GEORGE MACDONALD

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BY GEORGE MACDONALD

Hector Macintosh was a young man about five-and-twenty, who, with the proclivities of the Celt, inherited also some of the consequent disabilities, as well as some that were accidental. Among the rest was a strong tendency to regard only the ideal, and turn away from any authority derived from an inferior source. His chief delight lay in the attempt to embody, in what seemed to him the natural form of verse, the thoughts in him constantly moving at least in the direction of the ideal, even when he was most conscious of his inability to attain to the utterance of them. But it was only in the retirement of his own chamber that he attempted their embodiment; of all things, he shrank from any communion whatever concerning these cherished matters. Nor, indeed, had he any friends who could tempt him to share with them what seemed to him his best; so that, in truth, he was intimate with none. His mind would dwell much upon love and friendship in the imaginary abstract, but of neither had he had

the smallest immediate experience. He had cherished only the ideals of the purest and highest sort of either passion, and seemed to find satisfaction enough in the endeavor to embody such in his verse, without even imagining himself in communication with any visionary public. The era had not yet dawned when every scribbler is consumed with the vain ambition of being recognized, not, indeed, as what he is, but as what he pictures himself in his secret sessions of thought. That disease could hardly attack him while yet his very imaginations recoiled from the thought of the inimical presence of a stranger consciousness. Whether this was modesty, or had its hidden base in conceit, I am, with the few insights I have had into his mind, unable to determine.

That he had leisure for the indulgence of his bent was the result of his peculiar position. He lived in the house of his father, and was in his father's employment, so that he was able both to accommodate himself to his father's requirements and at the same time fully indulge his own especial taste. The elder Macintosh was a banker in one of the larger county towns of Scotland—at least, such is the profession and position there accorded by popular consent to one who is, in fact, only a bank-agent, for it is a post involving a good deal of influence and a yet greater responsibility. Of this responsibility, however, he had allowed his son to feel nothing, merely using him as a clerk, and leaving him, as soon as the stated hour for his office-work expired, free in mind as well as body, until the new day should

make a fresh claim upon his time and attention. His mother seldom saw him except at meals, and, indeed, although he always behaved dutifully to her, there was literally no intercommunion of thought or feeling between them—a fact which probably had a good deal to do with the undeveloped condition in which Hector found, or rather, did not find himself. Occasionally his mother wanted him to accompany her for a call, but he avoided yielding as much as possible, and generally with success; for this was one of the claims of social convention against which he steadily rebelled—the more determinedly that in none of his mother's friends could he take the smallest interest; for she was essentially a commonplace because ambitious woman, without a spark of aspiration, and her friends were of the same sort, without regard for anything but what was—or, at least, they supposed to be—the fashion. Indeed, it was hard to understand how Hector came ever to be born of such a woman, although in truth she was of as pure Celtic origin as her husband—only blood is not spirit, and that is often clearly manifest. His father, on the other hand, was not without some signs of an imagination—quite undeveloped, indeed, and, I believe, suppressed by the requirements of his business relations. At the same time, Hector knew that he cherished not a little indignation against the insolence of the good Dr. Johnson in regard to both Ossian and his humble translator, Macpherson, upholding the genuineness of both, although unable to enter into and set forth the points of the argument on either side. As to Hector, he reveled in the ancient traditions of his

family, and not unfrequently in his earlier youth had made an attempt to re-embody some of its legends into English, vain as regarded the retention of the special airiness and suggestiveness of their vaguely showing symbolism, for often he dropped his pen with a sigh of despair at the illusiveness of the special aroma of the Celtic imagination. For the rest, he had had as good an education as Scotland could in those days afford him, one of whose best features was the negative one that it did not at all interfere with the natural course of his inborn tendencies, and merely developed the power of expressing himself in what manner he might think fit. Let me add that he had a good conscience—I mean, a conscience ready to give him warning of the least tendency to overstep any line of prohibition; and that, as yet, he had never consciously refused to attend to such warning.

Another thing I must mention is that, although his mind was constantly haunted by imaginary forms of loveliness, he had never yet been what is called *in love*. For he had never yet seen anyone who even approached his idea of spiritual at once and physical attraction. He was content to live and wait, without even the notion that he was waiting for anything. He went on writing his verses, and receiving the reward, such as it was, of having placed on record the thoughts which had come to him, so that he might at will recall them. Neither had he any thought of the mental soil which was thus slowly gathering for the possible growth of an unknown seed, fit for growing and developing in that same unknown soil.

