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The Seaboard Parish, Complete

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THE SEABOARD PARISH

BY GEORGE MAC DONALD, LL.D.

VOL. I.

CHAPTER I.

HOMILETIC.

Dear Friends,—I am beginning a new book like an old sermon; but, as you know, I have been so accustomed to preach all my life, that whatever I say or write will more or less take the shape of a sermon; and if you had not by this time learned at least to bear with my oddities, you would not have wanted any more of my teaching. And, indeed, I did not think you would want any more. I thought I had bidden you farewell. But I am seated once again at my writing-table, to write for you—with a strange feeling, however, that I am in the heart of some curious, rather awful acoustic contrivance, by means of which the words which I have a habit of whispering over to myself as I write them, are heard aloud by multitudes of people whom I cannot see or hear. I will favour the fancy, that, by a sense of your presence, I may speak the more truly, as man to man.

But let me, for a moment, suppose that I am your grandfather, and that you have all come to beg for a story; and that, therefore, as usually happens in such cases, I am sitting with a puzzled face, indicating a more puzzled mind. I know that there are a great many stories in the holes and corners of my brain; indeed, here is one, there is one, peeping out at me like a rabbit; but alas, like a rabbit, showing me almost at the same instant the tail-end of it, and vanishing with a contemptuous *thud* of its hind feet on the ground. For I must have suitable regard to the desires of my children. It is a fine thing to be able to give people what they want, if at the same time you can give them what you want. To give people what they want, would sometimes be to give them only dirt and poison. To give them what you want, might be to set before them something of which they could not eat a mouthful. What both you and I want, I am willing to think, is a dish of good wholesome venison. Now I suppose my children around me are neither young enough nor old enough to care about a fairy tale, go that will not do. What they

want is, I believe, something that I know about—that has happened to myself. Well, I confess, that is the kind of thing I like best to hear anybody talk to me about. Let anyone tell me something that has happened to himself, especially if he will give me a peep into how his heart took it, as it sat in its own little room with the closed door, and that person will, so telling, absorb my attention: he has something true and genuine and valuable to communicate. They are mostly old people that can do so. Not that young people have nothing happen to them; but that only when they grow old, are they able to see things right, to disentangle confusions, and judge righteous judgment. Things which at the time appeared insignificant or wearisome, then give out the light that was in them, show their own truth, interest, and influence: they are far enough off to be seen. It is not when we are nearest to anything that we know best what it is. How I should like to write a story for old people! The young are always having stories written for them. Why should not the old people come in for a share? A story without a young person in it at all! Nobody under fifty admitted! It could hardly be a fairy tale, could it? Or a love story either? I am not so sure about that. The worst of it would be, however, that hardly a young person would read it. Now, we old people would not like that. We can read young people's books and enjoy them: they would not try to read old men's books or old women's books; they would be so sure of their being dry. My dear old brothers and sisters, we know better, do we not? We have nice old jokes, with no end of fun in them; only they cannot see the fun. We have strange tales, that we know to be true, and which look more and more marvellous every time we turn them over again; only somehow they do not belong to the ways of this year—I was going to say *week*,—and so the young people generally do not care to hear them. I have had one pale-faced boy, to be sure, who will sit at his mother's feet, and listen for hours to what took place before he was born. To him his mother's wedding-gown was as old as Eve's coat of skins. But then he was young enough not yet to have had a chance of losing the childhood common to the young and the old. Ah! I should like to write for you, old men, old women, to help you to read the past, to help you to look for the future. Now is your salvation nearer than when you believed; for, however your souls may be at peace, however your quietness and confidence may give you strength, in the decay of your earthly tab-

