

'I can't eat it; I'm so ashamed of myself.'

'When people do wrong, I suppose they must be ashamed of themselves. That's all right, isn't it?'

'Why won't you box my ears, then?' I persisted.

It was my sole but unavailing prayer. He turned away towards the house. My trouble rose to agony. I made some wild motion of despair, and threw myself on the grass. He turned, looked at me for a moment in silence, and then said in a changed tone—

'My boy, I am sorry for you. I beg you will not trouble yourself any more. The affair is not worth it. Such a trifle! What can I do for you?'

I got up. A new thought of possible relief had crossed my mind.

'Please, sir, if you won't box my ears, will you shake hands with me?'

'To be sure I will,' he answered, holding out his hand, and giving mine a very kindly shake. 'Where do you live?'

'I am at school at Aldwick, at Mr Elder's.'

'You're a long way from home!'

'Am I, sir? Will you tell me how to go? But it's of no consequence. I don't mind anything now you've forgiven me. I shall soon run home.'

'Come with me first. You must have something to eat.'

I wanted nothing to eat, but how could I oppose anything he said? I followed him at once, drying my eyes as I went. He led me to a great gate which I had passed before, and opening a wicket, took me across a court, and through another building where I saw many servants going about; then across a second court, which was paved with large flags, and so to a door which he opened, calling—

'Mrs Wilson! Mrs Wilson! I want you a moment.'

'Yes, Sir Giles,' answered a tall, stiff-looking elderly woman who presently appeared descending, with upright spine, a corkscrew staircase of stone.

'Here is a young gentleman, Mrs Wilson, who seems to have lost his way. He is one of Mr Elder's pupils at Aldwick. Will you get him something to eat and drink, and then send him home?'

'I will, Sir Giles.'

'Good-bye, my man,' said Sir Giles, again shaking hands with me. Then turning anew to the housekeeper, for such I found she was, he added:

'Couldn't you find a bag for him, and fill it with some of those brown pippins? They're good eating, ain't they?'

'With pleasure, Sir Giles.'

Thereupon Sir Giles withdrew, closing the door behind him, and leaving me with the sense of life from the dead.

'What's your name, young gentleman?' asked Mrs Wilson, with, I thought, some degree of sternness.

'Wilfrid Cumbermede,' I answered.

She stared at me a little, with a stare which would have been a start in most women. I was by this time calm enough to take a quiet look at her. She was dressed in black silk, with a white neckerchief crossing in front, and black mittens on her hands. After gazing at me fixedly for a moment or two, she turned away and ascended the stair, which went up straight from the door, saying—

'Come with me, Master Cumbermede. You must have some tea before you go.'

I obeyed, and followed her into a long, low-ceiled room, wainscotted all over in panels, with a square moulding at the top, which served for a cornice. The ceiling was ornamented with plaster reliefs. The windows looked out, on one side into the court, on the other upon the park. The floor was black and polished like a mirror, with bits of carpet here and there, and a rug before the curious, old-fashioned grate, where a little fire was burning and a small kettle boiling fiercely on the top of it. The tea-tray was already on the table. She got another cup and saucer, added a pot of jam to the preparations, and said:

'Sit down and have some bread and butter, while I make the tea.'

She cut me a great piece of bread, and then a great piece of butter, and I lost no time in discovering that the quality was worthy of the quantity. Mrs Wilson kept a grave silence for a good while. At last, as she was pouring out the second cup, she looked at me over the teapot, and said—

'You don't remember your mother, I suppose, Master Cumbermede?'

'No, ma'am. I never saw my mother.'

'Within your recollection, you mean. But you must have seen her, for you were two years old when she died.'

'Did you know my mother, then, ma'am?' I asked, but without any great surprise, for the events of the day had been so much out of the ordinary that I had for the time almost lost the faculty of wonder.

She compressed her thin lips, and a perpendicular wrinkle appeared in the middle of her forehead, as she answered—

'Yes; I knew your mother.'

'She was very good, wasn't she, ma'am?' I said, with my mouth full of bread and butter.

'Yes. Who told you that?'

'I was sure of it. Nobody ever told me.'

'Did they never talk to you about her?'

'No, ma'am.'

'So you are at Mr Elder's, are you?' she said, after another long pause, during which I was not idle, for my trouble being gone I could now be hungry.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'How did you come here, then?'

'I walked with the rest of the boys; but they are gone home without me.'

Thanks to the kindness of Sir Giles, my fault had already withdrawn so far into the past, that I wished to turn my back upon it altogether. I saw no need for confessing it to Mrs Wilson; and there was none.

'Did you lose your way?'

'No, ma'am.'

'What brought you here, then? I suppose you wanted to see the place.'

'The woman at the lodge told us the nearest way was through the park.'

I quite expected she would go on cross-questioning me, and then all the truth would have had to come out. But to my great relief, she went no further, only kept eyeing me in a manner so oppressive as to compel me to eat bread and butter and strawberry jam with self-defensive eagerness. I presume she trusted to find out the truth by-and-by. She contented herself in the mean time with asking questions about my uncle and aunt, the farm, the school, and Mr and Mrs Elder, all in a cold, stately, refraining manner, with two spots of red in her face—one on each cheek-bone, and a thin rather peevish nose dividing them. But her forehead was good, and when she smiled, which was not often, her eyes shone. Still, even I, with my small knowledge of

womankind, was dimly aware that she was feeling her way with me, and I did not like her much.

'Have you nearly done?' she asked at length.

'Yes, quite, thank you,' I answered.

'Are you going back to school to-night?'

'Yes, ma'am; of course.'

'How are you going?'

'If you will tell me the way—'

'Do you know how far you are from Aldwick?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Eight miles,' she answered; 'and it's getting rather late.'

I was seated opposite the windows to the park, and, looking up, saw with some dismay that the air was getting dusky. I rose at once, saying—

'I must make haste. They will think I am lost.'

'But you can never walk so far, Master Cumbermede.'

'Oh, but I must! I can't help it. I must get back as fast as possible.'

'You never can walk such a distance. Take another bit of cake while I go and see what can be done.'

Another piece of cake being within the bounds of possibility, I might at least wait and see what Mrs Wilson's design was. She left the room, and I turned to the cake. In a little while she came back, sat down, and went on talking. I was beginning to get quite uneasy, when a maid put her head in at the door, and said—

'Please, Mrs Wilson, the dog-cart's ready, ma'am.'

'Very well,' replied Mrs Wilson, and turning to me, said—more kindly than she had yet spoken—

'Now, Master Cumbermede, you must come and see me again. I'm too busy to spare much time when the family is at home; but they are all going away the week after next, and if you will come and see me then, I shall be glad to show you over the house.'

As she spoke she rose and led the way from the room, and out of the court by another gate from that by which I had entered. At the bottom of a steep descent, a groom was waiting with the dog-cart.

'Here, James,' said Mrs Wilson, 'take good care of the young gentleman, and put him down safe at Mr Elder's. Master Wilfrid, you'll find a hamper of apples underneath. You had better not eat them all yourself, you know. Here are two or three for you to eat by the way.'

'Thank you, Mrs Wilson. No; I'm not quite so greedy as that,' I answered gaily, for my spirits were high at the notion of a ride in the dog-cart instead of a long and dreary walk.

When I was fairly in, she shook hands with me, reminding me that I was to visit her soon, and away went the dog-cart behind a high-stepping horse. I had never before been in an open vehicle of any higher description than a cart, and the ride was a great delight. We went a different road from that which my companions had taken. It lay through trees all the way till we were out of the park.

'That's the land-steward's house,' said James.

'Oh, is it?' I returned, not much interested. 'What great trees those are all about it.'

'Yes; they're the finest elms in all the county those,' he answered. 'Old Coningham knew what he was about when he got the last baronet to let him build his nest there. Here we are at the gate!'

We came out upon a country road, which ran between the wall of the park and a wooden fence along a field of grass. I offered James one of my apples, which he accepted.

'There, now!' he said, 'there's a field!—A right good bit o' grass that! Our people has wanted to throw it into the park for hundreds of years. But they won't part with it for love or money. It ought by rights to be ours, you see, by the lie of the country. It's all one grass with the park. But I suppose them as owns it ain't of the same mind.—Cur'ous old box!' he added, pointing with his whip a long way off. 'You can just see the roof of it.'

I looked in the direction he pointed. A rise in the ground hid all but an ancient, high-peaked roof. What was my astonishment to discover in it the roof of my own home! I was certain it could be no other. It caused a strange sensation, to come upon it thus from the outside, as it were, when I thought myself miles and miles away from it, I fell a-pondering over the matter; and as I reflected, I became convinced that the trees from which we had just emerged were the same which used to churn the wind for my childish fancies. I did not feel inclined to share my feelings with my new acquaintance; but presently he put his whip in the

socket and fell to eating his apple. There was nothing more in the conversation he afterwards resumed deserving of record. He pulled up at the gate of the school, where I bade him good-night and rang the bell.

There was great rejoicing over me when I entered, for the boys had arrived without me a little while before, having searched all about the place where we had parted company, and come at length to the conclusion that I had played them a trick in order to get home without them, there having been some fun on the road concerning my local stupidity. Mr Elder, however, took me to his own room, and read me a lecture on the necessity of not abusing my privileges. I told him the whole affair from beginning to end, and thought he behaved very oddly. He turned away every now and then, blew his nose, took off his spectacles, wiped them carefully, and replaced them before turning again to me.

'Go on, go on, my boy. I'm listening,' he would say.

I cannot tell whether he was laughing or crying. I suspect both. When I had finished, he said, very solemnly—

'Wilfrid, you have had a narrow escape. I need not tell you how wrong you were about the apple, for you know that as well as I do. But you did the right thing when your eyes were opened. I am greatly pleased with you, and greatly obliged to Sir Giles. I will write and thank him this very night.'

'Please, sir, ought I to tell the boys? I would rather not.'

'No. I do not think it necessary.'

He rose and rang the bell.

'Ask Master Fox to step this way.'

Fox was the oldest boy, and was on the point of leaving.

'Fox,' said Mr Elder, 'Cumbermede has quite satisfied me. Will you oblige me by asking him no questions. I am quite aware such a request must seem strange, but I have good reasons for making it,'

'Very well, sir,' said Fox, glancing at me.

'Take him with you, then, and tell the rest. It is as a favour to myself that I put it, Fox.'

'That is quite enough, sir.'

Fox took me to Mrs Elder, and had a talk with the rest before I saw them. Some twenty years after, Fox and I had it out. I gave him a full explanation, for by that time I could smile over the affair. But what does the object matter?—an apple, or a thousand pounds? It is but the peg on which the act hangs. The act is everything.