One day there arrived in that cold Northern city a certain cold, sunshiny morning, gay and sparkling, and with it the beginning of what, for want of a better word, we may call his fate. He knew nothing of its approach, had not the slightest prevision that the divinity had that moment put his hand to the shaping of his rough-hewn ends. It was early October by the calendar, but leaves brown and spotted and dry lay already in little heaps on the pavement—heaps made and unmade continually, as if for the sport of the keen wind that now scattered them with a rush, and again, extemporizing a little evanescent whirlpool, gathered a fresh heap upon the flags, again to rush asunder, as in direst terror of the fresh-invading wind, determined yet again to scatter them, a broken rout of escaping fugitives. Along the pavement, seemingly in furtherance of the careless design of the wind, a girl went heedlessly scushling along among the unresting and unresisting leaves, making with her rather short skirt a mimic whirlwind of her own. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, and she seemed absorbed in anxious thought, which thought had its origin in one of the commonest causes of human perplexity—the need of money, and the impossibility of devising a scheme by which to procure any. It was but a few weeks since her father had died, leaving behind him such a scanty provision for his widow and child that only by the utmost care and coaxing were they able from the first to make it meet their necessities. Nor, indeed, would it have been possible for them to subsist had not a brother of the widow supplemented their poor resources with

an uncertain contingent, whose continuance he was not able to secure, or even dared to promise.

At the present moment, however, it was not anxiety as to their own affairs that occupied the mind of Annie Melville, near enough as that might have lain; it was the unhappy condition in which the imprudence of a school-friend—almost her only friend—had involved herself by her hasty marriage with a man who, up to the present moment, had shown no faculty for helping himself or the wife he had involved in his fate, and who did not know where or by what means to procure even the bread of which they were in immediate want.

Now Annie had never had to suffer hunger, and the idea that her companion from childhood should be exposed to such a fate was what she could not bear. Yet, for any way out of it she could see, it would have to be borne. She might possibly, by herself going without, have given her a good piece of bread; but then she would certainly share it with her foolish husband, and there would be little satisfaction in that! They had already arrived at a stage in their downward progress when not gold, or even silver, but bare copper, was lacking as the equivalent for the bread that could but keep them alive until the next rousing of the hunger that even now lay across their threshold. And how could she, in her all but absolute poverty, do anything? Her mother was but one pace or so from the same goal, and would, as a mother must, interfere to prevent her useless postponement of the inevitable. It was clear she could do nothing—and yet she could ill consent

that it should be so.

When her father almost suddenly left them alone, Annie was already acting as assistant in the Girls' High School—but, alas! without any recognition of her services by even a promise of coming payment. She lived only in the hope of a small salary, dependent on her definite appointment to the office. To attempt to draw upon this hope would be to imperil the appointment itself. She could not, even for her friend, risk her mother's prospects, already poor enough; and she could not help perceiving the hopelessness of her friend's case, because of the utter characterlessness of the husband to whom she was enslaved. Why interfere with the hunger he would do nothing to forestall? How could she even give such a man the sixpence which had been her father's last gift to her?

But Annie was one to whom, in the course of her life, something strange had not unfrequently happened, chiefly in the shape of what the common mind would set aside as mere coincidence. I do not say *many* such things had occurred in her life; but, together, their strangeness and their recurrence had caused her to remember every one of them, so that, when she reviewed them, they seemed to her many. And now, with a shadowy prevision, as it seemed, that something was going to happen, and with a shadowy recollection that she had known beforehand it was coming, something strange did take place. Of such things she used, in after days, always to employ the old, stately Bible-phrase, "It came to pass"; she never said, "It

happened."

As she walked along with her eyes on the ground, the withered leaves caught up every now and then in a wild dance by the frolicsome wind, she was suddenly aware of something among them which she could not identify, whirling in the aerial vortex about her feet. Scarcely caring what it was, she yet, all but mechanically, looked at it a little closer, lost it from sight, caught it again, as a fresh blast sent it once more gyrating about her feet, and now regarded it more steadfastly. Even then it looked like nothing but another withered leaf, brown and wrinkled, given over to the wind, and rustling along at its mercy. Yet it made an impression upon her so far unlike that of a leaf that for a moment more she fixed on it a still keener look of unconsciously expectant eyes, and saw only that it looked—perhaps a little larger than most of the other leaves, but as brown and dead as they. Almost the same instant, however, she turned and pounced upon it, and, the moment she handled it, became aware that it felt less crumbly and brittle than the others looked, and then saw clearly that it was not a leaf, but perhaps a rag, or possibly a piece of soiled and rumpled paper. With a curiosity growing to expectation, and in a moment to wondering recognition, she proceeded to uncrumple it carefully and smooth it out tenderly; nor was the process quite completed when she fell upon her knees on the cold flags, her little cloak flowing wide from the clasp at her neck in a yet wilder puff of the bitter wind; but suddenly remembering that she must not be praying in the sight of men, started again to her feet, and,

wrapping her closed hand tight in the scanty border of her cloak, hurried, with the pound-note she had rescued, to the friend whose need was sorer than her own—not without an undefined anxiety in her heart whether she was doing right. How much good the note did, or whether it merely fell into the bottomless gulf of irremediable loss, I cannot tell. Annie's friend and her shiftless mate at once changed their dirty piece of paper for silver, bought food and railway tickets, left the town, and disappeared entirely from her horizon.

