

A Tragedy of Bones

By George MacDonald

I rose to resume my journey, and walked many a desert mile. How I longed for a mountain, or even a tall rock, from whose summit I might see across the dismal plain or the dried-up channels to some bordering hope! . . .

About noon I came to a few tamarisk and juniper trees, and then to a few stunted firs. . .

I went deeper into the wood. . .

The trees were now large, and stood in regular, almost geometric, fashion, with roomy spaces between. There was little undergrowth, and I could see a long way in every direction. The forest was like a great church, solemn and silent and empty, for I met nothing on two feet or four that day. Now and then, it is true, some swift thing, and again some slow thing, would cross the space on which my eye happened that moment to settle; but it was always at some distance, and only enhanced the sense of wideness and vacancy. I heard a few birds, and saw plenty of butterflies, some of marvellously gorgeous colouring and combinations of colour, some of a pure and dazzling whiteness.

Coming to a spot where the pines stood farther apart and gave room for flowering shrubs, and hoping it a sign of some dwelling near, I took the direction where yet more and more roses grew, for I was hungry after the voice and face of my kind—after any live soul, indeed, human or not, which I might in some measure understand. What a hell of horror, I thought, to wander alone, a bare existence never going out of itself, never widening its life in another life, but, bound with the cords of its poor peculiarities, lying an eternal prisoner in the dungeon of its own being! I began to learn that it was impossible to live for oneself even, save in the presence of others—then, alas, fearfully possible! evil was only through good! selfishness but a parasite on the tree of life! In my own world I had the habit of solitary song; here not a crooning murmur ever parted my lips! There I sang without thinking; here I thought without singing! there I had never had a bosom-friend; here the affection of an idiot would be divinely welcome! ‘If only I had a dog to love!’ I sighed—and regarded with wonder my past self, which preferred the company of book or pen to that of man or woman; which, if the author of a tale I was enjoying appeared, would wish him away that I might return to his story. I had chosen the dead rather than the living, the thing thought rather than the thing thinking! ‘Any man,’ I said now, ‘is more than the greatest of books!’ I had not cared for my live brothers and sisters, and now I was left without even the dead to comfort me!

The wood thinned yet more, and the pines grew yet larger, sending up huge stems, like columns eager to support the heavens. More trees of other kinds appeared; the forest was growing richer! The roses were now trees, and their flowers of astonishing splendour.

Suddenly I spied what seemed a great house or castle; but its forms were so strangely indistinct, that I could not be certain it was more than a chance combination of tree-shapes. As I drew nearer, its lines yet held together, but neither they nor the body of it grew at all more definite; and when at length I stood in front of it, I remained as doubtful of its nature as before. House or castle habitable, it certainly was not; it might be a ruin overgrown with ivy and roses! Yet of building hid in the foliage, not the poorest wall-remnant could I discern. Again and again I seemed to descry what must be building, but it always vanished before closer inspection. Could it be, I pondered, that the ivy had embraced a huge edifice and consumed it, and its interlaced

branches retained the shapes of the walls it had assimilated?—I could be sure of nothing concerning the appearance.

Before me was a rectangular vacancy—the ghost of a doorway without a door: I stepped through it, and found myself in an open space like a great hall, its floor covered with grass and flowers, its walls and roof of ivy and vine, mingled with roses.

There could be no better place in which to pass the night! I gathered a quantity of withered leaves, laid them in a corner, and threw myself upon them. A red sunset filled the hall, the night was warm, and my couch restful; I lay gazing up at the live ceiling, with its tracery of branches and twigs, its clouds of foliage, and peeping patches of loftier roof. My eyes went wading about as if tangled in it, until the sun was down, and the sky beginning to grow dark. Then the red roses turned black, and soon the yellow and white alone were visible. When they vanished, the stars came instead, hanging in the leaves like live topazes, throbbing and sparkling and flashing many colours: I was canopied with a tree from Aladdin's cave!

Then I discovered that it was full of nests, whence tiny heads, nearly indistinguishable, kept popping out with a chirp or two, and disappearing again. For a while there were rustlings and stirrings and little prayers; but as the darkness grew, the small heads became still, and at last every feathered mother had her brood quiet under her wings, the talk in the little beds was over, and God's bird-nursery at rest beneath the waves of sleep. Once more a few flutterings made me look up: an owl went sailing across. I had only a glimpse of him, but several times felt the cool wafture of his silent wings. The mother birds did not move again; they saw that he was looking for mice, not children.

About midnight I came wide awake, roused by a revelry, whose noises were yet not loud. Neither were they distant; they were close to me, but attenuate. My eyes were so dazzled, however, that for a while I could see nothing; at last they came to themselves.

