

George MacDonald, A Letter to American Boys

My DEAR COUSINS,

Shall I really be talking to you as I sit here in my study with the river Thames now flowing, now ebbing, past my window? I am uttering no word, I am only writing; and you are not listening, not reading, for it will be a long time ere what I am now thinking shall reach you over the millions of waves that swell and sink between us. And yet I shall in very truth be talking to you.

In like manner, with divine differences, God began to talk to us ages before we were born: I will not say before we began to be, for, in a sense, that very moment God thought of us we began to exist, for what God thinks of, is. We have been lying for ages in his heart without knowing it. But now we have begun to know it. We are here, with a great beginning, and before us an end so great that there is no end to it. But we must take heed, or else, the very greatness will turn to confusion and terror.

Shall I explain what made me begin my letter to you just this way: I was sitting in my room, as I am now, thinking what I should say to you. And as I sat thinking after something worth saying and fit to say, my room spoke to me, that is, out of its condition and appearance came a thought into my mind. And that you may understand how it came, and how it was what it was, I will first show you what my room at this moment is like. For the thought had nothing to do with the sun outside, or the shining river, or the white-sailed boats, neither with the high wind that is tossing the rosy hawthorn-bloom before my windows, or with the magnolia trained up the wall and looking in at one of them: it had to do only with the inside of the room.

It is a rather long room. The greater part has its walls filled with books, and I am sitting at one end quite surrounded by them. But when I lift my eyes, I look to the other end, and into the heart of the stage for acting upon, filling all the width and a third part of the length of the room. It is surrounded with curtains, but those in front of it are withdrawn, and there the space of it lies before me, a bare, empty hollow of green and blue and red, which tomorrow evening will be filled with group after group of moving, talking, shining, acting men and women, boys and girls. It looked to me like a human heart, waiting to be filled with the scenes of its own story, with this difference, that the heart itself will determine of what sort those groups shall be. Then there grew up in my mind the following little parable, which, to those who do not care to understand it, will be dark, but to those who desire to know its meaning, may give light:

There was once a wise man to whom was granted the power to send forth his thoughts in shapes that other people could see. And, as he walked abroad in the world, he came upon some whom his wisdom might serve. One day, having, in a street of the city where he dwelt, rescued from danger a boy about ten years of age, he went with him to his mother, and begged that he might take him to his house for a week. When they heard his name, the parents willingly let their son go with him. And he taught him many things, and the boy loved and trusted him.

When the boy was asleep in bed, the wise man would go to his room at midnight, and lay his ear to his ear, and hearken to his dreams. Then he would stand and spread out his arms over him and look up. And the boy would smile, and his sleep was the deeper.

Once, just an hour after the sage had thus visited him, the boy woke, and found himself alone in the middle of the night. He could not get to sleep again, and grew so restless that he rose and went down the stair. The moon shone in at every western window, and his way was, now in glimmer and now in gloom.' On the first landing he saw a door wide open, which he had never seen open till now. It was the door of the wizard's room. Within, all was bright with moonlight, and the boy first peeped, then stepped in, and peered timidly about him.

The farther end of the room was hidden by a curtain stretched quite across it, and, curious to see what was behind, he approached it. But ere he reached it, the curtain slowly divided in the middle and, drawn back to each side, revealed a place with just light enough in it from the moonshine to show that it was a dungeon. In the middle of it, upon the floor, sat a prisoner, with fetters to his feet, and manacles to his hands; an iron collar was round his neck, and a chain from the collar had its last link in an iron staple deep-fixed in the stone floor. His head was sunk on his bosom, and he sat abject and despairing.

'What a wicked man he must be!' thought the boy, and was turning to run away in terror when the man lifted his head, and his look caught and held him. For he saw a pale, worn, fierce countenance, which, somehow, through all the added years, and all the dirt that defiled it, he recognized as his own. For a moment, the prisoner gazed at him mournfully; then a wild passion of rage and despair seized him; he dragged and tore at his chains, raved and shrieked, and dashed himself on the ground like one mad with imprisonment. For a time, he lay exhausted, then half rose and sat as before, gazing helplessly upon the ground.

By and by a spider came creeping along the bar of his fetters. He put out his hand, and, with the manacle on his wrist, crushed it, and smiled. Instantly through the gloom came a strong, clear, yet strangely sweet voice-and the very sweetness had in it something that made the boy think of fire. And the voice said:

'So! in the midst of misery, thou takest delight in destruction! Is it not well thou art chained? If thou wast free, thou wouldst in time destroy the world. Tame thy wild beast, or sit there till I tame him.'

The prisoner peered and stared through the dusk, but could see no one; he fell into another fit of furious raving, but not a hair-breadth would one link of chain yield to his wildest endeavor.

'Oh, my mother!' he cried, as he sank again into the grave of exhaustion.

'Thy mother is gone from thee,' said the voice, 'outworn by thine evil ways. Thou didst choose to have thyself and not thy 'mother, and there thou hast thyself, and she is gone. I only am left to care for thee-not with kisses and sweet words, but with a dungeon. Unawares to thyself thou hast forged thine own chains, and riveted them upon thy limbs. Not Hercules could free thee or himself from such imprisonment.' The man burst out weeping, and cried with sobs:

'What then am I to do, for the burden of them is intolerable?'

'What I will tell thee,' said the voice; 'for so shall thy chains fall from thee.'

'I will do it,' said the man.

'Thy prison is foul,' said the voice.

'It is,' answered the prisoner.

'Cleanse it, then.'

'How can I cleanse it when I cannot move?'

