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Chapter 5 - My Story

WHEN YOU last saw me, I was a boy of thirteen. You now see me a man of twenty-three.

The story of my life, in the interval between these two ages, is a story that can be soon told.

Speaking of my father first, I have to record that the end of his career did indeed come as Dame Dermody had foretold it. Before we had been a year in America, the total collapse of his land speculation was followed by his death. The catastrophe was complete. But for my mother's little income (settled on her at her marriage) we should both have been left helpless at the mercy of the world.

We made some kind friends among the hearty and hospitable people of the United States, whom we were unaffectedly sorry to leave. But there were reasons which inclined us to return to our own country after my father's death; and we did return accordingly.

Besides her brother-in-law (already mentioned in the earlier pages of my narrative), my mother had another relative--a cousin named Germaine--on whose assistance she mainly relied for starting me, when the time came, in a professional career. I remember it as a family rumor, that Mr. Germaine had been an unsuccessful suitor for my mother's hand in the days when they were young people together. He was still a bachelor at the later period when his eldest brother's death without issue placed him in possession of a handsome fortune. The accession of wealth made no difference in his habits of life: he was a lonely old man, estranged from his other relatives, when my mother and I returned to England. If I could only succeed in pleasing Mr. Germaine, I might consider my prospects (in some degree, at least) as being prospects assured.

This was one consideration that influenced us in leaving America. There was another--in which I was especially interested--that drew me back to the lonely shores of Greenwater Broad.

My only hope of recovering a trace of Mary was to make inquiries among the cottagers in the neighborhood of my old home. The good bailiff had been heartily liked and respected in his little sphere. It seemed at least possible that some among his many friends in Suffolk might have discovered traces of him, in the year that had passed since I had left England. In my dreams of Mary--and I dreamed of her constantly--the lake and its woody banks formed a frequent background in the visionary picture of my lost companion. To the lake shores I looked, with a natural superstition, as to my way back to the one life that had its promise of happiness for _me_--my life with Mary.

On our arrival in London, I started for Suffolk alone--at my mother's request. At her age she naturally shrank from revisiting the home scenes now occupied by the strangers to whom our house had been let.

Ah, how my heart ached (young as I was) when I saw the familiar green waters of the lake once more! It was evening. The first object that caught my eye was the gayly painted boat, once mine, in which Mary and I had so often sailed together. The people in possession of our house were sailing now. The sound of their laughter floated toward me merrily over the still water. _Their_ flag flew at the little mast-head, from which Mary's flag had never fluttered in the pleasant breeze. I turned my eyes from the boat; it hurt me to look at it. A few steps onward brought me to a promontory on the shore, and revealed the brown archways of the decoy on the opposite bank. There was the paling behind which we had knelt to watch the snaring of the ducks; there was the hole through which "Trim," the terrier, had shown himself to rouse the stupid curiosity of the water-fowl; there, seen at intervals through the trees, was the winding woodland path along which Mary and I had traced our way to Dermody's cottage on the day when my father's cruel hand had torn us from each other. How wisely my good mother had shrunk from looking again at the dear old scenes! I turned my back on the lake, to think with calmer thoughts in the shadowy solitude of the woods.

An hour's walk along the winding banks brought me round to the cottage which had once been Mary's home.

The door was opened by a woman who was a stranger to me. She civilly asked me to enter the parlor. I had suffered enough already; I made my inquiries, standing on the doorstep. They were soon at an end. The woman was a stranger in our part of Suffolk; neither she nor her husband had ever heard of Dermody's name.

I pursued my investigations among the peasantry, passing from cottage to cottage. The twilight came; the moon rose; the lights began to vanish from the lattice-windows; and still I continued my weary pilgrimage; and still, go where I might, the answer to my questions was the same. Nobody knew anything of Dermody. Everybody asked if I had not brought news of him myself. It pains me even now to recall the cruelly complete defeat of every effort which I made on that disastrous evening. I passed the night in one of the cottages; and I returned to London the next day, broken by disappointment, careless what I did, or where I went next.