But consequences were not over with Annie; and the next day she became acquainted with the fact that proved of great significance to her, namely, that the same evening she found the money, Mr. Macintosh's kitchen-chimney had been on fire; and it wanted but the knowledge of how this had taken place to change the girl's consciousness from that of one specially aided by the ministry of an angel to that of a young woman, honest hitherto, suddenly changed into a thief!

For, in the course of a certain friendly gossip's narrative, it came out that that night the banker had been using the kitchen fire for the destruction of an accumulation of bank-notes, the common currency of Scotland, which had been judged altogether too dirty, or too much dilapidated, to be reissued. The knowledge of this fact was the slam of the closing door, whereby Annie found her soul shut out to wander in a night of dismay. The woman who told the fact saw nothing of consequence in it; Mrs. Melville, to whom she was telling it, saw nothing but perhaps a

lesson on the duty of having chimneys regularly swept, because of the danger to neighboring thatch. But had not Annie been seated in the shadow, her ghastly countenance would, even to the most casual glance, have betrayed a certain guilty horror, for now she *knew* that she had found and given away what she ought at once to have handed back to its rightful owner. It was true he did not even know that he had lost it, and could have no suspicion that she had found it; but what difference did or could that make? It was true also that she had neither taken nor bestowed it to her own advantage; but again, what difference could that make in her duty to restore it? Did she not well remember how eloquently and precisely Mr. Kennedy had, the very last Sunday, expounded the passage, "Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor." Right was right, whatever soft-hearted people might say or think. Anyone might give what was his own, but who could be right in giving away what was another's? It was time she had done it without thinking; but she had known, or might have known, well enough that to whomsoever it might belong, it was not hers. And now what possibility was there of setting right what she had set wrong? It was just possible a day might come when she should be able to restore what she had unjustly taken, but at the present moment it was as impossible for her to lay her hand upon a pound-note as upon a million. And, terrible thought!—she might have to enter the presence of her father—dead, men called him, but alive she knew him—with the consciousness that she had not brought him back the honor he had left with her.

It will, of course, suggest itself to every reader that herein she was driving her sense of obligation to the verge of foolishness; and, indeed, the thought did not fail to occur even to herself; but the answer of the self-accusing spirit was that had she been thoroughly upright in heart, she would at once have gone to the nearest house and made such inquiry as must instantly have resulted in the discovery of what had happened. This she had omitted—without thought, it is true, but not, therefore, without blame; and now, so far as she could tell, she would never be able to make restitution! Had she even told her mother what befallen her, her mother might have thought of the way in which it had come to pass, and set her feet in the path of her duty! But she had made evil haste, and had compassed too much.

She found herself, in truth, in a sore predicament, and was on the point of starting to her feet to run and confess to Mr. Macintosh what she had done, that he might at once pronounce the penalty on what she never doubted he must regard as a case of simple theft; but she bethought herself that she would remain incapable of offering the least satisfaction, and must therefore be regarded merely as one who sought by confession to secure forgiveness and remission. What proof had she to offer even that she had given the money away? To mention the name of her friend would be to bring her into discredit, and transfer to her the blame of her own act. There was nothing she could do—and yet, however was she to go about with such a load upon her conscience? Confessing, she might at least be regarded as one

who desired and meant to be honest. Confession would, anyhow, ease the weight of her load. Passively at last, from very weariness of thought, her mind was but going backward and forward over its own traces, heedlessly obliterating them, when suddenly a new and horrid consciousness emerged from the trodden slime—that she was glad that at least Sophy *had* the money! For one passing moment she was glad with the joy of Lady Macbeth, that what was done was done, and could not be altered. Then once more the storm within her awoke and would not again be stilled.