ernacle, in the shortening of its cords, in the weakening of its stakes, in the rents through which you see the stars, you have yet your share in the cry of the creation after the sonship. But the one thing I should keep saying to you, my companions in old age, would be, "Friends, let us not grow old." Old age is but a mask; let us not call the mask the face. Is the acorn old, because its cup dries and drops it from its hold—because its skin has grown brown and cracks in the earth? Then only is a man growing old when he ceases to have sympathy with the young. That is a sign that his heart has begun to wither. And that is a dreadful kind of old age. The heart needs never be old. Indeed it should always be growing younger. Some of us feel younger, do we not, than when we were nine or ten? It is not necessary to be able to play at leapfrog to enjoy the game. There are young creatures whose turn it is, and perhaps whose duty it would be, to play at leapfrog if there was any necessity for putting the matter in that light; and for us, we have the privilege, or if we will not accept the privilege, then I say we have the duty, of enjoying their leapfrog. But if we must withdraw in a measure from sociable relations with our fellows, let it be as the wise creatures that creep aside and wrap themselves up and lay themselves by that their wings may grow and put on the lovely hues of their coming resurrection. Such a withdrawing is in the name of youth. And while it is pleasant—no one knows how pleasant except him who experiences it—to sit apart and see the drama of life going on around him, while his feelings are calm and free, his vision clear, and his judgment righteous, the old man must ever be ready, should the sweep of action catch him in its skirts, to get on his tottering old legs, and go with brave heart to do the work of a true man, none the less true that his hands tremble, and that he would gladly return to his chimney-corner. If he is never thus called out, let him examine himself, lest he should be falling into the number of those that say, "I go, sir," and go not; who are content with thinking beautiful things in an Atlantis, Oceana, Arcadia, or what it may be, but put not forth one of their fingers to work a salvation in the earth. Better than such is the man who, using just weights and a true balance, sells good flour, and never has a thought of his own.

I have been talking—to my reader is it? or to my supposed group of grandchildren? I remember—to my companions in old age. It is

time I returned to the company who are hearing my whispers at the other side of the great thundering gallery. I take leave of my old friends with one word: We have yet a work to do, my friends; but a work we shall never do aright after ceasing to understand the new generation. We are not the men, neither shall wisdom die with us. The Lord hath not forsaken his people because the young ones do not think just as the old ones choose. The Lord has something fresh to tell them, and is getting them ready to receive his message. When we are out of sympathy with the young, then I think our work in this world is over. It might end more honourably.

Now, readers in general, I have had time to consider what to tell you about, and how to begin. My story will be rather about my family than myself now. I was as it were a little withdrawn, even by the time of which I am about to write. I had settled into a gray-haired, quite elderly, yet active man—young still, in fact, to what I am now. But even then, though my faith had grown stronger, life had grown sadder, and needed all my stronger faith; for the vanishing of beloved faces, and the trials of them that are dear, will make even those that look for a better country both for themselves and their friends, sad, though it will be with a preponderance of the first meaning of the word *sad*, which was *settled, thoughtful*.

I am again seated in the little octagonal room, which I have made my study because I like it best. It is rather a shame, for my books cover over every foot of the old oak panelling. But they make the room all the pleasanter to the eye, and after I am gone, there is the old oak, none the worse, for anyone who prefers it to books.

I intend to use as the central portion of my present narrative the history of a year during part of which I took charge of a friend's parish, while my brother-in-law, Thomas Weir, who was and is still my curate, took the entire charge of Marshmallows. What led to this will soon appear. I will try to be minute enough in my narrative to make my story interesting, although it will cost me suffering to recall some of the incidents I have to narrate.

CHAPTER II.

CONSTANCE'S BIRTHDAY.

