

“Do *you* really believe there is such a thing as free will?” He ceased, awaiting the answer which Donal felt far from prepared to give him.

“My lord,” said Donal at length, “what I think or do not think, on the point, I do not feel at all capable, on a moment’s notice, of setting forth; neither do I think, however unavoidable such discussions must sometimes be in the forum of one’s own thoughts, that they are a profitable subject of open discussion between men. I think difficult questions of the sort, if they are to be treated at all between man and man, and not between God and man only, had better be treated in print, where what is said is at least a little fixed, and can with an eye-glance be brought again before the mind. But not so either do I think they can be discussed to any profit.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Grant? Surely these things are of the very first importance to humanity!”

“I grant it, my lord, if by *humanity* you mean the human individual. But my meaning is, that there are many questions, and this is one of them, that cannot be answered but in putting them to the proof of action.”

“You speak riddles!”

“I will endeavour to speak as directly to the point as a man can! I believe such questions can be answered only by the moral nature, which first and almost only they concern; and the only pure exercise of the moral nature is action, not discussion.”

“Do I not then,” said his lordship, with the faintest shadow of indignation in his tone, “bring my moral nature to bear on a question when I consider it from the highest grounds of duty?”

“No, my lord,” answered Donal, with decision; “you bring nothing but your intellectual nature to bear on it so. The moral nature, I repeat, operates only in action. To come to the absolute point in hand, the sole way for a man to know whether he has freedom of the will or not: is to put that will in operation—to do something he ought to do. He may strive to acquaint himself with all the facts concerning will, and spend himself imagining its mode of working; yet all the time never know whether he has a will or not.”

“But how am I to know how to put it in operation, if I do not know whether I have any freedom of will or not?”

“Just by being alive, my lord; by setting yourself to do the next thing you know you ought to do, or abstaining from the next thing you are tempted to, but know you ought not to do. It sounds childish, I know, and most people will set it aside as something that can be taken up any time, or at least postponed till questions are settled which never can be settled for them until they take just this divinely childish way of doing it. That is the only way in which a man *can* know whether he has got a free will or not.”

“Suppose he should find that he had not, for that he could not do what he wished?”

“What he ought, I said, my lord.”

“Well, what he ought,” said the earl.

“That he could not find proved. He might doubt it the more, but the only thing he could prove, would be that he had, or might have, a free will.”

“Then where would be the satisfaction, if he *could* only prove the one thing and not the other?”

“The truth alone can be proved, my lord. To a man that wanted to prove he had no freedom of will there would come as little satisfaction from the test as he deserved to find—and the less the more honest he was; but to the man anxious about the dignity of the nature given him, there would come in time every sort of needful satisfaction in the progress of his obedience.”

“But how can there be free will where the first thing demanded is obedience?”

“There is no free will save in resisting what one would like, and doing what the Truth would have him do.”

“That’s a dreary doctrine!”

“My lord, I have spent no little time and thought on the subject, after the action, that is, of which I speak, and the result is some sort of practical clearness to myself; but I should not care to make it clear, if even I could, to another, in any way but by persuading that other to arrive at the same conviction by the same path—the only path by which it could be arrived at,—namely, once more, the doing of the thing that was required of him.”

“Required of him by what?”

“I would rather you asked, required of him by *whom*; but I will answer you: by any one, or anything, or any thought, that bears the word required along with it—anything that carries a shadow of right in its demand. If a man does not do the thing which the very notion of a free will requires, what in earth, heaven, or hell, would be the use of his knowing all about the will, its freedom or its slavery, from alpha to omega? But it is impossible he should know anything.”

“You are a bold preacher for a youth!” said the earl. “But suppose now that a man was unconscious of the smallest ability to do anything that was required of him?”

“Then I should say there was but the more need he should do the thing without being conscious of the power.”

“That is nonsense.”