To the honour of my school-fellows I record that not one of them ever let fall a hint in the direction of the mystery. Neither did Mr or Mrs Elder once allude to it. If possible they were kinder than before.

CHAPTER X. I BUILD CASTLES

My companions had soon found out, and I think the discovery had something to do with the kindness they always showed me, that I was a good hand at spinning a yarn: the nautical phrase had got naturalized in the school. We had no chance, if we would have taken it, of spending any part of school-hours in such a pastime; but it formed an unfailing amusement when weather or humour interfered with bodily exercises. Nor were we debarred from the pleasure after we had retired for the night,—only, as we were parted in three rooms, I could not have a large audience then. I well remember, however, one occasion on which it was otherwise. The report of a super-excellent invention having gone abroad, one by one they came creeping into my room, after I and my companion were in bed, until we lay three in each bed, all being present but Fox. At the very heart of the climax, when a spectre was appearing and disappearing momently with the drawing in and sending out of his breath, so that you could not tell the one moment where he might show himself the next, Mr Elder walked into the room with his chamber-candle in his hand, straightway illuminating six countenances pale with terror—for I took my full share of whatever emotion I roused in the rest. But instead of laying a general interdict on the custom, he only said,

'Come, come, boys! it's time you were asleep. Go to your rooms directly.'

'Please, sir,' faltered one—Moberly by name—the dullest and most honourable boy, to my thinking, amongst us, 'mayn't I stay where I am? Cumbermede has put me all in a shiver.'

Mr Elder laughed, and turning to me, asked with his usual good-humour,

'How long will your story take, Cumbermede?'

'As long as you please, sir,' I answered.

'I can't let you keep them awake all night, you know.'

'There's no fear of that, sir,' I replied. 'Moberly would have been asleep long ago if it hadn't been a ghost. Nothing keeps him awake but ghosts.'

'Well, is the ghost nearly done with?'

'Not quite, sir. The worst is to come yet.'

'Please, sir,' interposed Moberly, 'if you'll let me stay where I am, I'll turn round on my deaf ear, and won't listen to a word more of it. It's awful, I do assure you, sir.' Mr Elder laughed again.

'No, no,' he said. 'Make haste and finish your story, Cumbermede, and let them go to sleep. You, Moberly, may stay where you are for the night, but I can't have this made a practice of.'

'No, no, sir,' said several at once.

'But why don't you tell your stories by daylight, Cumbermede? I'm sure you have time enough for them then.'

'Oh, but he's got one going for the day and another for the night.'

'Then do you often lie three in a bed?' asked Mr Elder with some concern.

'Oh no, sir. Only this is an extra good one, you see.'

Mr Elder laughed again, bade us good-night, and left us. The horror, however, was broken. I could not call up one 'shiver more, and in a few minutes Moberly, as well as his two companions, had slipped away to roomier quarters.

The material of the tales I told my companions was in part supplied from some of my uncle's old books, for in his little library there were more than the *Arcadia* of the same sort. But these had not merely afforded me the stuff to remodel and imitate; their spirit had wrought upon my spirit, and armour and war-horses and mighty swords were only the instruments with which faithful knights wrought honourable deeds.

I had a tolerably clear perception that such deeds could not be done in our days; that there were no more dragons lying in the woods: and that ladies did not now fall into the hands of giants. But I had the witness of an eternal impulse in myself that noble deeds had yet to be done, and therefore might be done, although I knew not how. Hence a feeling of the dignity of ancient descent, as involving association with great men and great actions of old, and therefore rendering such more attainable in the future, took deep root in my mind. Aware of the humbleness of my birth, and unrestrained by pride in my parents—I had lost them so early—I would indulge in many a day-dream of what I would gladly have been. I would ponder over the delights of having a history, and

how grand it would be to find I was descended from some far-away knight who had done deeds of high emprise. In such moods the recollection of the old sword that had vanished from the wall would return: indeed the impression it had made upon me may have been at the root of it all. How I longed to know the story of it! But it had gone to the grave with grannie. If my uncle or aunt knew it, I had no hope of getting it from either of them; for I was certain they had no sympathy with any such fancies as mine. My favourite invention, one for which my audience was sure to call when I professed incompetence, and which I enlarged and varied every time I returned to it, was of a youth in humble life who found at length he was of far other origin then he had supposed. I did not know then, that the fancy, not uncommon with boys, has its roots in the deepest instincts of our human nature. I need not add that I had not yet read Jean Paul's *Titan, or Hesperus, or Comet*.

This tendency of thought-received a fresh impulse from my visit to Moldwarp Hall, as I choose to name the great house whither my repentance had led me. It was the first I had ever seen to wake the sense of the mighty antique. My home was, no doubt, older than some parts of the hall; but the house we are born in never looks older than the last generation until we begin to compare it with others. By this time, what I had learned of the history of my country, and the general growth of the allied forces of my intellect, had rendered me capable of feeling the hoary eld of the great Hall. Henceforth it had a part in every invention of

my boyish imagination.

I was therefore not undesirous of keeping the half-engagement I had made with Mrs Wilson, but it was not she that drew me. With all her kindness, she had not attracted me, for cupboard-love is not the sole, or always the most powerful, operant on the childish mind: it is in general stronger in men than in either children or women. I would rather not see Mrs Wilson again—she had fed my body, she had not warmed my heart. It was the grand old house that attracted me. True, it was associated with shame, but rather with the recovery from it than with the fall itself; and what memorials of ancient grandeur and knightly ways must lie within those walls, to harmonize with my many dreams!

On the next holiday, Mr Elder gave me a ready permission to revisit Moldwarp Hall. I had made myself acquainted with the nearest way by crossroads and footpaths, and full of expectation, set out with my companions. They accompanied me the greater part of the distance, and left me at a certain gate, the same by which they had come out of the park on the day of my first visit. I was glad when they were gone, for I could then indulge my excited fancy at will. I heard their voices draw away into the distance. I was alone on a little footpath which led through a wood. All about me were strangely tall and slender oaks; but as I advanced into the wood, the trees grew more various, and in some of the opener spaces great old oaks, short and big-headed, stretched out their huge shadow-filled arms in true oak-fashion. The ground was uneven, and the path led up and down

over hollow and hillock, now crossing a swampy bottom, now climbing the ridge of a rocky eminence. It was a lovely forenoon, with grey-blue sky and white clouds. The sun shone plentifully into the wood, for the leaves were thin. They hung like clouds of gold and royal purple above my head, layer over layer, with the blue sky and the snowy clouds shining through. On the ground it was a world of shadows and sunny streaks, kept ever in interfluent motion by such a wind as John Skelton describes:

> 'There blew in that gardynge a soft piplyng cold
> Enbrethyng of Zepherus with his pleasant wynde.'

I went merrily along. The birds were not singing, but my heart did not need them. It was Spring-time there, whatever it might be in the world. The heaven of my childhood wanted no lark to make it gay. Had the trees been bare, and the frost shining on the ground, it would have been all the same. The sunlight was enough.

I was standing on the root of a great beech-tree, gazing up into the gulf of its foliage, and watching the broken lights playing about in the leaves and leaping from twig to branch, like birds yet more golden than the leaves, when a voice startled me.

'You're not looking for apples in a beech-tree, hey? it said.

I turned instantly, with my heart in a flutter. To my great relief I saw that the speaker was not Sir Giles, and that probably no allusion was intended. But my first apprehension made way only

for another pang, for, although I did not know the man, a strange dismay shot through me at sight of him. His countenance was associated with an undefined but painful fact that lay crouching in a dusky hollow of my memory. I had no time now to entice it into the light of recollection. I took heart and spoke.

'No,' I answered; 'I was only watching the sun on the leaves.'

'Very pretty, ain't it? Ah, it's lovely! It's quite beautiful—ain't it now? You like good timber, don't you? Trees, I mean?' he explained, aware, I suppose, of some perplexity on my countenance.

'Yes,' I answered. 'I like big old ones best.'

'Yes, yes,' he returned, with an energy that sounded strange and jarring to my mood; 'big old ones, that have stood for ages—the monarchs of the forest. Saplings ain't bad things either, though. But old ones are best. Just come here, and I'll show you one worth looking at. *It* wasn't planted yesterday, *I* can tell you.'

I followed him along the path, until we came out of the wood. Beyond us the ground rose steep and high, and was covered with trees; but here in the hollow it was open. A stream ran along between us and the height. On this side of the stream stood a mighty tree, towards which my companion led me. It was an oak, with such a bushy head and such great roots rising in serpent rolls and heaves above the ground, that the stem looked stunted between them.

'There!' said my companion; 'there's a tree! there's something like a tree! How a man must feel to call a tree like that his own!

That's Queen Elizabeth's oak. It is indeed. England is dotted with would-be Queen Elizabeth's oaks; but there is the very oak which she admired so much that she ordered luncheon to be served under it.... Ah! she knew the value of timber—did good Queen Bess. *That's* now—now—let me see—the year after the Armada—nine from fifteen—ah well, somewhere about two hundred and thirty years ago.'

'How lumpy and hard it looks!' I remarked.

'That's the breed and the age of it,' he returned. 'The wonder to me is they don't turn to stone and last for ever, those trees. Ah! there's something to live for now!'

He had turned away to resume his walk, but as he finished the sentence, he turned again towards the tree, and shook his finger at it, as if reproaching it for belonging to somebody else than himself.

'Where are you going now?' he asked, wheeling round upon me sharply, with a keen look in his magpie-eyes, as the French would call them, which hardly corresponded with the bluntness of his address.

'I'm going to the Hall,' I answered, turning away.

'You'll never get there that way. How are you to cross the river?'

'I don't know. I've never been this way before.'

'You've been to the Hall before, then? Whom do you know there?'

'Mrs Wilson,' I answered.

'H'm! Ah! You know Mrs Wilson, do you? Nice woman, Mrs Wilson!'

He said this as if he meant the opposite.

'Here,' he went on—'come with me. I'll show you the way.'

I obeyed, and followed him along the bank of the stream.

'What a curious bridge!' I exclaimed, as we came in sight of an ancient structure lifted high in the middle on the point of a Gothic arch.

'Yes, ain't it? he said. 'Curious? I should think so! And well it may be! It's as old as the oak there at least. There's a bridge now for a man like Sir Giles to call his own!'

'He can't keep it though,' I said, moralizing; for, in carrying on the threads of my stories, I had come to see that no climax could last for ever.