Still, we were not wholly parted. I saw Mary--as Dame Dermody said I should see her--in dreams.

Sometimes she came to me with the green flag in her hand, and repeated her farewell words--"Don't forget Mary!" Sometimes she led me to our well-remembered corner in the cottage parlor, and opened the paper on which her grandmother had written our prayers for us. We prayed together again, and sung hymns together again, as if the old times had come back. Once she appeared to me, with tears in her eyes, and said, "We must wait, dear: our time has not come yet." Twice I saw her looking at me, like one disturbed by anxious thoughts; and twice I heard her say, "Live patiently, live innocently, George, for my sake."

We settled in London, where my education was undertaken by a private tutor. Before we had been long in our new abode, an unexpected change in our prospects took place. To my mother's astonishment she received an offer of marriage (addressed to her in a letter) from Mr. Germaine.

"I entreat you not to be startled by my proposal!" (the old gentleman wrote). "You can hardly have forgotten that I was once fond of you, in the days when we were both young and both poor. No return to the feelings associated with that time is possible now. At my age, all I ask of you is to be the companion of the closing years of my life, and to give me something of a father's interest in promoting the future welfare of your son. Consider this, my dear, and tell me whether you will take the empty chair at an old man's lonely fireside."

My mother (looking almost as confused, poor soul! as if she had become a young girl again) left the whole responsibility of decision on the shoulders of her son! I was not long in making up my mind. If she said Yes, she would accept the hand of a man of worth and honor, who had been throughout his whole life devoted to her; and she would recover the comfort, the luxury, the social prosperity and position of which my father's reckless course of life had deprived her. Add to this, that I liked Mr. Germaine, and

that Mr. Germaine liked me. Under these circumstances, why should my mother say No? She could have said Yes, and the necessary consequence, she became, in due course of time, Mrs. Germaine.

I have only to add that, to the end of her life, my good mother congratulated herself (in this case at least) on having taken her son's advice.

The years went on, and still Mary and I were parted, except in my dreams. The years went on, until the perilous time which comes in every man's life came in mine. I reached the age when the strongest of all the passions seizes on the senses, and asserts its mastery over mind and body alike.

I had hitherto passively endured the wreck of my earliest and dearest hopes: I had lived patiently, and lived innocently, for Mary's sake. Now my patience left me; my innocence was numbered among the lost things of the past. My days, it is true, were still devoted to the tasks set me by my tutor; but my nights were given, in secret, to a reckless profligacy, which (in my present frame of mind) I look back on with disgust and dismay. I profaned my remembrances of Mary in the company of women who had reached the lowest depths of degradation. I impiously said to myself: "I have hoped for her long enough; I have waited for her long enough. The one thing now to do is to enjoy my youth and to forget her."

From the moment when I dropped into this degradation, I might sometimes think regretfully of Mary--at the morning time, when penitent thoughts mostly come to us; but I ceased absolutely to see her in my dreams. We were now, in the completest sense of the word, parted. Mary's pure spirit could hold no communion with mine; Mary's pure spirit had left me.

It is needless to say that I failed to keep the secret of my depravity from the knowledge of my mother. The sight of her grief was the first influence that sobered me. In some degree at least I restrained myself: I made the effort to return to purer ways of life. Mr. Germaine, though I had disappointed him, was too just a man to give me up as lost. He advised me, as a means of self-reform, to make my choice of a profession, and to absorb myself in closer studies than any that I had yet pursued.

I made my peace with this good friend and second father, not only by following his advice, but by adopting the profession to which he had been himself attached before he inherited his fortune--the profession of medicine. Mr. Germaine had been a surgeon: I resolved on being a surgeon too.