Was it from observation of nature in its association with human nature, or from artistic feeling alone, that Shakspeare so often represents Nature's mood as in harmony with the mood of the principal actors in his drama? I know I have so often found Nature's mood in harmony with my own, even when she had nothing to do with forming mine, that in looking back I have wondered at the fact. There may, however, be some self-deception about it. At all events, on the morning of my Constance's eighteenth birthday, a lovely October day with a golden east, clouds of golden foliage about the ways, and an air that seemed filled with the ether of an *aurum potable*, there came yet an occasional blast of wind, which, without being absolutely cold, smelt of winter, and made one draw one's shoulders together with the sense of an unfriendly presence. I do not think Constance felt it at all, however, as she stood on the steps in her riding-habit, waiting till the horses made their appearance. It had somehow grown into a custom with us that each of the children, as his or her birthday came round, should be king or queen for that day, and, subject to the veto of father and mother, should have everything his or her own way. Let me say for them, however, that in the matter of choosing the dinner, which of course was included in the royal prerogative, I came to see that it was almost invariably the favourite dishes of others of the family that were chosen, and not those especially agreeable to the royal palate. Members of families where children have not been taught from their earliest years that the great privilege of possession is the right to bestow, may regard this as an improbable assertion; but others will know that it might well enough be true, even if I did not say that so it was. But there was always the choice of some individual treat, which was determined solely by the preference of the individual in authority. Constance had chosen "a long ride with papa."

I suppose a parent may sometimes be right when he speaks with admiration of his own children. The probability of his being correct is to be determined by the amount of capacity he has for admiring other people's children. However this may be in my own case, I venture to assert that Constance did look very lovely that morning. She was fresh as the young day: we were early people—breakfast and prayers were over, and it was nine o'clock as she stood on the steps and I approached her from the lawn.

"O, papa! isn't it jolly?" she said merrily.

"Very jolly indeed, my dear," I answered, delighted to hear the word from the lips of my gentle daughter. She very seldom used a slang word, and when she did, she used it like a lady. Shall I tell you what she was like? Ah! you could not see her as I saw her that morning if I did. I will, however, try to give you a general idea, just in order that you and I should not be picturing to ourselves two very different persons while I speak of her.

She was rather little, and so slight that she looked tall. I have often observed that the impression of height is an affair of proportion, and has nothing to do with feet and inches. She was rather fair in complexion, with her mother's blue eyes, and her mother's long dark wavy hair. She was generally playful, and took greater liberties with me than any of the others; only with her liberties, as with her slang, she knew instinctively when, where, and how much. For on the borders of her playfulness there seemed ever to hang a fringe of thoughtfulness, as if she felt that the present moment owed all its sparkle and brilliance to the eternal sunlight. And the appearance was not in the least a deceptive one. The eternal was not far from her—none the farther that she enjoyed life like a bird, that her laugh was merry, that her heart was careless, and that her voice rang through the house—a sweet soprano voice—singing snatches of songs (now a street tune she had caught from a London organ, now an air from Handel or Mozart), or that she would sometimes tease her elder sister about her solemn and anxious looks; for Wynn timer, the eldest, had to suffer for her grandmother's sins against her daughter, and came into the world with a troubled little heart, that was soon compelled to flee for refuge to the rock that was higher than she. Ah! my Constance! But God was good to you and to us in you.

"Where shall we go, Connie?" I said, and the same moment the sound of the horses' hoofs reached us.

"Would it be too far to go to Addicehead?" she returned.

"It is a long ride," I answered.

"Too much for the pony?"

"O dear, no—not at all. I was thinking of you, not of the pony."

"I'm quite as able to ride as the pony is to carry me, papa. And I want to get something for Wynn timer. Do let us go."

"Very well, my dear," I said, and raised her to the saddle—if I may say *raised*, for no bird ever hopped more lightly from one twig to another than she sprung from the ground on her pony's back.

In a moment I was beside her, and away we rode.

The shadows were still long, the dew still pearly on the spiders' webs, as we trotted out of our own grounds into a lane that led away towards the high road. Our horses were fresh and the air was exciting; so we turned from the hard road into the first suitable field, and had a gallop to begin with. Constance was a good horse-woman, for she had been used to the saddle longer than she could remember. She was now riding a tall well-bred pony, with plenty of life—rather too much, I sometimes thought, when I was out with Wynn timer; but I never thought so when I was with Constance. Another field or two sufficiently quieted both animals—I did not want to have all our time taken up with their frolics—and then we began to talk.

"You are getting quite a woman now, Connie, my dear," I said.