'Cannot move! Thy hands were upon thy face a moment gone and now they are upon the floor! Near one of those hands lies a dead mouse; yonder is an open window. Cast the dead thing out into the furnace of life, that it may speedily make an end thereof.'

With sudden obedient resolve the prisoner made the endeavor to reach it. The chain pulled the collar hard, and the manacle wrenched his wrist; but he caught the dead thing by the tail, and with a fierce effort threw it; out of the window it flew and fell and the air of his dungeon seemed already clearer.

After a silence, came the voice again:

'Behind thee lies a broom,' it said; 'reach forth and take it, and sweep around thee as far as thy chains will yield thee scope.'

The man obeyed, and, as he swept, at every stroke he reached farther. At length, how it came he could not tell, for his chains hung heavy upon him still, he found himself sweeping the very foot of the walls.

A moment more, and he stood at the open window, looking out into the world. A dove perched upon the window sill, and walked inquiringly in; he caught it in his hands, and looked how to close the window, that he might secure its company. Then came the voice:

'Wilt thou, a prisoner, make of thyself a jailer?'

He opened his hands, and the dove darted into the sunlight. There it fluttered and flashed for a moment, like a bird of snow; then re-entered, and flew into his very hands. He stroked and kissed it. The bird went and came, and was his companion.

Still, his chains hung about him, and he sighed and groaned under their weight.

'Set thee down,' said the voice, 'and polish thine irons.'

He obeyed, rubbing link against link busily with his hands. And thus, he labored as it seemed to the boy in the vision day after day, until at last every portion within his reach, of fetter, and chain, and collar, glittered with brightness.

'Go to the window,' then said the voice, 'and lay thee down in the sunshine.'

He went and lay down, and fell asleep. When he awoke, he began to raise himself heavily; but, lo! the sun had melted all the burnished parts of his bonds, the rest dropped from him, and he sprung to his feet. For very joy of lightness, he ran about the room like a frolicking child. Then said the voice once more:

'Now carve thee out of the wall the figure of a man, as perfect as thou canst think and make it.'

'Alas!' said the prisoner to himself, 'I know not how to carve or fashion the image of anything.'

But as he said it, he turned with a sigh to find among the fragments of his fetters what piece of iron might best serve him for a chisel. To work he set, and many and weary were the hours he wrought, for his attempts appeared to him nothing better than those of a child, and again and ever again as he

carved, he had to change his purpose, and cut away what he had carved; for the thing he wrought would not conform itself to the thing he thought, and it seemed he made no progress in the task that was set him. But he did not know that it was because his thought was not good enough to give strength and skill to his hand, that it seemed too good for his hand to follow.

One night he wrought hard by the glimmer of his wretched lamp, until, over-wearied, he fell fast asleep, and slept like one dead. When he awoke, lo! a man of light, lovely and grand, who stood where he had been so wearily carving the unresponsive stone! He rose and drew nigh. Behold, it was an opening in the wall, through which his freedom shone! The man of light was the door into the universe. And he darted through the wall.

As he vanished from his sight, the boy felt the wind of the morning lave his forehead; but with the prisoner vanished the vision; he was alone, with the moon shining through the windows. Too solemn to be afraid, he crept back to his bed, and fell fast asleep.

In the morning, he knew there had come to him what he now took for a strange dream, but he remembered little of it, and thought less about it, and the same day the wizard took him home.

His mother was out when he arrived, and he had not been in five minutes before it began to rain. It was holiday time, and there were no lessons, and the school room looked dismal as a new street. He had not a single companion, and the rain came down with slow persistence. He tried to read, but could not find any enjoyment in it. His thoughts grew more and more gloomy, until at last his very soul was disquieted within him. When his mother came home and sought him in the school-room, she found him lying on the floor, sullen and unkind. Although he knew her step as she entered, he never looked up; and when she spoke to him, he answered like one aggrieved.

'I am sorry you are unhappy,' said his mother, sweetly. I did not know you were to be home to-day. Come with me to my room.' He answered his mother insolently:

'I don't want to go with you. I only want to be left alone.'

His mother turned away, and, without another word, left the room.

The cat came in, went up to him purring, and rubbed herself against him. He gave her such a blow that she flew out again, in angry fright, with her back high above her head. And the rain rained faster, and the wind began to blow, and the misery settled down upon his soul like lead. At last he wept with his face on the floor, quite overmastered by the most contemptible of passions-self-pity.

Again, the voice of his mother came to him. The wizard had in the meantime come to see her, and had just left her.

'Get up, my boy,' she said, in a more commanding tone than he had ever heard from her before.

With her words the vision returned upon him, clear, and plain, and strong. He started in terror, almost expecting to hear the chains rattle about him.

'Get up, and make the room tidy. See how you have thrown the books about!' said his mother.

He dared not disobey her. He sprung to his feet, and as he reduced the little chaos around him to order, first calmness descended, and then shame arose. As he fulfilled her word, his mother stood and looked

on. The moment he had finished, he ran to her, threw his arms about her neck, burst into honest, worthy tears, and cried:

'Mother"

Then, after a while, he sobbed out:

'I am sorry I was so cross and rude to my mother.'

She kissed him, and put her arms around him, and with his mind's eye he saw the flap of the white dove's wing. She took him by the hand and led him to the window. The sun was shining, and a grand rainbow stood against the black curtain of the receding cataract.

'Come, my child,' she said; 'we will go out together.'

It was long years ere the boy understood all the meanings of the vision. I doubt if he understands them all yet. But he will one day. And I can say no more for the wisest of the readers, or for the writer himself, of this parable.

The Father of all the boys on earth and in heaven be with the boys of America! and when they grow up, may they and the men of England understand, and love, and help each other! Amen!

Your friend,

GEORGE MACDONALD."