'Can't keep it! He could carry off every stone of it if he liked.'

'Then it wouldn't be the bridge any longer.'

'You're a sharp one,' he said.

'I don't know,' I answered, truly enough. I seemed to myself to be talking sense, that was all.

'Well, I do. What do you mean by saying he couldn't keep it?'

'It's been a good many people's already, and it'll be somebody else's some day,' I replied.

He did not seem to relish the suggestion, for he gave a kind of grunt, which gradually broke into a laugh as he answered,

'Likely enough! likely enough!'

We had now come round to the end of the bridge, and I saw

that it was far more curious than I had perceived before.

'Why is it so narrow?' I asked, wonderingly, for it was not three feet wide, and had a parapet of stone about three feet high on each side of it.

'Ah!' he replied, 'that's it, you see. As old as the hills. It was built, *this* bridge was, before ever a carriage was made—yes, before ever a carrier's cart went along a road. They carried everything then upon horses' backs. They call this the pack-horse bridge. You see there's room for the horses' legs, and their loads could stick out over the parapets. That's the way they carried everything to the Hall then. That was a few years before *you* were born, young gentleman.'

'But they couldn't get their legs—the horses, I mean—couldn't get their legs through this narrow opening,' I objected; for a flat stone almost blocked up each end.

'No; that's true enough. But those stones have been up only a hundred years or so. They didn't want it for pack-horses any more then, and the stones were put up to keep the cattle, with which at some time or other I suppose some thrifty owner had stocked the park, from crossing to this meadow. That would be before those trees were planted up there.'

When we had crossed the stream, he stopped at the other end of the bridge and said,

'Now, you go that way—up the hill. There's a kind of path, if you can find it, but it doesn't much matter. Good morning.'

He walked away down the bank of the stream, while I struck

into the wood.

When I reached the top, and emerged from the trees that skirted the ridge, there stood the lordly Hall before me, shining in autumnal sunlight, with gilded vanes and diamond-paned windows, as if it were a rock against which the gentle waves of the sea of light rippled and broke in flashes. When you looked at its foundation, which seemed to have torn its way up through the clinging sward, you could not tell where the building began and the rock ended. In some parts indeed the rock was wrought into the walls of the house; while in others it was faced up with stone and mortar. My heart beat high with vague rejoicing. Grand as the aged oak had looked, here was a grander growth—a growth older too than the oak, and inclosing within it a thousand histories.

I approached the gate by which Mrs Wilson had dismissed me. A flight of rude steps cut in the rock led to the portcullis, which still hung, now fixed in its place in front of the gate; for though the Hall had no external defences, it had been well fitted for the half-sieges of troublous times. A modern mansion stands, with its broad sweep up to the wide door, like its hospitable owner in full dress and broad-bosomed shirt on his own hearth-rug: this ancient house stood with its back to the world, like one of its ancient owners, ready to ride, in morion, breast-plate, and jack-boots—yet not armed *cap-à-pie*, not like a walled castle, that is.

I ascended the steps, and stood before the arch—filled with a great iron-studded oaken gate—which led through a square

tower into the court. I stood gazing for some minutes before I rang the bell. Two things in particular I noticed. The first was—over the arch of the doorway, amongst others—one device very like the animal's head upon the watch and the seal which my great-grandmother had given me. I could not be sure it was the same, for the shape—both in the stone and in my memory—was considerably worn. The other interested me far more. In the great gate was a small wicket, so small that there was hardly room for me to pass without stooping. A thick stone threshold lay before it. The spot where the right foot must fall in stepping out of the wicket was worn into the shape of a shoe, to the depth of between three and four inches I should judge, vertically into the stone. The deep foot-mould conveyed to me a sense of the coming and going of generations, such as I could not gather from the age-worn walls of the building.

A great bell-handle at the end of a jointed iron-rod hung down by the side of the wicket. I rang. An old woman opened the wicket, and allowed me to enter. I thought I remembered the way to Mrs Wilson's door well enough, but when I ascended the few broad steps, curved to the shape of the corner in which the entrance stood, and found myself in the flagged court, I was bewildered, and had to follow the retreating portress for directions. A word set me right, and I was soon in Mrs Wilson's presence. She received me kindly, and expressed her satisfaction that I had kept what she was pleased to consider my engagement.

After some refreshment and a little talk, Mrs Wilson said,

'Now, Master Cumbermede, would you like to go and see the gardens, or take a walk in the park and look at the deer?'

'Please, Mrs Wilson,' I returned, 'you promised to show me the house.'

'You would like that, would you?'

'Yes,' I answered,—'better than anything.'

'Come, then,' she said, and took a bunch of keys from the wall. 'Some of the rooms I lock up when the family's away.'

It was a vast place. Roughly it may be described as a large oblong which the great hall, with the kitchen and its offices, divided into two square courts—the one flagged, the other gravelled. A passage dividing the hall from the kitchen led through from the one court to the other. We entered this central portion through a small tower; and, after a peep at the hall, ascended to a room above the entrance, accessible from an open gallery which ran along two sides of the hall. The room was square, occupying the area-space of the little entrance tower. To my joyous amazement, its walls were crowded with swords, daggers—weapons in endless variety, mingled with guns and pistols, for which I cared less. Some which had hilts curiously carved and even jewelled, seemed of foreign make. Their character was different from that of the rest; but most were evidently of the same family with the one sword I knew. Mrs Wilson could tell me nothing about them. All she knew was that this was the armoury, and that Sir Giles had a book with something written in it about every one of the weapons. They

were no chance collection: each had a history. I gazed in wonder and delight. Above the weapons hung many pieces of armour—no entire suits, however; of those there were several in the hall below. Finding that Mrs Wilson did not object to my handling the weapons within my reach, I was soon so much absorbed in the examination of them that I started when she spoke.

'You shall come again, Master Cumbermede,' she said. 'We must go now.' I replaced a Highland broadsword, and turned to follow her. She was evidently pleased with the alacrity of my obedience, and for the first time bestowed on me a smile as she led the way from the armoury by another door. To my enhanced delight this door led into the library. Gladly would I have lingered, but Mrs Wilson walked on, and I followed through rooms and rooms, low-pitched, and hung with tapestry, some carpeted, some floored with black polished oak, others with some kind of cement or concrete, all filled with ancient furniture whose very aspect was a speechless marvel. Out of one into another, along endless passages, up and down winding stairs, now looking from the summit of a lofty tower upon terraces and gardens below—now lost in gloomy arches, again out upon acres of leads, and now bathed in the sweet gloom of the ancient chapel with its stained windows of that old glass which seems nothing at first, it is so modest and harmonious, but which for that very reason grows into a poem in the brain: you see it last and love it best—I followed with unabating delight.

When at length Mrs Wilson said I had seen the whole, I

begged her to let me go again into the library, for she had not given me a moment to look at it. She consented.

It was a part of the house not best suited for the purpose, connected with the armoury by a descent of a few steps. It lay over some of the housekeeping department, was too near the great hall, and looked into the flagged court. A library should be on the ground-floor in a quiet wing, with an outlook on grass, and the possibility of gaining it at once without going through long passages. Nor was the library itself, architecturally considered, at all superior to its position. The books had greatly outgrown the space allotted to them, and several of the neighbouring rooms had been annexed as occasion required; hence it consisted of half-a-dozen rooms, some of them merely closets intended for dressing-rooms, and all very ill lighted. I entered it however in no critical spirit, but with a feeling of reverential delight. My uncle's books had taught me to love books. I had been accustomed to consider his five hundred volumes a wonderful library; but here were thousands—as old, as musty, as neglected, as dilapidated, therefore as certainly full of wonder and discovery, as man or boy could wish.—Oh the treasures of a house that has been growing for ages! I leave a whole roomful of lethal weapons, to descend three steps into six roomfuls of books—each 'the precious life-blood of a master-spirit'—for as yet in my eyes all books were worthy! Which did I love best? Old swords or old books? I could not tell! I had only the grace to know which I *ought* to love best.

As we passed from the first room into the second, up rose

a white thing from the corner of the window-seat, and came towards us. I started. Mrs Wilson exclaimed:

'La! Miss Clara! how ever—?

The rest was lost in the abyss of possibility.

'They told me you were somewhere about, Mrs Wilson, and I thought I had better wait here. How do you do?'

'La, child, you've given me such a turn!' said Mrs Wilson. 'You might have been a ghost if it had been in the middle of the night.'

'I'm very sorry, Mrs Wilson,' said the girl merrily. 'Only you see if it had been a ghost it couldn't have been me.'

'How's your papa, Miss Clara?'

'Oh! he's always quite well.'

'When did you see him?'

'To-day. He's at home with grandpapa now.'

'And you ran away and left him?'

'Not quite that. He and grandpapa went out about some business—to the copse at Deadman's Hollow, I think. They didn't want my advice—they never do; so I came to see you, Mrs Wilson.'

By this time I had been able to look at the girl. She was a year or two older than myself, I thought, and the loveliest creature I had ever seen. She had large blue eyes of the rare shade called violet, a little round perhaps, but the long lashes did something to rectify that fault; and a delicate nose—turned up a little of course, else at her age she could not have been so pretty. Her mouth was well curved, expressing a full share of Paley's happiness;

her chin was something large and projecting, but the lines were fine. Her hair was a light brown, but dark for her eyes, and her complexion would have been enchanting to any one fond of the 'sweet mixture, red and white.' Her figure was that of a girl of thirteen, undetermined—but therein I was not critical. 'An exceeding fair forehead,' to quote Sir Philip Sidney, and plump, white, dimple-knuckled hands complete the picture sufficiently for the present. Indeed it would have been better to say only that I was taken with her, and then the reader might fancy her such as he would have been taken with himself. But I was not fascinated. It was only that I was a boy and she was a girl, and there being no element of decided repulsion, I felt kindly disposed towards her.

Mrs Wilson turned to me.

'Well, Master Cumbermede, you see I am able to give you more than I promised.'

'Yes,' I returned; 'you promised to show me the old house—'

'And here,' she interposed, 'I show you a young lady as well.'

'Yes, thank you,' I said simply. But I had a feeling that Mrs Wilson was not absolutely well-pleased.

I was rather shy of Miss Clara—not that I was afraid of her, but that I did not exactly know what was expected of me, and Mrs Wilson gave us no further introduction to each other. I was not so shy, however, as not to wish Mrs Wilson would leave us together, for then, I thought, we should get on well enough; but such was not her intent. Desirous of being agreeable, however—as far as I knew how, and remembering that Mrs Wilson had

given me the choice before, I said to her—

'Mightn't we go and look at the deer, Mrs Wilson?'

