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St. George and St. Michael

George MacDonald

Imprint

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ST. GEORGE AND ST. MICHAEL.

CHAPTER I.

DOROTHY AND RICHARD.

It was the middle of autumn, and had rained all day. Through the lozenge-panes of the wide oriel window the world appeared in the slowly gathering dusk not a little dismal. The drops that clung trickling to the dim glass added rain and gloom to the landscape beyond, whither the eye passed, as if vaguely seeking that help in the distance, which the dripping hollyhocks and sodden sunflowers bordering the little lawn, or the honeysuckle covering the wide porch, from which the slow rain dropped ceaselessly upon the pebble-paving below, could not give—steepy slopes, hedge-divided into small fields, some green and dotted with red cattle, others crowded with shocks of bedraggled and drooping corn, which looked suffering and patient.

The room to which the window having this prospect belonged was large and low, with a dark floor of uncarpeted oak. It opened immediately upon the porch, and although a good fire of logs blazed on the hearth, was chilly to the sense of the old man, who, with his feet on the skin of a fallow-deer, sat gazing sadly into the flames, which shone rosy through the thin hands spread out before them. At the opposite corner of the great low-arched chimney sat a lady past the prime of life, but still beautiful, though the beauty was all but merged in the loveliness that rises from the heart to the face of such as have taken the greatest step in life—that is, as the old proverb says, the step out of doors. She was plainly yet rather richly dressed, in garments of an old-fashioned and well-preserved look. Her hair was cut short above her forehead, and frizzed out in

bunches of little curls on each side. On her head was a covering of dark stuff, like a nun's veil, which fell behind and on her shoulders. Close round her neck was a string of amber beads, that gave a soft harmonious light to her complexion. Her dark eyes looked as if they found repose there, so quietly did they rest on the face of the old man, who was plainly a clergyman. It was a small, pale, thin, delicately and symmetrically formed face, yet not the less a strong one, with endurance on the somewhat sad brow, and force in the closed lips, while a good conscience looked clear out of the grey eyes.

They had been talking about the fast-gathering tide of opinion which, driven on by the wind of words, had already begun to beat so furiously against the moles and ramparts of Church and kingdom. The execution of lord Strafford was news that had not yet begun to 'hiss the speaker.'

'It is indeed an evil time,' said the old man. 'The world has seldom seen its like.'

'But tell me, master Herbert,' said the lady, 'why comes it in this our day? For our sins or for the sins of our fathers?'

'Be it far from me to presume to set forth the ways of Providence!' returned her guest. 'I meddle not, like some that should be wiser, with the calling of the prophet. It is enough for me to know that ever and again the pride of man will gather to "a mighty and a fearful head," and, like a swollen mill-pond overfed of rains, burst the banks that confine it, whether they be the laws of the land or the ordinances of the church, usurping on the fruitful meadows, the hope of life for man and beast. Alas!' he went on, with a new suggestion from the image he had been using, 'if the beginning of strife be as the letting out of water, what shall be the end of that strife whose beginning is the letting out of blood?'

'Think you then, good sir, that thus it has always been? that such times of fierce ungodly tempest must ever follow upon seasons of peace and comfort?—even as your cousin of holy memory, in his verses concerning the church militant, writes:

"Thus also sin and darkness follow still
The church and sun, with all their power and skill."

'Truly it seems so. But I thank God the days of my pilgrimage are nearly numbered. To judge by the tokens the wise man gives us, the mourners are already going about my streets. The almond-tree flourisheth at least.'

He smiled as he spoke, laying his hand on his grey head.

'But think of those whom we must leave behind us, master Herbert. How will it fare with them?' said the lady in troubled tone, and glancing in the direction of the window.

In the window sat a girl, gazing from it with the look of a child who had uttered all her incantations, and could imagine no abatement in the steady rain-pour.

'We shall leave behind us strong hearts and sound heads too,' said Mr. Herbert. 'And I bethink me there will be none stronger or sounder than those of your young cousins, my late pupils, of whom I hear brave things from Oxford, and in whose affection my spirit constantly rejoices.'

'You will be glad to hear such good news of your relatives, Dorothy,' said the lady, addressing her daughter.