I was lying on my withered leaves in the corner of a splendid hall. Before me was a crowd of gorgeously dressed men and gracefully robed women, none of whom seemed to see me. In dance after dance they vaguely embodied the story of life, its meetings, its passions, its partings. A student of Shakspeare, I had learned something of every dance alluded to in his plays, and hence partially understood several of those I now saw—the minuet, the pavin, the hey, the coranto, the lavolta. The dancers were attired in fashion as ancient as their dances.

A moon had risen while I slept, and was shining through the countless-windowed roof; but her light was crossed by so many shadows that at first I could distinguish almost nothing of the faces of the multitude; I could not fail, however, to perceive that there was something odd about them: I sat up to see them better.—Heavens! could I call them faces? They were skull fronts!—hard, gleaming bone, bare jaws, truncated noses, lipless teeth which could no more take part in any smile! Of these, some flashed set and white and murderous; others were clouded with decay, broken and gapped, coloured of the earth in which they seemed so long to have lain! Fearfuller yet, the eye-sockets were not empty; in each was a lidless living eye! In those wrecks of faces, glowed or flashed or sparkled eyes of every colour, shape, and expression. The beautiful, proud eye, dark and lustrous, condescending to whatever it rested upon, was the more terrible; the lovely, languishing eye, the more repulsive; while the dim, sad eyes, less at variance with their setting, were sad exceedingly, and drew the heart in spite of the horror out of which they gazed.

I rose and went among the apparitions, eager to understand something of their being and belongings. Were they souls, or were they and their rhythmic motions but phantasms of what had been? By look nor by gesture, not by slightest break in the measure, did they show themselves aware of me; I was not present to them: how much were they in relation to each other? Surely

they saw their companions as I saw them! Or was each only dreaming itself and the rest? Did they know each how they appeared to the others—a death with living eyes? Had they used their faces, not for communication, not to utter thought and feeling, not to share existence with their neighbours, but to appear what they wished to appear, and conceal what they were? and, having made their faces masks, were they therefore deprived of those masks, and condemned to go without faces until they repented?

‘How long must they flaunt their facelessness in faceless eyes?’ I wondered. ‘How long will the frightful punishment endure? Have they at length begun to love and be wise? Have they yet yielded to the shame that has found them?’

I heard not a word, saw not a movement of one naked mouth. Were they because of lying bereft of speech? With their eyes they spoke as if longing to be understood: was it truth or was it falsehood that spoke in their eyes? They seemed to know one another: did they see one skull beautiful, and another plain? Difference must be there, and they had had long study of skulls!

My body was to theirs no obstacle: was I a body, and were they but forms? or was I but a form, and were they bodies? The moment one of the dancers came close against me, that moment he or she was on the other side of me, and I could tell, without seeing, which, whether man or woman, had passed through my house.

On many of the skulls the hair held its place, and however dressed, or in itself however beautiful, to my eyes looked frightful on the bones of the forehead and temples. In such case, the outer ear often remained also, and at its tip, the jewel of the ear as Sidney calls it, would hang, glimmering, gleaming, or sparkling, pearl or opal or diamond—under the night of brown or of raven locks, the sunrise of golden ripples, or the moonshine of pale, interclouded, fluffy cirri—lichenous all on the ivory-white or damp-yellow naked bone. I looked down and saw the daintily domed instep; I looked up and saw the plump shoulders basing the spring of the round full neck—which withered at half-height to the fluted shaft of a gibbose cranium.

The music became wilder, the dance faster and faster; eyes flared and flashed, jewels twinkled and glittered, casting colour and fire on the pallid grins that glode through the hall, weaving a ghastly rhythmic woof in intricate maze of multitudinous motion, when sudden came a pause, and every eye turned to the same spot:—in the doorway stood a woman, perfect in form, in holding, and in hue, regarding the company as from the pedestal of a goddess, while the dancers stood ‘like one forbid’, frozen to a new death by the vision of a life that killed. ‘Dead things, I live!’ said her scornful glance. Then, at once, like leaves in which an instant wind awakes, they turned each to another, and broke afresh into melodious consorted motion, a new expression in their eyes, late solitary, now filled with the interchange of a common triumph. ‘Thou also,’ they seemed to say, ‘wilt soon become weak as we! thou wilt soon become like unto us!’ I turned mine again to the woman—and saw upon her side a small dark shadow.

She had seen the change in the dead stare; she looked down; she understood the talking eyes; she pressed both her lovely hands on the shadow, gave a smothered cry, and fled. The birds moved rustling in their nests, and a flash of joy lit up the eyes of the dancers, when suddenly a warm wind, growing in strength as it swept through the place, blew out every light. But the low moon yet glimmered on the horizon with ‘sick assay’ to shine, and a turbid radiance yet gleamed from so many eyes, that I saw well enough what followed. As if each shape had been but a snow-image, it began to fall to pieces, ruining in the warm wind. In papery flakes the flesh peeled from its bones, dropping like soiled snow from under its garments; these fell fluttering in rags and strips, and the whole white skeleton, emerging from garment and flesh together, stood bare and lank amid the decay that littered the floor. A faint rattling shiver went through the naked

company; pair after pair the laming eyes went out; and the darkness grew round me with the loneliness. For a moment the leaves were still swept fluttering all one way; then the wind ceased, and the owl floated silent through the silent night.