'You had better not,' she answered. 'They are rather ill-tempered just now. They might run at you. I heard them fighting last night, and knocking their horns together dreadfully.'

'Then we'd better not,' said Clara. 'They frightened me very much yesterday.'

We were following Mrs Wilson from the room. As we passed the hall-door, we peeped in.

'Do you like such great high places?' asked Clara.

'Yes, I do,' I answered. 'I like great high places. It makes you gasp somehow.'

'Are you fond of gasping? Does it do you good?' she asked, with a mock-simplicity which might be humour or something not so pleasant.

'Yes, I think it does,' I answered. 'It pleases me.'

'I don't like it. I like a quiet snug place like the library—not a great wide place like this, that looks as if it had swallowed you and didn't know it.'

'What a clever creature she is!' I thought. We turned away and followed Mrs Wilson again.

I had expected to spend the rest of the day with her, but the moment we reached her apartment, she got out a bottle of her home-made wine and some cake, saying it was time for me to go home. I was much disappointed—the more that the pretty Clara remained behind; but what could I do? I strolled back to Aldwick

with my head fuller than ever of fancies new and old. But Mrs Wilson had said nothing of going to see her again, and without an invitation I could not venture to revisit the Hall.

In pondering over the events of the day, I gave the man I had met in the wood a full share in my meditations.

CHAPTER XI. A TALK WITH MY UNCLE

When I returned home for the Christmas holidays, I told my uncle, amongst other things, all that I have just recorded; for although the affair seemed far away from me now, I felt that he ought to know it. He was greatly pleased with my behaviour in regard to the apple. He did not identify the place, however, until he heard the name of the housekeeper: then I saw a cloud pass over his face. It grew deeper when I told him of my second visit, especially while I described the man I had met in the wood.

'I have a strange fancy about him, uncle,' I said. 'I think he must be the same man that came here one very stormy night—long ago—and wanted to take me away.'

'Who told you of that?' asked my uncle startled.

I explained that I had been a listener.

'You ought not to have listened.'

'I know that now; but I did not know then. I woke frightened, and heard the voices.'

'What makes you think he was the same man?'

'I can't be sure, you know. But as often as I think of the man I met in the wood, the recollection of that night comes back to me.'

'I dare say. What was he like?'

I described him as well as I could.

'Yes,' said my uncle, 'I dare say. He is a dangerous man.'

'What did he want with me?'

'He wanted to have something to do with your education. He is an old friend—acquaintance I ought to say—of your father's. I should be sorry you had any intercourse with him. He is a very worldly kind of man. He believes in money and rank and getting on. He believes in nothing else that, I know.'

'Then I am sure I shouldn't like him,' I said.

'I am pretty sure you wouldn't,' returned my uncle.

I had never before heard him speak so severely of any one. But from this time he began to talk to me more as if I had been a grown man. There was a simplicity in his way of looking at things, however, which made him quite intelligible to a boy as yet uncorrupted by false aims or judgments. He took me about with him constantly, and I began to see him as he was, and to honour and love him more than ever.

Christmas-day this year fell on a Sunday. It was a model Christmas-day. My uncle and I walked to church in the morning. When we started, the grass was shining with frost, and the air was cold; a fog hung about the horizon, and the sun shone through it with red rayless countenance. But before we reached the church, which was some three miles from home, the fog was gone, and the frost had taken shelter with the shadows; the sun was dazzling without being clear, and the golden cock on the spire was glittering keen in the moveless air.

'What do they put a cock on the spire for, uncle?' I asked.

'To end off with an ornament, perhaps,' he answered.

'I thought it had been to show how the wind blew.'

'Well, it wouldn't be the first time great things—I mean the spire, not the cock—had been put to little uses.'

'But why should it be a cock,' I asked, 'more than any other bird?'

'Some people—those to whom the church is chiefly historical—would tell you it is the cock that rebuked St Peter. Whether it be so or not, I think a better reason for putting it there would be that the cock is the first creature to welcome the light, and tell people that it is coming. Hence it is a symbol of the clergyman.'

'But our clergyman doesn't wake the people, uncle. I've seen him send *you* to sleep sometimes.'

My uncle laughed.

'I dare say there are some dull cocks too,' he answered.

'There's one at the farm,' I said, 'which goes on crowing every now and then all night—in his sleep—Janet says. But it never wakes till all the rest are out in the yard.'

My uncle laughed again. We had reached the churchyard, and by the time we had visited grannie's grave—that was the only one I thought of in the group of family mounds—the bells had ceased, and we entered.

I at least did not sleep this morning; not however because of the anti-somnolence of the clergyman—but that, in a pew not far off from me, sat Clara. I could see her as often as I pleased to turn my head half-way round. Church is a very favourable place

for falling in love. It is all very well for the older people to shake their heads and say you ought to be minding the service—that does not affect the fact stated—especially when the clergyman is of the half-awake order who take to the church as a gentleman-like profession. Having to sit so still, with the pretty face so near, with no obligation to pay it attention, but with perfect liberty to look at it, a boy in the habit of inventing stories could hardly help fancying himself in love with it. Whether she saw me or not, I cannot tell. Although she passed me close as we came out, she did not look my way, and I had not the hardihood to address her.

As we were walking home, my uncle broke the silence.

'You would like to be an honourable man, wouldn't you, Willie?' he said.

'Yes, that I should, uncle.'

'Could you keep a secret now?'

'Yes, uncle.'

'But there are two ways of keeping a secret.'

'I don't know more than one.'

'What's that?'

'Not to tell it.'

'Never to show that you knew it, would be better still.'

'Yes, it would—'

'But, suppose a thing:—suppose you knew that there was a secret; suppose you wanted very much to find it out, and yet would not try to find it out: wouldn't that be another way of keeping it?'

'Yes, it would. If I knew there was a secret, I should like to find it out.'

'Well, I am going to try you. There is a secret. I know it; you do not. You have a right to know it some day, but not yet. I mean to tell it you, but I want you to learn a great deal first. I want to keep the secret from hurting you. Just as you would keep things from a baby which would hurt him, I have kept some things from you.'

'Is the sword one of them, uncle?' I asked.

'You could not do anything with the secret if you did know it,' my uncle went on, without heeding my question; 'but there may be designing people who would make a tool of you for their own ends. It is far better you should be ignorant. Now will you keep my secret?—or, in other words, will you trust me?' I felt a little frightened. My imagination was at work on the formless thing. But I was chiefly afraid of the promise—lest I should anyway break it.

'I will try to keep the secret—keep it from myself, that is—ain't it, uncle?'

'Yes. That is just what I mean.'

'But how long will it be for, uncle?'

'I am not quite sure. It will depend on how wise and sensible you grow. Some boys are men at eighteen—some not at forty. The more reasonable and well-behaved you are, the sooner shall I feel at liberty to tell it you.'

He ceased, and I remained silent. I was not astonished. The vague news fell in with all my fancies. The possibility of

something pleasant, nay even wonderful and romantic, of course suggested itself, and the hope which thence gilded the delay tended to reconcile me to my ignorance.

'I think it better you should not go back to Mr Elder's, Willie,' said my uncle.

I was stunned at the words. Where could a place be found to compare for blessedness with Mr Elder's school? Not even the great Hall, with its acres of rooms and its age-long history, could rival it.

Some moments passed before I could utter a faltering 'Why?'

'That is part of my secret, Willie,' answered my uncle. 'I know it will be a disappointment to you, for you have been very happy with Mr Elder.'

'Yes, indeed,' I answered. It was all I could say, for the tears were rolling down my cheeks, and there was a great lump in my throat.

'I am very sorry indeed to give you pain, Willie,' he said kindly.

'It's not my blame, is it, uncle?' I sobbed.

'Not in the least, my boy.'

'Oh! then, I don't mind it so much.'

'There's a brave boy! Now the question is, what to do with you.'

'Can't I stop at home, then?'

'No, that won't do either, Willie. I must have you taught, and I haven't time to teach you myself. Neither am I scholar enough

for it now; my learning has got rusty. I know your father would have wished to send you to college, and although I do not very well see how I can manage it, I must do the best I can. I'm not a rich man, you see, Willie, though I have a little laid by. I never could do much at making money, and I must not leave your aunt unprovided for.'

'No, uncle. Besides, I shall soon be able to work for myself and you too.'

'Not for a long time if you go to college, Willie. But we need not talk about that yet.'

In the evening I went to my uncle's room. He was sitting by his fire reading the New Testament.

'Please, uncle,' I said, 'will you tell me something about my father and mother?'

'With pleasure, my boy,' he answered, and after a moment's thought began to give me a sketch of my father's life, with as many touches of the man himself as he could at the moment recall. I will not detain my reader with the narrative. It is sufficient to say that my father was a simple honourable man, without much education, but a great lover of plain books. His health had always been delicate; and before he died he had been so long an invalid that my mother's health had given way in nursing him, so that she very soon followed him. As his narrative closed my uncle said: 'Now, Willie, you see, with a good man like that for your father, you are bound to be good and honourable! Never mind whether people praise you or not; you do what you

ought to do. And don't be always thinking of your rights. There are people who consider themselves very grand because they can't bear to be interfered with. They think themselves lovers of justice, when it is only justice to themselves they care about. The true lover of justice is one who would rather die a slave than interfere with the rights of others. To wrong any one is the most terrible thing in the world. Injustice *to* you is not an awful thing like injustice *in* you. I should like to see you a great man, Willie. Do you know what I mean by a great man?'

'Something else than I know, I'm afraid, uncle,' I answered.

'A great man is one who will try to do right against the devil himself: one who will not do wrong to please anybody or to save his life.'

I listened, but I thought with myself a man might do all that, and be no great man. I would do something better—some fine deed or other—I did not know what now, but I should find out by-and-by. My uncle was too easily pleased: I should demand more of a great man. Not so did the knights of old gain their renown. I was silent.

'I don't want you to take my opinions as yours, you know, Willie,' my uncle resumed. 'But I want you to remember what my opinion is.'

As he spoke, he went to a drawer in the room, and brought out something which he put in my hands. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was the watch grannie had given me.

'There,' he said, 'is your father's watch. Let it keep you in mind

that to be good is to be great.'

'Oh, thank you, uncle!' I said, heeding only my recovered treasure. 'But didn't it belong to somebody before my father? Grannie gave it me as if it had been hers.'

'Your grandfather gave it to your father; but when he died, your great-grandmother took it. Did she tell you anything about it?'