But now a third something happened which brought with it hope, for it suggested a way of deliverance. Impelled by the same power that causes a murderer to haunt the scene of his violence, she left the house, and was unaware whither she was directing her steps until she found herself again passing the door of the banker's house; there, in that same kitchen-window, on a level with the pavement, she espied, in large pen-drawn print, the production apparently of the cook or another of the servants, the announcement that a parlor-maid was wanted immediately. Again without waiting to think, and only afterwards waking up to the fact and meaning of what she had done, she turned, went back to the entry-door, and knocked. It was almost suddenly opened by the cook, and at once the storm of her misery was assuaged in a rising moon of hope, and the night became light about her. Ah, through what miseries are not even frail hopes our best and safest, our only *true* guides indeed, into other and yet fairer hopes!

"Did you want to see the mistress?" asked the jolly-faced

cook, where she stood on the other side of the threshold; and, without waiting an answer, she turned and led the way to the parlor. Annie followed, as if across the foundation of the fallen wall of Jericho; and found, to her surprise, that Mrs. Macintosh, knowing her by sight, received her with condescension, and Annie, grateful for the good-humor which she took for kindness, told her simply that she had come to see whether she would accept her services as parlor-maid.

Mrs. Macintosh seemed surprised at the proposal, and asked her the natural question whether she had ever occupied a similar situation.

Annie answered she had not, but that at home, while her father was alive, she had done so much of the same sort that she believed she could speedily learn all that was necessary.

"I thought someone told me," said the lady, who was one of the greatest gossips in the town, "that you were one of the teachers in the High School?"

"That is true," answered Annie; "I was doing so upon probation; but I had not yet begun to receive any salary for it. I was only a sort of apprentice to the work, and under no engagement."

Mrs. Macintosh, after regarding Annie for some time, and taking silent observation of her modesty and good-breeding, said at last:

"I like the look of you, Miss—, Miss–"

"My name is Annie Melville."

"Well, Annie, I confess I do not indeed *see* anything particularly unsuitable in you, but at the same time I cannot help fearing you may be—or, I should say rather, may imagine yourself—superior to what may be required of you."

"Oh, no, ma'am!" answered Annie; "I assure you I am too poor to think of any such thing! Indeed, I am so anxious to make money at once that, if you would consent to give me a trial, I should be ready to come to you this very evening."

"You will have no wages before the end of your six months."

"I understand, ma'am."

"It is a risk to take you without a character."

"I am very sorry, ma'am; but I have no one that can vouch for me—except, indeed, Mrs. Slater, of the High School, would say a word in my favor."

"Well, well!" answered Mrs. Macintosh, "I am so far pleased with you that I do not think I can be making a *great* mistake if I merely give you a trial. You may come to-night, if you like—that is, with your mother's permission."

Annie ran home greatly relieved, and told her mother what a piece of good-fortune she had had. Mrs. Melville did not at all take to the idea at first, for she cherished undefined expections for Annie, and knew that her father had done so also, for the girl was always reading, and had been for years in the habit of reading aloud to him, making now and then a remark that showed she understood well what she read. So the mother took comfort in her disappointment that her child had, solely for her sake,

she supposed, betaken herself to such service as would at once secure her livelihood and bring her in a little money, for, with the shadow of coming want growing black above them, even her first half-year's wages was a point of hope and expectation.

"Well, Annie," she answered, after a few moments' consideration, "it is but for a time; and you will be able to give up the place as soon as you please, and the easier that she only takes you on trial; that will hold for you as well as for her."

But nothing was farther from Annie's intention than finding the place would not suit her: no change could she dream of before at least she had a pound-note in her hand, when at once she would make it clear to her mother what a terrible scare had driven her to the sudden step she had taken. Until then she must go about with her whole head sick and her whole heart faint; neither could she for many weeks rid herself of the haunting notion that the banker, who was chiefly affected by her crime,—for as such she fully believed and regarded her deed,—was fully aware of her guilt. It seemed to her, when at any moment he happened to look at her, that now at last he must be on the point of letting her know that he had read the truth in her guilty looks, and she constantly fancied him saying to himself, "That is the girl who stole my money; she feels my eyes upon her." Every time she came home from an errand she would imagine her master looking from the window of his private room on the first floor, in readiness to cast aside forbearance and denounce her: he was only waiting to make himself one shade surer! Ah, how long was the time she

had to await her cleansing, the moment when she could go to him and say, "I have wronged, I have robbed you; here is all I can do to show my repentance. All this time I have been but waiting for my wages, to repay what I had taken from you." And, oddly enough, she was always mixing herself up with the man in the parable, who had received from his master a pound to trade with and make more; from her dreams she would wake in terror at the sound of that master's voice, ordering the pound to be taken from her and given to the school-fellow whom, at the cost of her own honesty, she had befriended. Oh, joyous day when the doom should be lifted from her, and she set free, to dream no more! For surely, when at length her master knew all, with the depth of her sorrow and repentance, he could not refuse his forgiveness! Would he not even, she dared to hope, remit the interest due on his money?—of which she entertained, in her ignorance, a usurious and preposterous idea.