Even as she said the words, the setting sun broke through the mass of grey cloud, and poured over the earth a level flood of radiance, in which the red wheat glowed, and the drops that hung on every ear flashed like diamonds. The girl's hair caught it as she turned her face to answer her mother, and an aureole of brown-tinted gold gleamed for a moment about her head.

'I am glad that you are pleased, madam, but you know I have never seen them—or heard of them, except from master Herbert, who has, indeed, often spoke rare things of them.'

'Mistress Dorothy will still know the reason why,' said the clergyman, smiling, and the two resumed their conversation. But the girl rose, and, turning again to the window, stood for a moment rapt in the transfiguration passing upon the world. The vault of grey was utterly shattered, but, gathering glory from ruin, was hurrying in rosy masses away from under the loftier vault of blue. The ordered shocks upon twenty fields sent their long purple shadows across the flush; and the evening wind, like the sighing that follows

departed tears, was shaking the jewels from their feathery tops. The sunflowers and hollyhocks no longer cowered under the tyranny of the rain, but bowed beneath the weight of the gems that adorned them. A flame burned as upon an altar on the top of every tree, and the very pools that lay on the distant road had their message of light to give to the hopeless earth. As she gazed, another hue than that of the sunset, yet rosy too, gradually flushed the face of the maiden. She turned suddenly from the window, and left the room, shaking a shower of diamonds from the honeysuckle as she passed out through the porch upon the gravel walk.

Possibly her elders found her departure a relief, for although they took no notice of it, their talk became more confidential, and was soon mingled with many names both of rank and note, with a familiarity which to a stranger might have seemed out of keeping with the humbler character of their surroundings.

But when Dorothy Vaughan had passed a corner of the house to another garden more ancient in aspect, and in some things quaint even to grotesqueness, she was in front of a portion of the house which indicated a far statelier past—closed and done with, like the rooms within those shuttered windows. The inhabited wing she had left looked like the dwelling of a yeoman farming his own land; nor did this appearance greatly belie the present position of the family. For generations it had been slowly descending in the scale of worldly account, and the small portion of the house occupied by the widow and daughter of sir Ringwood Vaughan was larger than their means could match with correspondent outlay. Such, however, was the character of lady Vaughan, that, although she mingled little with the great families in the neighbourhood, she was so much respected, that she would have been a welcome visitor to most of them.

The reverend Mr. Matthew Herbert was a clergyman from the Welsh border, a man of some note and influence, who had been the personal friend both of his late relative George Herbert and of the famous Dr. Donne. Strongly attached to the English church, and recoiling with disgust from the practices of the puritans—as much, perhaps, from refinement of taste as abhorrence of schism—he had never yet fallen into such a passion for episcopacy as to feel any

cordiality towards the schemes of the archbishop. To those who knew him his silence concerning it was a louder protest against the policy of Laud than the fiercest denunciations of the puritans. Once only had he been heard to utter himself unguardedly in respect of the primate, and that was amongst friends, and after the second glass permitted of his cousin George. 'Tut! laud me no Laud,' he said. 'A skipping bishop is worse than a skipping king.' Once also he had been overheard murmuring to himself by way of consolation, 'Bishops pass; the church remains.' He had been a great friend of the late sir Ringwood; and although the distance from his parish was too great to be travelled often, he seldom let a year go by without paying a visit to his friend's widow and daughter.

Turning her back on the cenotaph of their former greatness, Dorothy dived into a long pleached alley, careless of the drip from overhead, and hurrying through it came to a circular patch of thin grass, rounded by a lofty hedge of yew-trees, in the midst of which stood what had once been a sun-dial. It mattered little, however, that only the stump of a gnomon was left, seeing the hedge around it had grown to such a height in relation to the diameter of the circle, that it was only for a very brief hour or so in the middle of a summer's day, when, of all periods, the passage of Time seems least to concern humanity, that it could have served to measure his march. The spot had, indeed, a time-forsaken look, as if it lay buried in the bosom of the past, and the present had forgotten it.

Before emerging from the alley, she slackened her pace, half-stopped, and, stooping a little in her tucked-up skirt, threw a bird-like glance around the opener space; then stepping into it, she looked up to the little disc of sky, across which the clouds, their roses already withered, sailed dim and grey once more, while behind them the stars were beginning to recall their half-forgotten message from regions unknown to men. A moment, and she went up to the dial, stood there for another moment, and was on the point of turning to leave the spot, when, as if with one great bound, a youth stood between her and the entrance of the alley.