'Nothing particular. She said it was her husband's.'

'So it was, I believe.'

'She used to call him my father.'

'Ah, you remember that!'

'I've had so much time to think about things, uncle!'

'Yes. Well—I hope you will think more about things yet.'

'Yes, uncle. But there's something else I should like to ask you about.'

'What's that?'

'The old sword.'

My uncle smiled, and rose again, saying, 'Ah! I thought as much. Is that anything like it?' he added, bringing it from the bottom of a cupboard.

I took it from his hands with awe. It was the same. If I could have mistaken the hilt, I could not mistake the split sheath.

'Oh, uncle!' I exclaimed, breathless with delight.

'That's it—isn't it?' he said, enjoying my enjoyment.

'Yes, that it is! Now tell me all about it, please.'

'Indeed I can tell you very little. Some ancestor of ours fought

with it somewhere. There was a story about it, but I have forgot it. You may have it if you like.'

'No, uncle! May I? To take away with me?'

'Yes. I think you are old enough now not to do any mischief with it.'

I do not believe there was a happier boy in England that night. I did not mind where I went now. I thought I could even bear to bid Mrs Elder farewell. Whether therefore possession had done me good, I leave my reader to judge. But happily for our blessedness, the joy of possession soon palls, and not many days had gone by before I found I had a heart yet. Strange to say, it was my aunt who touched it.

I do not yet know all the reasons which brought my uncle to the resolution of sending me abroad: it was certainly an unusual mode of preparing one for the university; but the next day he disclosed the plan to me. I was pleased with the notion. But my aunt's apron went up to her eyes. It was a very hard apron, and I pitied those eyes although they were fierce.

'Oh, auntie!' I said, 'what are you crying for? Don't you like me to go?'

'It's too far off, child. How am I to get to you if you should be taken ill?'

Moved both by my own pleasure and her grief, I got up and threw my arms round her neck. I had never done so before. She returned my embrace and wept freely.

As it was not a fit season for travelling, and as my uncle had

not yet learned whither it would be well to send me, it was after all resolved that I should return to Mr Elder's for another half-year. This gave me unspeakable pleasure; and I set out for school again in such a blissful mood as must be rare in the experience of any life.

CHAPTER XII. THE HOUSE-STEWARD

My uncle had had the watch cleaned and repaired for me, so that, notwithstanding its great age, it was yet capable of a doubtful sort of service. Its caprices were almost human, but they never impaired the credit of its possession in the eyes of my school-fellows; rather they added to the interest of the little machine, inasmuch as no one could foretell its behaviour under any circumstances. We were far oftener late now, when we went out for a ramble. Heretofore we had used our faculties and consulted the sky—now we trusted to the watch, and indeed acted as if it could regulate the time to our convenience, and carry us home afterwards. We regarded it, in respect Of time, very much as some people regard the Bible in respect of eternity. And the consequences were similar. We made an idol of it, and the idol played us the usual idol-pranks.

But I think the possession of the sword, in my own eyes too a far grander thing than the watch, raised me yet higher in the regard of my companions. We could not be on such intimate terms with the sword, for one thing, as with the watch. It was in more senses than one beyond our sphere—a thing to be regarded with awe and reverence. Mr Elder had most wisely made no objection to my having it in our bed-room; but he drove two nails

into the wall and hung it high above my reach, saying the time had not come for my handling it. I believe the good man respected the ancient weapon, and wished to preserve it from such usage as it might have met with from boys. It was the more a constant stimulus to my imagination, and I believe insensibly to my moral nature as well, connecting me in a kind of dim consciousness with foregone ancestors who had, I took it for granted, done well on the battle-field. I had the sense of an inherited character to sustain in the new order of things. But there was more in its influence which I can hardly define—the inheritance of it even gave birth to a certain sense of personal dignity.

Although I never thought of visiting Moldwarp Hall again without an invitation, I took my companions more than once into the woods which lay about it: thus far I used the right of my acquaintance with the housekeeper. One day in Spring, I had gone with them to the old narrow bridge. I was particularly fond of visiting it. We lingered a long time about Queen Elizabeth's oak; and by climbing up on each other's shoulders, and so gaining some stumps of vanished boughs, had succeeded in clambering, one after another, into the wilderness of its branches, where the young buds were now pushing away the withered leaves before them, as the young generations of men push the older into the grave. When my turn came, I climbed and climbed until I had reached a great height in its top.

Then I sat down, holding by the branch over my head, and began to look about me. Below was an entangled net, as it

seemed—a labyrinth of boughs, branches, twigs, and shoots. If I had fallen I could hardly have reached the earth. Through this environing mass of lines, I caught glimpses of the country around—green fields, swelling into hills, where the fresh foliage was bursting from the trees; and below, the little stream was pursuing its busy way by a devious but certain path to its unknown future. Then my eyes turned to the tree-clad ascent on the opposite side: through the topmost of its trees, shone a golden spark, a glimmer of yellow fire. It was the vane on the highest tower of the Hall. A great desire seized me to look on the lordly pile once more. I descended in haste, and proposed to my companions that we should climb through the woods, and have a peep at the house. The eldest, who was in a measure in charge of us—his name was Bardsley, for Fox was gone—proposed to consult my watch first. Had we known that the faithless thing had stopped for an hour and a half, and then resumed its onward course as if nothing had happened, we should not have delayed our return. As it was, off we scampered for the pack-horse bridge, which we left behind us only after many frog-leaps over the obstructing stones at the ends. Then up through the wood we went like wild creatures, abstaining however from all shouting and mischief, aware that we were on sufferance only. At length we stood on the verge of the descent, when to our surprise we saw the sun getting low in the horizon. Clouds were gathering overhead, and a wailful wind made one moaning sweep through the trees behind us in the hollow. The sun had hidden his shape, but not his splendour, in the skirts of

the white clouds which were closing in around him. Spring as it was, I thought I smelled snow in the air. But the vane which had drawn me shone brilliant against a darkening cloud, like a golden bird in the sky. We looked at each other, not in dismay exactly, but with a common feeling that the elements were gathering against us. The wise way would of course have been to turn at once and make for home; but the watch had to be considered. Was the watch right, or was the watch wrong? Its health and conduct were of the greatest interest to the commonweal. That question must be answered. We looked from the watch to the sun, and back from the sun to the watch. Steady to all appearance as the descending sun itself, the hands were trotting and crawling along their appointed way, with a look of unconscious innocence, in the midst of their diamond coronet. I volunteered to settle the question: I would run to the Hall, ring the bell, and ask leave to go as far into the court as to see the clock on the central tower. The proposition was applauded. I ran, rang, and being recognized by the portress, was at once admitted. In a moment I had satisfied myself of the treachery of my bosom-friend, and was turning to leave the court, when a lattice opened, and I heard a voice calling my name. It was Mrs Wilson's. She beckoned me. I went up under the window.

'Why don't you come and see me, Master Cumbermede?' she said.

'You didn't ask me, Mrs Wilson. I should have liked to come very much.'

'Come in, then, and have tea with me now.'

'No, thank you,' I answered. 'My schoolfellows are waiting for me, and we are too late already. I only came to see the clock.'

'Well, you must come soon, then.'

'I will, Mrs Wilson. Good-night,' I answered, and away I ran, opened the wicket for myself, set my foot in the deep shoe-mould, then rushed down the rough steps and across the grass to my companions.

When they heard what time it was, they turned without a word, and in less than a minute we were at the bottom of the hill and over the bridge. The wood followed us with a moan which was gathering to a roar. Down in the meadow it was growing dark. Before we reached the lodge, it had begun to rain, and the wind, when we got out upon the road, was blowing a gale. We were seven miles from home. Happily the wind was in our back, and, wet to the skin, but not so weary because of the aid of the wind, we at length reached Aldwick. The sole punishment we had for being so late—and that was more a precaution than a punishment—was that we had to go to bed immediately after a hurried tea. To face and fight the elements is, however, an invaluable lesson in childhood, and I do not think those parents do well who are over-careful to preserve all their children from all inclemencies of weather or season.

When the next holiday drew near, I once more requested and obtained permission to visit Moldwarp Hall. I am now puzzled to understand why my uncle had not interdicted it, but certainly

he had laid no injunctions upon me in regard thereto. Possibly he had communicated with Mrs Wilson: I do not know. If he had requested Mr. Elder to prevent me, I could not have gone. So far, however, must this have been from being the case that, on the eve of the holiday, Mr Elder said to me:

'If Mrs Wilson should ask you to stay all night, you may.'

I suspect he knew more about some things than I did. The notion of staying all night seemed to me, however, out of the question. Mrs Wilson could not be expected to entertain me to that extent. I fancy, though, that she had written to make the request. My schoolfellows accompanied me as far as the bridge, and there left me. Mrs Wilson received me with notable warmth, and did propose that I should stay all night, to which I gladly agreed, more, it must be confessed, from the attraction of the old house than the love I bore to Mrs Wilson.

'But what is that you are carrying?' she asked.

It was my sword. This requires a little explanation.

It was natural enough that on the eve of a second visit, as I hoped, to the armoury, I should, on going up to bed, lift my eyes with longing look to my own sword. The thought followed—what a pleasure it would be to compare it with the other swords in the armoury. If I could only get it down and smuggle it away with me! It was my own. I believed Mr Elder would not approve of this, but at the same time he had never told me not to take it down: he had only hung it too high for any of us to reach it —almost close to the ceiling, in fact. But a want of enterprise

was not then a fault of mine, and the temptation was great. So, when my chum was asleep, I rose, and by the remnant of a fading moon got together the furniture—no easy undertaking when the least noise would have betrayed me. Fortunately there was a chest of drawers not far from under the object of my ambition, and I managed by half inches to move it the few feet necessary. On the top of this I hoisted the small dressing-table, which, being only of deal, was very light. The chest of drawers was large enough to hold my small box beside the table. I got on the drawers by means of a chair, then by means of the box I got on the table, and so succeeded in getting down the sword. Having replaced the furniture, I laid the weapon under my bolster, and was soon fast asleep. The moment I woke I got up, and before the house was stirring had deposited the sword in an outbuilding whence I could easily get it off the premises. Of course my companions knew, and I told them all my design. Moberly hinted that I ought to have asked Mr Elder, but his was the sole remark in that direction.

'It is my sword, Mrs Wilson,' I answered.

'How do you come to have a sword?' she asked. 'It is hardly a fit plaything for you.'

I told her how it had been in the house since long before I was born, and that I had brought it to compare with some of the swords in the armoury.

