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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Molière  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall Willis  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche  
Stockton Turgenev Balzac  
Burroughs Vatsyayana Crane  
Curtis Tocqueville Verne  
Homer Tolstoy Gogol Busch  
Darwin Thoreau Whitman Twain  
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Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte  
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# **Wilfrid Cumbermede**

George MacDonald

# Imprint

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## WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

### 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 unfailling 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 down-stairs.

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.