The days went on, and the hour of her deliverance drew nigh. But, long before it came, two other processes had been slowly arriving at maturity. She had been gaining the confidence of her mistress, so that, ere three months were over, the arrangement of all minor matters of housekeeping was entirely in her hands. It may be that Mrs. Macintosh was not a little lazy, nor sorry to leave aside whatever did not positively demand her personal attention; one thing I am sure of, that Annie never made the smallest attempt to gain this favor, if such it was. Her mistress would, for instance, keep losing the keys of the cellaret, until in

despair she at last yielded them entirely to the care of Annie, who thereafter carried them in her pocket, where they were always at hand when wanted.

The other result was equally natural, but of greater importance; Hector, the only child of the house, was gradually and, for a long time, unconsciously falling in love with Annie. Those friends of the family who liked Annie, and felt the charm of her manners and simplicity, said only that his mother had herself to blame, for what else could she expect? Others of them, regarding her from the same point of view as her mistress, repudiated the notion as absurd, saying Hector was not the man to degrade himself! He was incapable of such a misalliance.

But, as I have said already, Hector, although he had never yet been in love, was yet more than usually ready to fall in love, as belongs to the poetic temperament, when the fit person should appear. As to what sort she might prove depended on two facts in Hector—one, that he was fastidious in the best meaning of the word, and the other that he was dominated by sound good sense; a fact which even his father allowed, although with a grudge, seeing he had hitherto manifested no devotion to business, but spent his free time in literary pursuits. Of the special nature of those pursuits his father knew, or cared to know, nothing; and as to his mother, she had not even a favorite hymn.

I may say, then, that the love of womankind, which in solution, so to speak, pervaded every atomic interstice of the nature of Hector, had gradually, indeed, but yet rapidly, concentrated and

crystallized around the idea of Annie—the more homogeneously and absorbingly that she was the first who had so moved him. It was, indeed, in the case of each a first love, although in the case of neither love at first sight.

Almost from the hour when first Annie entered the family, Hector had looked on her with eyes of interest; but, for a time, she had gone about the house with a sense almost of being there upon false pretenses, for she knew that she was doing what she did from no regard to any of its members, but only to gain the money whose payment would relieve her from an ever-present consciousness of guilt; and for this cause, if for no other, she was not in danger of falling in love with Hector. She was, indeed, too full of veneration for her master and mistress, and for their son so immeasurably above her, to let her thoughts rest upon him in any but a distantly worshipful fashion.

But it was part of her duty, which was not over well-defined in the house, to see that her young master's room was kept tidy and properly dusted; and in attending to this it was unavoidable that she should come upon indications of the way in which he spent his leisure hours. Never dreaming, indeed, that a servant might recognize at a glance what his father and mother did not care to know, Hector was never at any pains to conceal, or even to lay aside the lines yet wet from his pen when he left the room; and Annie could not help seeing them, or knowing what they were. Like many another Scotch lassie, she was fonder of reading than of anything else; and in her father's house she had

had the free use of what books were in it; nor is it, then, to be wondered at that she was far more familiar with certain great books than was ever many an Oxford man. Some never read what they have no desire to assimilate; and some read what no expenditure of reading could ever make them able to appropriate; but Annie read, understood, and re-read the "Paradise Lost"; knew intimately "Comus" as well; delighted in "Lycidas," and had some of Milton's sonnets by heart; while for the Hymn on the Nativity, she knew every line, had studied every turn and phrase in it. It is sometimes a great advantage not to have many books, and so never outgrow the sense of mystery that hovers about even an open book-case; it was with awe and reverence that Annie, looking around Hector's room, saw in it, not daring to touch them, books she had heard of, but never seen—among others a Shakspere in one thick volume lay open on his table; nor is it, then, surprising that, when putting his papers straight, she could not help seeing from the different lengths of the lines upon them that they were verse. She trembled and glowed at the very sight of them, for she had in herself the instinct of sacred numbers, and in her soul felt a vague hunger after what might be contained in those loose papers—into which she did not even peep, instinctively knowing it dishonorable. She trembled yet more at recognizing the beautiful youth in the same house with her, to whom she did service, as himself one of those gifted creatures whom most she revered—a poet, perhaps another such as Milton! Neither are all ladies, nor all servants of ladies,

honorable like Annie, or fit as she to be left alone with a man's papers.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.