'Very well,' she answered. 'I dare say we can manage it; but when Mr Close is at home it is not very easy to get into the armoury. He's so jealous of any one touching his swords and

guns!'

'Who is Mr Close, then?'

'Mr Close is the house-steward.'

'But they're not his, then, are they?'

'It's quite enough that he thinks so. He has a fancy for that sort of thing. I'm sure I don't see anything so precious in the rusty old rubbish.'

I suspected that, as the saying is, there was no love lost between Mrs Wilson and Mr Close. I learned afterwards that he had been chaplain to a regiment of foot, which, according to rumour, he had had to leave for some misconduct. This was in the time of the previous owner of Moldwarp Hall, and nobody now knew the circumstances under which he had become house-steward—a position in which Sir Giles, when he came to the property, had retained his services.

'We are going to have company, and a dance, this evening,' continued Mrs Wilson. 'I hardly know what to do with you, my hands are so full.'

This was not very consistent with her inviting me to stay all night, and confirms my suspicion that she had made a request to that purport of Mr. Elder, for otherwise, surely, she would have sent me home.

'Oh! never mind me, Mrs Wilson,' I said. 'If you will let me wander about the place, I shall be perfectly comfortable.'

'Yes; but you might get in the way of the family, or the visitors,' she said.

'I'll take good care of that,' I returned. 'Surely there is room in this huge place without running against any one.'

'There ought to be,' she answered.

After a few minutes' silence, she resumed.

'We shall have a good many of them staying all night', but there will be room for you, I dare say. What would you like to do with yourself till they begin to come?'

'I should like to go to the library,' I answered, thinking, I confess, of the adjacent armoury as well. 'Should I be in the way there?'

'No; I don't think you would,' she replied, thoughtfully. 'It's not often any one goes there.'

'Who takes charge of the books?' I asked.

'Oh! books don't want much taking care of,' she replied. 'I have thought of having them down and dusting the place out, but it would be such a job! and the dust don't signify upon old books. They ain't of much count in this house. Nobody heeds them.'

'I wish Sir Giles would let me come and put them in order in the holidays,' I said, little knowing how altogether unfit I yet was for such an undertaking.

'Ah well! we'll see. Who knows?'

'You don't think he would!' I exclaimed.

'I don't know. Perhaps he might. But I thought you were going abroad soon.'

I had not said anything to her on the subject. I had never had an opportunity.

'Who told you that, Mrs Wilson?'

'Never you mind. A little bird. Now you had better go to the library. I dare say you won't hurt anything, for Sir Giles, although he never looks at the books, would be dreadfully angry if he thought anything were happening to them.'

'I'll take as good care of them as if they were my uncle's. He used to let me handle his as much as I liked. I used to mend them up for him. I'm quite accustomed to books, I assure you, Mrs Wilson.'

'Come, then; I will show you the way,' she said.

'I think I know the way,' I answered. For I had pondered so much over the place, and had, I presume, filled so many gaps of recollection with creations of fancy, that I quite believed I knew my way all about the house.

'We shall see,' she returned with a smile. 'I will take you the nearest way, and you shall tell me on your honour if you remember it.'

She led the way, and I followed. Passing down the stone stair and through several rooms, mostly plain bedrooms, we arrived at a wooden staircase, of which there were few in the place. We ascended a little way, crossed one or two rooms more, came out on a small gallery open to the air, a sort of covered bridge across a gulf in the building, re-entered, and after crossing other rooms, tapestried, and to my eyes richly furnished, arrived at the first of those occupied by the library.

'Now did you know the way, Wilfrid?'

'Not in the least,' I answered. 'I cannot think how I could have forgotten it so entirely. I am ashamed of myself.'

'You have no occasion,' she returned. 'You never went that way at all.'

'Oh, dear me!' I said; 'what a place it is! I might lose myself in it for a week.'

'You would come out somewhere, if you went on long enough, I dare say. But you must not leave the library till I come and fetch you. You will want some dinner before long.'

'What time do you dine?' I asked, putting my hand to my watch-pocket.

'Ah! you've got a watch—have you? But indeed, on a day like this, I dine when I can. You needn't fear. I will take care of you.'

'Mayn't I go into the armoury?'

'If you don't mind the risk of meeting Mr Close. But he's not likely to be there to-day.'

She left me with fresh injunctions not to stir till she came for me. But I now felt the place to be so like a rabbit-warren, that I dared not leave the library, if not for the fear of being lost, then for the fear of intruding upon some of the family. I soon nestled in a corner, with books behind, books before, and books all around me. After trying several spots, like a miner searching for live lodes, and finding nothing auriferous to my limited capacities and tastes, I at length struck upon a rich vein, instantly dropped on the floor, and, with my back against the shelves, was now immersed in 'The Seven Champions of Christendom.'

As I read, a ray of light, which had been creeping along the shelves behind me, leaped upon my page. I looked up. I had not yet seen the room so light. Nor had I perceived before in what confusion and with what disrespect the books were heaped upon the shelves. A dim feeling awoke in me that to restore such a world to order would be like a work of creation; but I sank again forthwith in the delights of a feast provided for an imagination which had in general to feed itself. I had here all the delight of invention without any of its effort.

At length I became aware of some weariness. The sunbeam had vanished, not only from the page, but from the room. I began to stretch my arms. As the tension of their muscles relaxed, my hand fell upon the sword which I had carried with me and laid on the floor by my side. It awoke another mental nerve. I would go and see the armoury.

I rose, and wandered slowly through room after room of the library, dragging my sword after me. When I reached the last, there, in the corner next the outer wall of the house, rose the three stone steps leading to the little door that communicated with the treasury of ancient strife. I stood at the foot of the steps irresolute for a moment, fearful lest my black man, Mr Close, should be within, polishing his weapons perhaps, and fearful in his wrath. I ascended the steps, listened at the door, heard nothing, lifted the old, quaintly-formed latch, peeped in, and entered. There was the whole collection, abandoned to my eager gaze and eager hands! How long I stood, taking down weapon after weapon,

examining each like an old book, speculating upon modes of use, and intention of varieties in form, poring over adornment and mounting, I cannot tell. Historically the whole was a sealed book; individually I made a thorough acquaintance with not a few, noting the differences and resemblances between them and my own, and instead of losing conceit of the latter, finding more and more reasons for holding it dear and honourable. I was poising in one hand, with the blade upright in the air—for otherwise I could scarcely have held it in both—a huge two-handed, double-hilted sword with serrated double edge, when I heard a step approaching, and before I had well replaced the sword, a little door in a corner which-I had scarcely noticed—the third door to the room—opened, and down the last steps of the narrowest of winding stairs a little man in black screwed himself into the armoury. I was startled, but not altogether frightened. I felt myself grasping my own sword somewhat nervously in my left hand, as I abandoned the great one, and let it fall back with a clang into its corner.

'By the powers!' exclaimed Mr Close, revealing himself an Irishman at once in the surprise of my presence, 'and whom have we here?'

I felt my voice tremble a little as I replied,

'Mrs Wilson allowed me to come, sir. I assure you I have not been hurting anything.'

'Who's to tell that? Mrs Wilson has no business to let any one come here. This is my quarters. There—you've got one in your

hand now! You've left finger-marks on the blade, I'll be bound. Give it me.'

He stretched out his hand. I drew back.

'This one is mine,' I said.

'Ho, ho, young gentleman! So you're a collector—are you? Already too! Nothing like beginning in time. Let me look at the thing, though.'

He was a little man, as I have said, dressed in black, with a frock coat and a deep white neckcloth. His face would have been vulgar, especially as his nose was a traitor to his mouth, revealing in its hue the proclivities of its owner, but for a certain look of the connoisseur which went far to redeem it. The hand which he stretched out to take my weapon, was small and delicate—like a woman's indeed. His speech was that of a gentleman. I handed him the sword at once.

He had scarcely glanced at it when a strange look passed over his countenance. He tried to draw it, failed, and looking all along the sheath, saw its condition. Then his eyes flashed. He turned from me abruptly, and went up the stair he had descended. I waited anxiously for what seemed to me half an hour: I dare say it was not more than ten minutes. At last I heard him revolving on his axis down the corkscrew staircase. He entered and handed me my sword, saying—

'There! I can't get it out of the sheath. It's in a horrid state of rust. Where did you fall in with it?'

I told him all I knew about it. If he did not seem exactly

interested, he certainly behaved with some oddity. When I told him what my grandmother had said about some battle in which an ancestor had worn it, his arm rose with a jerk, and the motions of his face, especially of his mouth, which appeared to be eating its own teeth, were for a moment grotesque. When I had finished, he said, with indifferent tone, but eager face—

'Well, it's a rusty old thing, but I like old weapons. I'll give you a bran new officer's sword, as bright as a mirror, for it—I will. There now! Is it a bargain?'

'I could not part with it, sir—not for the best sword in the country,' I answered. 'You see it has been so long in our family.'

'Hm! hm! you're quite right, my boy. I wouldn't if I were you. But as I see you know how to set a right value on such a weapon, you may stay and look at mine as long as you like. Only if you take any of them from their sheaths, you must be very careful how you put them in again. Don't use any force. If there is any one you can't manage easily, just lay it on the window-sill, and I will attend to it. Mind you don't handle—I mean touch—the blades at all. There would be no end of rust-spots before morning.'

I was full of gratitude for the confidence he placed in me.

'I can't stop now to tell you about them all, but I will—some day.'

So saying he disappeared once more up the little staircase, leaving me like Aladdin in the jewel-forest. I had not been alone more than half an hour or so, however, when he returned, and taking down a dagger, said abruptly,

'There, that is the dagger with which Lord Harry Rolleston'—I think that was the name, but knowing nothing of the family or its history, I could not keep the names separate—'stabbed his brother Gilbert. And there is—'

He took down one after another, and with every one he associated some fact—or fancy perhaps, for I suspect now that he invented not a few of his incidents.

'They have always been fond of weapons in this house,' he said. 'There now is one with the strangest story! It's in print—I can show it you in print in the library there. It had the reputation of being a magic sword—'

'Like King Arthur's Excalibur?' I asked, for I had read a good deal of the history of Prince Arthur.

'Just so,' said Mr Close. 'Well, that sword had been in the family for many years—I may say centuries. One day it disappeared, and there was a great outcry. A lackey had been discharged for some cause or other, and it was believed he had taken it. But before they found him, the sword was in its place upon the wall. Afterwards the man confessed that he had taken it, out of revenge, for he knew how it was prized. But in the middle of the next night, as he slept in a roadside inn, a figure dressed in ancient armour had entered the room, taken up the sword, and gone away with it. I dare say it was all nonsense. His heart had failed him when he found he was followed, and he had contrived by the help of some fellow-servant to restore it. But there are very queer stories about old weapons—swords in particular. I must go

now,' he concluded, 'for we have company to-night, and I have a good many things to see to.'