Having entered, at rather an earlier age than usual, on my new way of life, I may at least say for myself that I worked hard. I won, and kept, the interest of the professors under whom I studied. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that my reformation was, morally speaking, far from being complete. I worked; but what I did was done selfishly, bitterly, with a hard heart. In religion and morals I adopted the views of a materialist companion of my studies--a worn-out man of more than double my age. I believed in nothing but what I could see, or taste, or feel. I lost all faith in humanity. With the one exception of my mother, I had no respect for women. My remembrances of Mary deteriorated until they became little more than a lost link of association with the past. I still preserved the green flag as a matter of habit; but it was no longer kept about me; it was left undisturbed in a drawer of my writing-desk. Now and then a wholesome doubt, whether my life was not utterly unworthy of me, would rise in my mind. But it held no long possession of my thoughts. Despising others, it was in the logical order of things that I should follow my conclusions to their bitter end, and consistently despise myself.

The term of my majority arrived. I was twenty-one years old; and of the illusions of my youth not a vestige remained.

Neither my mother nor Mr. Germaine could make any positive complaint of my conduct. But they were both thoroughly uneasy about me. After anxious consideration, my step-father arrived at a conclusion. He decided that the one chance of restoring me to my better and brighter self was to try the stimulant of a life among new people and new scenes.

At the period of which I am now writing, the home government had decided on sending a special diplomatic mission to one of the native princes ruling over a remote province of our Indian empire. In the disturbed state of the province at that time, the mission, on its arrival in India, was to be accompanied to the prince's court by an escort, including the military as well as the civil servants of the crown. The surgeon appointed to sail with the expedition from England was an old friend of Mr. Germaine's, and was in want of an assistant on whose capacity he could rely. Through my stepfather's interest, the post was offered to me. I accepted it without hesitation. My only pride left was the miserable pride of indifference. So long as I pursued my profession, the place in which I pursued it was a matter of no importance to my mind.

It was long before we could persuade my mother even to contemplate the new prospect now set before me. When she did at length give way, she yielded most unwillingly. I confess I left her with the tears in my eyes--the first I had shed for many a long year past.

The history of our expedition is part of the history of British India. It has no place in this narrative.

Speaking personally, I have to record that I was rendered incapable of performing my professional duties in less than a week from the time when the mission reached its destination. We were encamped outside the city; and an attack was made on us, under cover of darkness, by the fanatical natives. The attempt was defeated with little difficulty, and with only a trifling loss on our side. I was among the wounded, having been struck by a javelin, or spear, while I was passing from one tent to another.

Inflicted by a European weapon, my injury would have been of no serious consequence. But the tip of the Indian spear had been poisoned. I escaped the mortal danger of lockjaw; but, through some peculiarity in the action of the poison on my constitution (which I am quite unable to explain), the wound obstinately refused to heal.

I was invalided and sent to Calcutta, where the best surgical help was at my disposal. To all appearance, the wound healed there--then broke out again. Twice this happened; and the medical men agreed that the best course to take would be to send me home. They calculated on the invigorating effect of the sea voyage, and, failing this, on the salutary influence of my native air. In the Indian climate I was pronounced incurable.

Two days before the ship sailed a letter from my mother brought me startling news. My life to come--if I _had_ a life to come--had been turned into a new channel. Mr. Germaine had died suddenly, of heart-disease. His will, bearing date at the time when I left England, bequeathed an income for life to my mother, and left the bulk of his property to me, on the one condition that I adopted his name. I accepted the condition, of course, and became George Germaine.

Three months later, my mother and I were restored to each other.

Except that I still had some trouble with my wound, behold me now to all appearance one of the most enviable of existing mortals; promoted to the position of a wealthy gentleman; possessor of a house in London and of a country-seat in Perthshire; and, nevertheless, at twenty-three years of age, one of the most miserable men living!

And Mary?

In the ten years that had now passed over, what had become of Mary?

You have heard my story. Read the few pages that follow, and you will hear hers.