"Quite an old grannie, papa," she answered.

"Old enough to think about what's coming next," I said gravely.

"O, papa! And you are always telling us that we must not think about the morrow, or even the next hour. But, then, that's in the pulpit," she added, with a sly look up at me from under the drooping feather of her pretty hat.

"You know very well what I mean, you puss," I answered. "And I don't say one thing in the pulpit and another out of it."

She was at my horse's shoulder with a bound, as if Spry, her pony, had been of one mind and one piece with her. She was afraid she had offended me. She looked up into mine with as anxious a face as ever I saw upon Wynn timer.

"O, thank you, papa!" she said when I smiled. "I thought I had been rude. I didn't mean it, indeed I didn't. But I do wish you would make it a little plainer to me. I do think about things sometimes, though you would hardly believe it."

"What do you want made plainer, my child?" I asked.

"When we're to think, and when we're not to think," she answered.

I remember all of this conversation because of what came so soon after.

"If the known duty of to-morrow depends on the work of to-day," I answered, "if it cannot be done right except you think about it and lay your plans for it, then that thought is to-day's business, not to-morrow's."

"Dear papa, some of your explanations are more difficult than the things themselves. May I be as impertinent as I like on my birthday?" she asked suddenly, again looking up in my face.

We were walking now, and she had a hold of my horse's mane, so as to keep her pony close up.

"Yes, my dear, as impertinent as you like—not an atom more, mind."

"Well, papa, I sometimes wish you wouldn't explain things so much. I seem to understand you all the time you are preaching, but when I try the text afterwards by myself, I can't make anything of it, and I've forgotten every word you said about it."

"Perhaps that is because you have no right to understand it."

"I thought all Protestants had a right to understand every word of the Bible," she returned.

"If they can," I rejoined. "But last Sunday, for instance, I did not expect anybody there to understand a certain bit of my sermon, except your mamma and Thomas Weir."

"How funny! What part of it was that?"

"O! I'm not going to tell you. You have no right to understand it. But most likely you thought you understood it perfectly, and it appeared to you, in consequence, very commonplace."

"In consequence of what?"

"In consequence of your thinking you understood it."

"O, papa dear! you're getting worse and worse. It's not often I ask you anything—and on my birthday too! It is really too bad of you to bewilder my poor little brains in this way."

"I will try to make you see what I mean, my pet. No talk about an idea that you never had in your head at all, can make you have that idea. If you had never seen a horse, no description even, not to say no amount of remark, would bring the figure of a horse before your mind. Much more is this the case with truths that belong to the convictions and feelings of the heart. Suppose a man had never in his life asked God for anything, or thanked God for anything, would his opinion as to what David meant in one of his worshipping psalms be worth much? The whole thing would be beyond him. If you have never known what it is to have care of any kind upon you, you cannot understand what our Lord means when he tells us to take no thought for the morrow."

"But indeed, papa, I am very full of care sometimes, though not perhaps about to-morrow precisely. But that does not matter, does it?"

"Certainly not. Tell me what you are full of care about, my child, and perhaps I can help you."

"You often say, papa, that half the misery in this world comes from idleness, and that you do not believe that in a world where God is at work every day, Sundays not excepted, it could have been intended that women any more than men should have nothing to do. Now what am I to do? What have I been sent into the world for? I don't see it; and I feel very useless and wrong sometimes."

"I do not think there is very much to complain of you in that respect, Connie. You, and your sister as well, help me very much in my parish. You take much off your mother's hands too. And you do a good deal for the poor. You teach your younger brothers and sister, and meantime you are learning yourselves."

"Yes, but that's not work."

"It is work. And it is the work that is given you to do at present. And you would do it much better if you were to look at it in that light. Not that I have anything to complain of."

"But I don't want to stop at home and lead an easy, comfortable life, when there are so many to help everywhere in the world."

"Is there anything better in doing something where God has not placed you, than in doing it where he has placed you?"