So saying he left me. I remained a long time in the armoury, and then returned to the library, where I seated myself in the same corner as before, and went on with my reading—lost in pleasure.

All at once I became aware that the light was thickening, and that I was very hungry. At the same moment I heard a slight rustle in the room, and looked round, expecting to see Mrs Wilson come to fetch me. But there stood Miss Clara—not now in white, however, but in a black silk frock. She had grown since I saw her last, and was prettier than ever. She started when she saw me.

'You here!' she exclaimed, as if we had known each other all our lives. 'What are you doing here?'

'Reading,' I answered, and rose from the floor, replacing the book as I rose. 'I thought you were Mrs Wilson come to fetch me.'

'Is she coming here?'

'Yes. She told me not to leave the library till she came for me.'

'Then I must get out of the way.'

'Why so, Miss Clara?' I asked.

'I don't mean her to know I am here. If you tell, I shall think you the meanest—'

'Don't trouble yourself to find your punishment before you've found your crime,' I said, thinking of my own processes of invention. What a little prig I must have been!

'Very well, I will trust you,' she returned, holding out her hand.

—'I didn't give it you to keep, though,' she added, finding that, with more of country manners than tenderness, I fear, I retained it in my boyish grasp.

I felt awkward at once, and let it go.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Now, when do you expect Mrs. Wilson?'

'I don't know at all. She said she would fetch me for dinner. There she comes, I do believe.'

Clara turned her head like a startled forest creature that wants to listen, but does not know in what direction, and moved her feet as if she were about to fly.

'Come back after dinner,' she said: 'you had better!' and darting to the other side of the room, lifted a piece of hanging tapestry, and vanished just in time, for Mrs Wilson's first words crossed her last.

'My dear boy—Master Cumbermede, I should say, I am sorry I have not been able to get to you sooner. One thing after another has kept me on my legs till I'm ready to drop. The cook is as tiresome as cooks only can be. But come along; I've got a mouthful of dinner for you at last, and a few minutes to eat my share of it with you, I hope.'

I followed without a word, feeling a little guilty, but only towards Mrs Wilson, not towards myself, if my reader will acknowledge the difference—for I did not feel that I ought to betray Miss Clara. We returned as we came; and certainly whatever temper the cook might be in, there was nothing amiss

with the dinner. Had there been, however, I was far too hungry to find fault with it.

'Well, how have you enjoyed yourself, Master Wilfrid? Not very much, I am afraid. But really I could not help it,' said Mrs Wilson.

'I couldn't have enjoyed myself more,' I answered. 'If you will allow me, I'll go back to the library as soon as I've done my dinner.'

'But it's almost dark there now.'

'You wouldn't mind letting me have a candle, Mrs Wilson?'

'A candle, child! It would be of no use. The place wouldn't light up with twenty candles.'

'But I don't want it lighted up. I could read by one candle as well as by twenty.'

'Very well. You shall do as you like. Only be careful, for the old house is as dry as tinder, and if you were to set fire to anything, we should be all in a blaze in a moment.'

'I will be careful, Mrs Wilson. You may trust me. Indeed you may.'

She hurried me a little over my dinner. The bell in the court rang loudly.

'There's some of them already! That must be the Simmonses. They're always early, and they always come to that gate—I suppose because they haven't a carriage of their own, and don't like to drive into the high court in a chaise from the George and Pudding.'

‘I’ve quite done, ma’am: may I go now?’

‘Wait till I get you a candle.’

She took one from a press in the room, lighted it, led me once more to the library, and there left me with a fresh injunction not to be peeping out and getting in the way of the visitors.

CHAPTER XIII. THE LEADS

The moment Mrs Wilson was gone, I expected to see Clara peep out from behind the tapestry in the corner; but as she did not appear, I lifted it, and looked in. There was nothing behind but a closet almost filled with books, not upon shelves, but heaped up from floor to ceiling. There had been just room, and no more, for Clara to stand between the tapestry and the books. It was of no use attempting to look for her—at least I said so to myself, for as yet the attraction of an old book was equal to that of a young girl. Besides, I always enjoyed waiting—up to a certain point. Therefore I resumed my place on the floor, with the *Seven Champions* in one hand, and my chamber-candlestick in the other.

I had for the moment forgotten Clara in the adventures of St. Andrew of Scotland, when the *silking* of her frock aroused me. She was at my side.

'Well, you've had your dinner? Did she give you any dessert?'

'This is my dessert,' I said, holding up the book. 'It's far more than—'

'Far more than your desert,' she pursued, 'if you prefer it to me.'

'I looked for you first,' I said defensively.

'Where?'

'In the closet there.'

'You didn't think I was going to wait there, did you? Why the very spiders are hanging dead in their own webs in there. But here's some dessert for you—if you're as fond of apples as most boys,' she added, taking a small rosy-cheeked beauty from her pocket.

I accepted it, but somehow did not quite relish being lumped with boys in that fashion. As I ate it, which I should have felt bound to do even had it been less acceptable in itself, she resumed —

'Wouldn't you like to see the company arrive? That's what I came for. I wasn't going to ask Goody Wilson.'

'Yes, I should,' I answered; 'but Mrs Wilson told me to keep here, and not get in their way.'

'Oh! I'll take care of that. We shan't go near them. I know every corner of the place—a good deal better than Mrs Wilson. Come along, Wilfrid—that's your name, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is. Am I to call you Clara?'

'Yes, if you are good—that is, if you like. I don't care what you call me. Come along.'

I followed. She led me into the armoury. A great clang of the bell in the paved court fell upon our ears.

'Make haste,' she said, and darted to the door at the foot of the little stair. 'Mind how you go,' she went on. 'The steps are very much worn. Keep your right shoulder foremost.'

I obeyed her directions, and followed her up the stair. We passed the door of a room over the armoury, and ascended still,

to creep out at last through a very low door on to the leads of the little square tower. Here we could on the one side look into every corner of the paved court, and on the other, across the roof of the hall, could see about half of the high court, as they called it, into which the carriages drove; and from this post of vantage, we watched the arrival of a good many parties. I thought the ladies tripping across the paved court, with their gay dresses lighting up the Spring twilight, and their sweet voices rippling its almost pensive silence, suited the time and the place much better than the carriages dashing into the other court, fine as they looked with their well-kept horses and their servants in gay liveries. The sun was down, and the moon was rising—near the full, but there was too much light in the sky to let her make much of herself yet. It was one of those Spring evenings which you could not tell from an Autumn one except for a certain something in the air appealing to an undefined sense—rather that of smell than any other. There were green buds and not withering leaves in it—life and not death; and the voices of the gathering guests were of the season, and pleasant to the soul. Of course Nature did not then affect me so definitely as to make me give forms of thought to her influences. It is now first that I turn them into shapes and words.

As we stood, I discovered that I had been a little mistaken about the position of the Hall. I saw that, although from some points in front it seemed to stand on an isolated rock, the ground rose behind it, terrace upon terrace, the uppermost of which terraces were crowned with rows of trees. Over them, the moon

was now gathering her strength.

'It is rather cold; I think we had better go in,' said Clara, after we had remained there for some minutes without seeing any fresh arrivals.

'Very well,' I answered. 'What shall we do? Shall you go home?'

'No, certainly not. We must see a good deal more of the fun first.'

'How will you manage that? You will go to the ball-room, I suppose. You can go where you please, of course.'

'Oh no! I'm not grand enough to be invited. Oh, dear no! At least I am not old enough.'

'But you will be some day.'

'I don't know. Perhaps. We'll see. Meantime we must make the best of it. What are *you* going to do?'

'I shall go back to the library.'

'Then I'll go with you—till the music begins; and then I'll take you where you can see a little of the dancing. It's great fun.'

'But how will you manage that?'

'You leave that to me.'

We descended at once to the armoury, where I had left my candle; and thence we returned to the library.

'Would you like me to read to you?' I asked.

'I don't mind—if it's anything worth hearing.'

'Well, I'll read you a bit of the book I was reading when you came in.'

'What! that musty old book! No, thank you. It's enough to give one the horrors—the very sight of it is enough. How can you like such frumpy old things?'

'Oh! you mustn't mind the look of it,' I said. 'It's *very* nice inside!'

'I know where there is a nice one,' she returned. 'Give me the candle.'

I followed her to another of the rooms, where she searched for some time. At length—'There it is!' she said, and put into my hand *The Castle of Otranto*. The name promised well. She next led the way to a lovely little bay window, forming almost a closet, which looked out upon the park, whence, without seeing the moon, we could see her light on the landscape, and the great deep shadows cast over the park from the towers of the Hall. There we sat on the broad window-sill, and I began to read. It was delightful. Does it indicate loss of power, that the grown man cannot enjoy the book in which the boy delighted? Or is it that the realities of the book, as perceived by his keener eyes, refuse to blend with what imagination would supply if it might?

No sooner however did the first notes of the distant violins enter the ear of my companion than she started to her feet.

'What's the matter?' I asked, looking up from the book.

'Don't you hear the music?' she said, half-indignantly.

'I hear it now,' I answered; 'but why—?'

'Come along,' she interrupted, eagerly. 'We shall just be in time to see them go across from the drawing-room to the ball-

room. Come, come. Leave your candle.'

I put down my book with some reluctance. She led me into the armoury, and from the armoury out on the gallery half-encompassing the great hall, which was lighted up, and full of servants. Opening another door in the gallery, she conducted me down a stair which led almost into the hall, but, ascending again behind it, landed us in a little lobby, on one side of which was the drawing-room, and on the other the ball-room, on another level, reached by a few high, semi-circular steps.

'Quick! quick!' said Clara, and turning sharply round, she opened another door, disclosing a square-built stone staircase. She pushed the door carefully against the wall, ran up a few steps, I following in some trepidation, turned abruptly, and sat down. I did as she did, questioning nothing: I had committed myself to her superior knowledge.

The quick ear of my companion had caught the first sounds of the tuning of the instruments, and here we were, before the invitation to dance, a customed observance at Moldwarp Hall, had begun to play. In a few minutes thereafter, the door of the drawing-room opened; when, pair after pair, the company, to the number of over a hundred and fifty, I should guess, walked past the foot of the stair on which we were seated, and ascended the steps into the ball-room. The lobby was dimly lighted, except from the two open doors, and there was little danger of our being seen.