“If it be nonsense, the nonsense lies in the supposition that a man can be conscious of not possessing a power; he can only be not conscious of possessing it and that is a very different thing. How is a power to be known but by being a power, and how is it to be a power, but in its own exercise of itself? There is more in man than he can be at any given moment conscious of; there is life, the power of the eternal behind him, which only in action can he

make his own, therefore which only in action, which is almost but another name for obedience, can he become conscious of, seeing that only then is it actually his.”

“You are splitting a hair!”

“If the only way into life lies through the middle of what you call a hair—yes, even if it looks but a hair to you, what are you to do but split it. Only the fact is it is a world in size, though you, seeing but the knife-edge of it, take it for a hair.”

“Come, come, now! How does all this apply to one like me? A man who would really like to make up his mind about the thing, and is not at the moment aware of any very pressing duty that he is required or neglecting to do?”

“But is your lordship not aware of some not very pressing duty that you are neglecting? Some duties only need to be acknowledged by the smallest amount of action, to become paramount in their demands upon us.”

“That is the worst of it!” half muttered the earl. “That is why I would avoid such acknowledgement! Who knows where it might carry me, or what it might not go on to demand of me?”

He spoke like one who did not know he spoke aloud.

“Yes, my lord,” said Donal, “that is how most men treat the most important things! The devil would blind us to get a good hold of us!”

“Bah!” said his lordship, glad of the turn to leave the path of the conversation; “you don’t mean to say you believe in that legendary personage?”

“He who does what the devil would have him do, is the man who believes in him, not he who does not care whether he is or not, so long as he does nothing to his mind. But be sure of this, that, if there be such a one as the devil, he will be the last to be anxious to convince men of his existence till he has got them in his power. There is no end of truth in the old legends of men selling their souls to the devil. But he is a subject I do not care to discuss; for he is not very interesting to me.—I am sure, however,” added Donal fearful of failing in his duty, “if your lordship would but set yourself to get over the habit of depending so much on medicine, you would not be long in finding out that you had a free will.”

His lordship scowled like a thunder-cloud.

“I am certain, my lord, that one question asked of the will will bring an answer, where a thousand asked of the intellect, will bring nothing satisfactory.”

“I did not send for you to act the part of father confessor, Mr. Grant,” said his lordship in a tone from which Donal could not well judge the feeling behind it; “but as you have taken the office, I may as well let you keep it; that matter of my medical treatment of myself is just that which has brought me into my present difficulty. It would be too long a story to tell you how, like poor Coleridge, I was led from one degree to another; but surely you will allow

the desire to escape from pain to be as natural an instinct as any other; from that, and partly to enable me to survive the consequence of much thoughtlessness in my behaviour to others, I have become by degrees far too dependent upon the use of drugs. And now, when, from certain symptoms, I have reason to fear a change of some kind not far off—I do not of course mean to-morrow, or next year, but somewhere nearer than it was this time, I won't say last year, but say ten years ago—why, then, one begins to think about certain things one has been too ready to forget. I suppose, however, if a man should through the operation of such things upon the tissue of his brain, have no will left, and if there be another world, which I for one am not altogether prepared to deny, and if also the will be a natural possession of the human being, then it must return to him the moment he is set free from the body.”

“My lord, I would not have you count too much upon that. We know very little about these things; but what if the brain be just the means of giving the opportunity for the action which is to result in freedom? What if there should, without the brain, be no means of working out the liberty we need? What if we are here like birds in a cage, with wings able to fly about the cage; and what if, when we are dead, we shall indeed be out of the cage; but without wings, having never made use of them while we had them? Just think for a moment what we should be without the senses.”

“But of course we shall be able to see and hear, else where is the use of believing in another world?”

“I suspect, my lord, the other world does not need our believing in it to make a fact of it. But if a man were never to teach his soul to see, if he were obstinately to close his eyes upon this world, and look at nothing all the time he was in it, I should be very doubtful whether the mere fact of going dead, would make him see. Never having learned to see, the sense of seeing in the soul, correspondent to and higher than that of the body, never having been developed, how should it expand and empower itself by mere deliverance from the one best schoolmaster to whom it would give no heed? The senses here are, I suspect, only as the husk under which is ripening the deeper, keener, better senses belonging to the next stage of our life; and so, my lord, I cannot think that, if the will has not been developed here through the means and occasions given it, the mere passing into another condition should set it free. For freedom is the unclosing of the idea which lies at our root, the vital power of our existence. The rose is the freedom of the rose-tree. I should think, having lost his brain, and got nothing instead, he would find himself a mere centre of unanswerable questions.”