"No, papa. But my sisters are quite enough for all you have for us to do at home. Is nobody ever to go away to find the work meant for her? You won't think, dear papa, that I want to get away from home, will you?"

"No, my dear. I believe that you are really thinking about duty. And now comes the moment for considering the passage to which you began by referring:—What God may hereafter require of you, you must not give yourself the least trouble about. Everything he gives you to do, you must do as well as ever you can, and that is the best possible preparation for what he may want you to do next. If people would but do what they have to do, they would always find themselves ready for what came next. And I do not believe that those who follow this rule are ever left floundering on the sea-deserted sands of inaction, unable to find water enough to swim in."

"Thank you, dear papa. That's a little sermon all to myself, and I think I shall understand it even when I think about it afterwards. Now let's have a trot."

"There is one thing more I ought to speak about though, Connie. It is not your moral nature alone you ought to cultivate. You ought to make yourself as worth God's making as you possibly can. Now I am a little doubtful whether you keep up your studies at all."

She shrugged her pretty shoulders playfully, looking up in my face again.

"I don't like dry things, papa."

"Nobody does."

"Nobody!" she exclaimed. "How do the grammars and history-books come to be written then?"

In talking to me, somehow, the child always put on a more childish tone than when she talked to anyone else. I am certain there was no affection in it, though. Indeed, how could she be affected with her fault-finding old father?

"No. Those books are exceedingly interesting to the people that make them. Dry things are just things that you do not know enough about to care for them. And all you learn at school is next to nothing to what you have to learn."

"What must I do then?" she asked with a sigh. "Must I go all over my French Grammar again? O dear! I do hate it so!"

"If you will tell me something you like, Connie, instead of something you don't like, I may be able to give you advice. Is there nothing you are fond of?" I continued, finding that she remained silent.

"I don't know anything in particular—that is, I don't know anything in the way of school-work that I really liked. I don't mean that I didn't try to do what I had to do, for I did. There was just one thing I liked—the poetry we had to learn once a week. But I suppose gentlemen count that silly—don't they?"

"On the contrary, my dear, I would make that liking of yours the foundation of all your work. Besides, I think poetry the grandest thing God has given us—though perhaps you and I might not quite agree about what poetry was poetry enough to be counted an especial gift of God. Now, what poetry do you like best?"

"Mrs. Hemans's, I think, papa."

"Well, very well, to begin with. 'There is,' as Mr. Carlyle said to a friend of mine—'There is a thin vein of true poetry in Mrs. Hemans.'"

But it is time you had done with thin things, however good they may be. Most people never get beyond spoon-meat—in this world, at least, and they expect nothing else in the world to come. I must take you in hand myself, and see what I can do for you. It is wretched to see capable enough creatures, all for want of a little guidance, bursting with admiration of what owes its principal charm to novelty of form, gained at the cost of expression and sense. Not that that applies to Mrs. Hemans. She is simple enough, only diluted to a degree. But I hold that whatever mental food you take should be just a little too strong for you. That implies trouble, necessitates growth, and involves delight."

"I sha'n't mind how difficult it is if you help me, papa. But it is anything but satisfactory to go groping on without knowing what you are about."

I ought to have mentioned that Constance had been at school for two years, and had only been home a month that very day, in order to account for my knowing so little about her tastes and habits of mind. We went on talking a little more in the same way, and if I were writing for young people only, I should be tempted to go on a little farther with the account of what we said to each other; for it might help some of them to see that the thing they like best should, circumstances and conscience permitting, be made the centre from which they start to learn; that they should go on enlarging their knowledge all round from that one point at which God intended them to begin. But at length we fell into a silence, a very happy one on my part; for I was more than delighted to find that this one too of my children was following after the truth—wanting to do what was right, namely, to obey the word of the Lord, whether openly spoken to all, or to herself in the voice of her own conscience and the light of that understanding which is the candle of the Lord. I had often said to myself in past years, when I had found myself in the company of young ladies who announced their opinions—probably of no deeper origin than the prejudices of their nurses—as if these distinguished them from all the world besides; who were profound upon passion and ignorant of grace; who had not a notion whether a dress was beautiful, but only whether it was of the newest cut—I had often said to myself: "What shall I do if my daughters come to talk and think like that—if thinking it can be called?" but being con-