I interrupt my narrative to mention the odd fact that so fully

was my mind possessed with the antiquity of the place, which it had been the pride of generation after generation to keep up, that now, when I recall the scene, the guests always appear dressed not as they were then, but in a far more antique style with which after knowledge supplied my inner vision.

Last of all came Lady Brotherton, Sir Giles's wife, a pale, delicate-looking woman, leaning on the arm of a tall, long-necked, would-be-stately, yet insignificant-looking man. She gave a shiver as, up the steps from the warm drawing-room, she came at once opposite our open door.

'What a draught there is here!' she said, adjusting her rose-coloured scarf about her shoulders. 'It feels quite wintry. Will you oblige me, Mr Mellon, by shutting that door? Sir Giles will not allow me to have it built up. I am sure there are plenty of ways to the leads besides that.'

'This door, my lady?' asked Mr Mellon.

I trembled lest he should see us.

'Yes. Just throw it to. There's a spring lock on it. I can't think —'

The slam and echoing bang of the closing door cut off the end of the sentence. Even Clara was a little frightened, for her hand stole into mine for a moment before she burst out laughing.

'Hush! hush!' I said. 'They will hear you.'

'I almost wish they would,' she said. 'What a goose I was to be frightened, and not speak! Do you know where we are?'

'No,' I answered; 'how should I? Where are we?'

My fancy of knowing the place had vanished utterly by this time. All my mental charts of it had got thoroughly confused, and I do not believe I could have even found my way back to the library.

'Shut out on the leads,' she answered. 'Come along. We may as well go to meet our fate.'

I confess to a little palpitation of the heart as she spoke, for I was not yet old enough to feel that Clara's companionship made the doom a light one. Up the stairs we went—here no twisting corkscrew, but a broad flight enough, with square turnings. At the top was a door, fastened only with a bolt inside—against no worse housebreakers than the winds and rains. When we emerged, we found ourselves in the open night.

'Here we are in the moon's drawing-room!' said Clara.

The scene was lovely. The sky was all now—the earth only a background or pedestal for the heavens. The river, far below, shone here and there in answer to the moon, while the meadows and fields lay as in the oblivion of sleep, and the wooded hills were only dark formless masses. But the sky was the dwelling-place of the moon, before whose radiance, penetratingly still, the stars shrunk as if they would hide in the flowing skirts of her garments. There was scarce a cloud to be seen, and the whiteness of the moon made the blue thin. I could hardly believe in what I saw. It was as if I had come awake without getting out of the dream.

We were on the roof of the ball-room. We felt the rhythmic

motion of the dancing feet shake the building in time to the music. 'A low melodious thunder' buried beneath—above, the eternal silence of the white moon!

We passed to the roof of the drawing-room. From it, upon one side, we could peep into the great gothic window of the hall, which rose high above it. We could see the servants passing and repassing, with dishes for the supper which was being laid in the dining-room under the drawing-room, for the hall was never used for entertainment now, except on such great occasions as a coming of age, or an election-feast, when all classes met.

'We mustn't stop here,' said Clara. 'We shall get our deaths of cold.'

'What shall we do, then?' I asked.

'There are plenty of doors,' she answered—'only Mrs Wilson has a foolish fancy for keeping them all bolted. We must try, though.'

Over roof after roof we went; now descending, now ascending a few steps; now walking along narrow gutters, between battlement and sloping roof; now crossing awkward junctions—trying doors many in tower and turret—all in vain! Every one was bolted on the inside. We had grown quite silent, for the case looked serious.

'This is the last door,' said Clara—'the last we can reach. There are more in the towers, but they are higher up. What *shall* we do? Unless we go down a chimney, I don't know what's to be done.' Still her voice did not falter, and my courage did not give way.

She stood for a few moments, silent. I stood regarding her, as one might listen for a doubtful oracle.

'Yes. I've got it!' she said at length. 'Have you a good head, Wilfrid?'

'I don't quite know what you mean,' I answered.

'Do you mind being on a narrow place, without much to hold by?'

'High up?' I asked with a shiver.

'Yes.'

For a moment I did not answer. It was a special weakness of my physical nature, one which my imagination had increased tenfold—the absolute horror I had of such a transit as she was evidently about to propose. My worst dreams—from which I would wake with my heart going like a fire-engine—were of adventures of the kind. But before a woman, how could I draw back? I would rather lie broken at the bottom of the wall. And if the fear should come to the worst, I could at least throw myself down and end it so.

'Well?' I said, as if I had only been waiting for her exposition of the case.

'Well!' she returned.—'Come along then.'

I did go along—like a man to the gallows; only I would not have turned back to save my life. But I should have hailed the slightest change of purpose in her, with such pleasure as Daniel must have felt when he found the lions would rather not eat him. She retraced our steps a long way—until we reached the middle

of the line of building which divided the two courts.

'There!' she said, pointing to the top of the square tower over the entrance to the hall, from which we had watched the arrival of the guests: it rose about nine feet only above where we now stood in the gutter—'I *know* I left the door open when we came down. I did it on purpose. I hate Goody Wilson. Lucky, you see! —that is if you have a head. And if you haven't, it's all the same: I have.'

So saying, she pointed to a sort of flying buttress which sprung sideways, with a wide span, across the angle the tower made with the hall, from an embrasure of the battlement of the hall to the outer corner of the tower, itself more solidly buttressed. I think it must have been made to resist the outward pressure of the roof of the hall; but it was one of those puzzling points which often occur—and oftenest in domestic architecture—where additions and consequent alterations have been made from time to time. Such will occasion sometimes as much conjecture towards their explanation as a disputed passage in Shakspere or Aeschylus.

Could she mean me to cross that hair-like bridge? The mere thought was a terror. But I would not blench. Fear I confess—cowardice if you will:—poltroonery, not.

'I see,' I answered. 'I will try. If I fall, don't blame me. I will do my best.'

'You don't think,' she returned, 'I'm going to let you go alone! I should have to wait hours before you found a door to let me down—unless indeed you went and told Goody Wilson, and I had

rather die where I am. No, no. Come along. I'll show you how.'

With a rush and a scramble, she was up over the round back of the buttress before I had time to understand that she meant as usual to take the lead. If she could but have sent me back a portion of her skill, or lightness, or nerve, or whatever it was, just to set me off with a rush like that! But I stood preparing at once and hesitating. She turned and looked over the battlements of the tower.

'Never mind, Wilfrid,' she said; 'I'll fetch you presently.'

'No, no,' I cried. 'Wait for me. I'm coming.'

I got astride of the buttress, and painfully forced my way up. It was like a dream of leap-frog, prolonged under painfully recurring difficulties. I shut my eyes, and persuaded myself that all I had to do was to go on leap-frogging. At length, after more trepidation and brain-turning than I care to dwell upon, lest even now it should bring back a too keen realization of itself, I reached the battlement, seizing which with one shaking hand, and finding the other grasped by Clara, I tumbled on the leads of the tower.

'Come along!' she said. 'You see, when the girls like, they can beat the boys—even at their own games. We're all right now.'

'I did my best,' I returned, mightily relieved. '*I'm* not an angel, you know. I can't fly like you.'

She seemed to appreciate the compliment.

'Never mind. I've done it before. It was game of you to follow.'

Her praise elated me. And it was well.

'Come along,' she added.

She seemed to be always saying *Come along*.

I obeyed, full of gratitude and relief. She skipped to the tiny turret which rose above our heads, and lifted the door-latch. But, instead of disappearing within, she turned and looked at me in white dismay. The door was bolted. Her look roused what there was of manhood in me. I felt that, as it had now come to the last gasp, it was mine to comfort her.

'We are no worse than we were,' I said. 'Never mind.'

'I don't know that,' she answered mysteriously.—'Can *you* go back as you came? *I* can't.'

I looked over the edge of the battlement where I stood. There was the buttress crossing the angle of moonlight, with its shadow lying far down on the wall. I shuddered at the thought of renewing my unspeakable dismay. But what must be must.

Besides, Clara had praised me for creeping where she could fly: now I might show her that I could creep where she could not fly.

'I will try,' I returned, putting one leg through an embrasure, and holding on by the adjoining battlement.

'Do take care, Wilfrid,' she cried, stretching out her hands, as if to keep me from falling.

A sudden pulse of life rushed through me. All at once I became not only bold, but ambitious.

'Give me a kiss,' I said, 'before I go.'

'Do you make so much of it?' she returned, stepping back a pace.—How much a woman she was even then!

Her words roused something in me which to this day I have not been able quite to understand. A sense of wrong had its share in the feeling; but what else I can hardly venture to say. At all events, an inroad of careless courage was the consequence. I stepped at once upon the buttress, and stood for a moment looking at her—no doubt with reproach. She sprang towards me.

'I beg your pardon,' she said.

The end of the buttress was a foot or two below the level of the leads, where Clara stood. She bent over the battlement, stooped her face towards me, and kissed me on the mouth. My only answer was to turn and walk down the buttress, erect; a walk which, as the arch of the buttress became steeper, ended in a run and a leap on to the gutter of the hall. There I turned, and saw her stand like a lady in a ballad leaning after me in the moonlight. I lifted my cap and sped away, not knowing whither, but fancying that out of her sight I could make up my mind better. Nor was I mistaken. The moment I sat down, my brains began to go about, and in another moment I saw what might be attempted.

In going from roof to roof, I had seen the little gallery along which I had passed with Mrs Wilson on my way to the library. It crossed what might be called an open shaft in the building. I thought I could manage, roofed as it was, to get in by the open side. It was some time before I could find it again; but when I did come upon it at last, I saw that it might be done. By the help of a projecting gargoyle, curiously carved in the days when the wall to which it clung had formed part of the front of the building, I got

my feet upon the wooden rail of the gallery, caught hold of one of the small pillars which supported the roof, and *slewed* myself in. I was almost as glad as when I had crossed the buttress, for below me was a paved bottom, between high walls, without any door, like a dry well in the midst of the building.

My recollection of the way to the armoury, I found, however, almost obliterated. I knew that I must pass through a bedroom at the end of the gallery, and that was all I remembered. I opened the door, and found myself face to face with a young girl with wide eyes. She stood staring and astonished, but not frightened. She was younger than Clara, and not so pretty. Her eyes looked dark, and also the hair she had been brushing. Her face would have been quite pale, but for the rosy tinge of surprise. She made no exclamation, only stared with her brush in her hand, and questions in her eyes. I felt far enough from comfortable; but with a great effort I spoke.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.