“You go too far for me,” said his lordship, looking a little uncomfortable, as if there might be something in what the fellow said, “but I think it almost time for me to try and break myself a little of the habit. By degrees one night—you know—eh?”

“I have little faith in doing things by degrees, my lord—except such indeed as by their very nature cannot be done at once. It is true a bad habit can only be contracted by degrees, and I will not say, because I do not know, whether any one has ever cured himself of one by degrees, but it cannot be the best way. What is bad ought to be got rid of at once.”

"Ah, but you know that might cost you your life!"

"What of that, my lord? Life, the life you mean, is not the first thing."

"Not the first thing! Why, the Bible says, 'All that a man hath will he give for his life!'"

"Yes; that is in the Bible; but who said it?"

"What does it matter who said it?"

"Much always; everything sometimes."

"Who said it then?"

"The devil."

"The devil he did! And who ought to know better, I should like to ask!"

"Every man ought to know better. And besides, it is not what a man will or will not do, but what a man ought or ought not to do!"

"Ah, there you have me, I suppose! But there are some things so damned difficult, that a man must be very sure of the danger he is in before he can bring himself to do them!" "That may be true, my lord; and in the present case your lordship must know that it is not the health alone these drugs undermine, but the moral nature as well!"

"I know it; and that therefore I cannot be counted guilty of many things I have done, seeing they were done under the influence of these hellish concoctions. It was not I, but these things working on my brain, and making me see things for the first time in an altogether false light. This will be considered when I come to be judged—if there be in truth a day of judgement."

"One thing I am sure of," said Donal, "that your lordship, as well as every man, will have fair play. But there is this to be considered; at first, if you did not know what you were about, you might not be much to blame, though it is impossible to say when there might not be a glimmer of light left; but afterwards, when you knew that you were putting yourself in danger of doing you did not know what, you must have been as much to blame as if you had made a Frankenstein-demon, and turned him loose on the earth, knowing you would not be in the least able to control him."

"And is not that what the God you believe in does every day?"

"My lord, the God I believe in has *not* lost his control over either of us."

"Then let him set the thing right! Why should we have to toil to draw his plough with but one horse when there ought to be four?"

"He will see to it, my lord; do not fear—though it will probably be in a way your lordship will hardly like. He is compelled to do terrible things sometimes."

"What should compel him?"

"The love that is in him, the love that he is, towards us who would have our own way to the ruin of everything he cares for!"

Then the spirit awoke in Donal, or came upon him, and he spoke.

"My lord," he said, "if you would ever again be able to thank God, if there be one in the other world to whom you would go, if you would make up for any wrong you have ever done, if you would ever feel in your soul once more the innocence of a child, if you care to call God your father, and Jesus Christ your brother, if you would fall asleep in peace and wake to a new life, I conjure you to resist the devil, to give up the evil habit that is dragging you lower and lower every hour. It will be very hard, I know! Anything I can do, by watching with you night and day, and giving myself to your help, I am ready for. I will do all a man can to deliver you from the weariness that must come over you in the endeavour. I will give my life to assist you, and count myself honoured, believing I shall then have lived a life worth

living. Resolve, my lord—in God’s name resolve at once to be free. Then will you know that you have a free will, because your will will have made itself free by doing the will of God against all disinclination of your own. It will be a glorious victory, and will at once set you high on the hill whose peak is the throne of God.”

*Donal Grant* by George MacDonald (Taken from the Scots/English edition, 2019, translated by David Jack. *Donal Grant* was first published in 1883.)

Chapter XXX, “An Unsought-For Interview”

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