'Ah ha, mistress Dorothy, you do not escape me so!' he cried, spreading out his arms as if to turn back some runaway creature.

But mistress Dorothy was startled, and mistress Dorothy did not choose to be startled, and therefore mistress Dorothy was dignified, if not angry.

'I do not like such behaviour, Richard,' she said. 'It ill suits with the time. Why did you hide behind the hedge, and then leap forth so rudely?'

'I thought you saw me,' answered the youth. 'Pardon my heedlessness, Dorothy. I hope I have not startled you too much.'

As he spoke he stooped over the hand he had caught, and would have carried it to his lips, but the girl, half-pettishly, snatched it away, and, with a strange mixture of dignity, sadness, and annoyance in her tone, said—

'There has been something too much of this, Richard, and I begin to be ashamed of it.'

'Ashamed!' echoed the youth. 'Of what? There is nothing but me to be ashamed of, and what can I have done since yesterday?'

'No, Richard; I am not ashamed of you, but I am ashamed of—of—this way of meeting—and—and—'

'Surely that is strange, when we can no more remember the day in which we have not met than that in which we met first! No, dear Dorothy—'

'It is not our meeting, Richard; and if you would but think as honestly as you speak, you would not require to lay upon me the burden of explanation. It is this foolish way we have got into of late—kissing hands—and—and—always meeting by the old sundial, or in some other over-quiet spot. Why do you not come to the house? My mother would give you the same welcome as any time these last—how many years, Richard?'

'Are you quite sure of that, Dorothy?'

'Well—I did fancy she spoke with something more of ceremony the last time you met. But, consider, she has seen so much less of you of

late.

Yet I am sure she has all but a mother's love in her heart towards you.

For your mother was dear to her as her own soul.'

'I would it were so, Dorothy! For then, perhaps, your mother would not shrink from being my mother too. When we are married, Dorothy—'

'Married!' exclaimed the girl. 'What of marrying, indeed!' And she turned sideways from him with an indignant motion. 'Richard,' she went on, after a marked and yet but momentary pause, for the youth had not had time to say a word, 'it has been very wrong in me to meet you after this fashion. I know it now, for see what such things lead to! If you knew it, you have done me wrong.'

'Dearest Dorothy!' exclaimed the youth, taking her hand again, of which this time she seemed hardly aware, 'did you not know from the very vanished first that I loved you with all my heart, and that to tell you so would have been to tell the sun that he shines warm at noon in midsummer? And I did think you had a little—something for me, Dorothy, your old playmate, that you did not give to every other acquaintance. Think of the houses we have built and the caves we have dug together—of our rabbits, and urchins, and pigeons, and peacocks!'

'We are children no longer,' returned Dorothy. 'To behave as if we were would be to keep our eyes shut after we are awake. I like you, Richard, you know; but why this—where is the use of all this—new sort of thing? Come up with me to the house, where master Herbert is now talking to my mother in the large parlour. The good man will be glad to see you.'

'I doubt it, Dorothy. He and my father, as I am given to understand, think so differently in respect of affairs now pending betwixt the parliament and the king, that—'

'It were more becoming, Richard, if the door of your lips opened to the king first, and let the parliament follow.'

'Well said!' returned the youth with a smile. 'But let it be my excuse that I speak as I am wont to hear.'

The girl's hand had lain quiet in that of the youth, but now it started from it like a scared bird. She stepped two paces back, and drew herself up.

'And you, Richard?' she said, interrogatively.

'What would you ask, Dorothy?' returned the youth, taking a step nearer, to which she responded by another backward ere she replied.

'I would know whom you choose to serve—whether God or Satan; whether you are of those who would set at nought the laws of the land— —'

'Insist on their fulfilment, they say, by king as well as people,' interrupted Richard.

'They would tear their mother in pieces— —'

'Their mother!' repeated Richard, bewildered.

'Their mother, the church,' explained Dorothy.

'Oh!' said Richard. 'Nay, they would but cast out of her the wolves in sheep's clothing that devour the lambs.'