fident that instruction for which the mind is not prepared only lies in a rotting heap, producing all kinds of mental evils correspondent to the results of successive loads of food which the system cannot assimilate, my hope had been to rouse wise questions in the minds of my children, in place of overwhelming their digestions with what could be of no instruction or edification without the foregoing appetite. Now my Constance had begun to ask me questions, and it made me very happy. We had thus come a long way nearer to each other; for however near the affection of human animals may bring them, there are abysses between soul and soul—the souls even of father and daughter—over which they must pass to meet. And I do not believe that any two human beings alive know yet what it is to love as love is in the glorious will of the Father of lights.

I linger on with my talk, for I shrink from what I must relate.

We were going at a gentle trot, silent, along a woodland path—a brown, soft, shady road, nearly five miles from home, our horses scattering about the withered leaves that lay thick upon it. A good deal of underwood and a few large trees had been lately cleared from the place. There were many piles of fagots about, and a great log lying here and there along the side of the path. One of these, when a tree, had been struck by lightning, and had stood till the frosts and rains had bared it of its bark. Now it lay white as a skeleton by the side of the path, and was, I think, the cause of what followed. All at once my daughter's pony sprang to the other side of the road, shying sideways; unsettled her so, I presume; then rearing and plunging, threw her from the saddle across one of the logs of which I have spoken. I was by her side in a moment. To my horror she lay motionless. Her eyes were closed, and when I took her up in my arms she did not open them. I laid her on the moss, and got some water and sprinkled her face. Then she revived a little; but seemed in much pain, and all at once went off into another faint. I was in terrible perplexity.

Presently a man who, having been cutting fagots at a little distance, had seen the pony careering through the wood, came up and asked what he could do to help me. I told him to take my horse, whose bridle I had thrown over the latch of a gate, and ride to Oldcastle Hall, and ask Mrs. Walton to come with the carriage as quick-

ly as possible. "Tell her," I said, "that her daughter has had a fall from her pony, and is rather shaken. Ride as hard as you can go."

The man was off in a moment; and there I sat watching my poor child, for what seemed to be a dreadfully long time before the carriage arrived. She had come to herself quite, but complained of much pain in her back; and, to my distress, I found that she could not move herself enough to make the least change of her position. She evidently tried to keep up as well as she could; but her face expressed great suffering: it was dreadfully pale, and looked worn with a month's illness. All my fear was for her spine.

At length I caught sight of the carriage, coming through the wood as fast as the road would allow, with the woodman on the box, directing the coachman. It drew up, and my wife got out. She was as pale as Constance, but quiet and firm, her features composed almost to determination. I had never seen her look like that before. She asked no questions: there was time enough for that afterwards. She had brought plenty of cushions and pillows, and we did all we could to make an easy couch for the poor girl; but she moaned dreadfully as we lifted her into the carriage. We did our best to keep her from being shaken; but those few miles were the longest journey I ever made in my life.

When we reached home at length, we found that Ethel, or, as we commonly called her, using the other end of her name, Wynn timer—for she was named after her mother—had got a room on the ground-floor, usually given to visitors, ready for her sister; and we were glad indeed not to have to carry her up the stairs. Before my wife left, she had sent the groom off to Addicehead for both physician and surgeon. A young man who had settled at Marshmallows as general practitioner a year or two before, was waiting for us when we arrived. He helped us to lay her upon a mattress in the position in which she felt the least pain. But why should I linger over the sorrowful detail? All agreed that the poor child's spine was seriously injured, and that probably years of suffering were before her. Everything was done that could be done; but she was not moved from that room for nine months, during which, though her pain certainly grew less by degrees, her want of power to move herself remained almost the same.