The girl was silent. Anger glowed on her forehead and flashed from her grey eyes. She stood one moment, then turned to leave him, but half turned again to say scornfully—

'I must go at once to my mother! I knew not I had left her with such a wolf as master Herbert is like to prove!'

'Master Herbert is no bishop, Dorothy!'

'The bishops, then, are the wolves, master Heywood?' said the girl, with growing indignation.

'Dear Dorothy, I am but repeating what I hear. For my own part, I know little of these matters. And what are they to us if we love one another?'

'I tell you I am a child no longer,' flamed Dorothy.

'You were seventeen last St. George's Day, and I shall be nineteen next

St. Michael's.'

'St. George for merry England!' cried Dorothy.

'St. Michael for the Truth!' cried Richard.

'So be it. Good-bye, then,' said the girl, going.

'What DO you mean, Dorothy?' said Richard; and she stood to hear, but with her back towards him, and, as it were, hovering midway in a pace. 'Did not St. Michael also slay his dragon? Why should the knights part company? Believe me, Dorothy, I care more for a smile from you than for all the bishops in the church, or all the presbyters out of it.'

'You take needless pains to prove yourself a foolish boy, Richard; and if I go not to my mother at once, I fear I shall learn to despise you—which I would not willingly.'

'Despise me! Do you take me for a coward then, Dorothy?'

'I say not that. I doubt not, for the matter of swords and pistols, you are much like other male creatures; but I protest I could never love a man who preferred my company to the service of his king.'

She glided into the alley and sped along its vaulted twilight, her white dress gleaming and clouding by fits as she went.

The youth stood for a moment petrified, then started to overtake her, but stood stock-still at the entrance of the alley, and followed her only with his eyes as she went.

When Dorothy reached the house, she did not run up to her room that she might weep unseen. She was still too much annoyed with Richard to regret having taken such leave of him. She only swallowed down a little balloonful of sobs, and went straight into the parlour, where her mother and Mr. Herbert still sat, and resumed her seat in the bay window. Her heightened colour, an occasional toss of her head backwards, like that with which a horse seeks ease from the bearing-rein, generally followed by a renewal of the attempt to swallow something of upward tendency, were the only signs of her discomposure, and none of them were observed by her mother or her guest. Could she have known, however, what feelings had already begun to rouse themselves in the mind of him

whose boyishness was an offence to her, she would have found it more difficult to keep such composure.

Dorothy's was a face whose forms were already so decided that, should no softening influences from the central regions gain the ascendancy, beyond a doubt age must render it hard and unlovely. In all the roundness and freshness of girlhood, it was handsome rather than beautiful, beautiful rather than lovely. And yet it was strongly attractive, for it bore clear indication of a nature to be trusted. If her grey eyes were a little cold, they were honest eyes, with a rare look of steadfastness; and if her lips were a little too closely pressed, it was clearly from any cause rather than bad temper. Neither head, hands, nor feet were small, but they were fine in form and movement; and for the rest of her person, tall and strong as Richard was, Dorothy looked further advanced in the journey of life than he.

She needed hardly, however, have treated his indifference to the politics of the time with so much severity, seeing her own acquaintance with and interest in them dated from that same afternoon, during which, from lack of other employment, and the weariness of a long morning of slow, dismal rain, she had been listening to Mr. Herbert as he dwelt feelingly on the arrogance of puritan encroachment, and the grossness of presbyterian insolence both to kingly prerogative and episcopal authority, and drew a touching picture of the irritant thwartings and pitiful insults to which the gentle monarch was exposed in his attempts to support the dignity of his divine office, and to cast its protecting skirt over the defenceless church; and if it was with less sympathy that he spoke of the fears which haunted the captive metropolitan, Dorothy at least could detect no hidden sarcasm in the tone in which he expressed his hope that Laud's devotion to the beauty of holiness might not result in the dignity of martyrdom, as might well be feared by those who were assured that the whole guilt of Strafford lay in his return to his duty, and his subsequent devotion to the interests of his royal master: to all this the girl had listened, and her still sufficiently uncertain knowledge of the affairs of the nation had, ere the talk was over, blossomed in a vague sense of partizanship. It was chiefly her desire after the communion of sympathy with Richard that had led her into the mistake of such a hasty disclosure of her new feelings.