Not for a moment had I been afraid. It is true that whoever would cross the threshold of any world, must leave fear behind him; but, for myself, I could claim no part in its absence. No conscious courage was operant in me; simply, I was not afraid. I neither knew why I was not afraid, nor wherefore I might have been afraid. I feared not even fear—which of all dangers is the most dangerous.

I went out into the wood, at once to resume my journey. Another moon was rising, and I turned my face toward it.

I had not gone ten paces when I caught sight of a strange-looking object, and went nearer to know what it might be. I found it a mouldering carriage of ancient form, ruinous but still upright on its heavy wheels. On each side of the pole, still in its place, lay the skeleton of a horse; from their two grim white heads ascended the shrivelled reins to the hand of the skeleton-coachman seated on his tattered hammer-cloth; both doors had fallen away; within sat two skeletons, each leaning back in its corner.

Even as I looked, they started awake, and with a cracking rattle of bones, each leaped from the door next it. One fell and lay; the other stood a moment, its structure shaking perilously; then with difficulty, for its joints were stiff, crept, holding by the back of the carriage, to the opposite side, the thin leg-bones seeming hardly strong enough to carry its weight, where, kneeling by the other, it sought to raise it, almost falling itself again in the endeavour.

The prostrate one rose at length, as by a sudden effort, to the sitting posture. For a few moments it turned its yellowish skull to this side and that; then, heedless of its neighbour, got upon its feet by grasping the spokes of the hind wheel. Half erected thus, it stood with its back to the other, both hands holding one of its knee-joints. With little less difficulty and not a few contortions, the kneeling one rose next, and addressed its companion.

‘Have you hurt yourself, my lord?’ it said, in a voice that sounded far-off, and ill-articulated as if blown aside by some spectral wind.

‘Yes, I have,’ answered the other, in like but rougher tone. ‘You would do nothing to help me, and this cursed knee is out!’

‘I did my best, my lord.’

‘No doubt, my lady, for it was bad! I thought I should never find my feet again!—But, bless my soul, madam! are you out in your bones?’

She cast a look at herself.

‘I have nothing else to be out in,’ she returned; ‘—and *you* at least cannot complain! But what on earth does it mean? Am I dreaming?’

‘You may be dreaming, madam—I cannot tell; but this knee of mine forbids me the grateful illusion.—Ha! I too, I perceive, have nothing to walk in but bones!—Not so unbecoming to a man, however! I trust to goodness they are not my bones! every one aches worse than another, and this loose knee worst of all! The bed must have been damp—and I too drunk to know it!’

‘Probably, my lord of Cokayne!’

‘What! what!—You make me think I too am dreaming—aches and all! How do *you* know the title my roistering bullies give me? I don’t remember you!—Anyhow, you have no right to take liberties! My name is—I am lord—tut, tut! What do you call me when I’m—I mean when you

are sober? I cannot—at the moment,—Why, what *is* my name?—I must have been *very* drunk when I went to bed! I often am!’

‘You come so seldom to mine, that I do not know, my lord; but I may take your word for *that!*’

‘I hope so!’

‘—if for nothing else!’

‘Hoity toity! I never told you a lie in my life!’

‘You never told me anything but lies.’

‘Upon my honour!—Why, I never saw the woman before!’

‘You knew me well enough to lie to, my lord!’

‘I do seem to begin to dream I have met you before, but, upon my oath, there is nothing to know you by! Out of your clothes, who is to tell who you may not be?—One thing I may swear—that I never saw you so much undressed before!—By heaven, I have no recollection of you!’

‘I am glad to hear it: my recollections of you are the less distasteful!—Good morning, my lord!’

She turned away, hobbled, clacking, a few paces, and stood again.

‘You are just as heartless as—as—any other woman, madam!—Where in this hell of a place shall I find my valet?—What was the cursed name I used to call the fool?’

He turned his bare noddle this way and that on its creaking pivot, still holding his knee with both hands.

‘I will be your valet for once, my lord,’ said the lady, turning once more to him. ‘—What can I do for you? It is not easy to tell!’

‘Tie my leg on, of course, you fool! Can’t you see it is all but off? Heigho, my dancing days!’

She looked about with her eyeless sockets and found a piece of fibrous grass, with which she proceeded to bind together the adjoining parts that had formed the knee. When she had done, he gave one or two carefully tentative stamps.

‘You used to stamp rather differently, my lord!’ she said, as she rose from her knees.

‘Eh? what!—Now I look at you again, it seems to me I used to hate you!—Eh?’

‘Naturally, my lord! You hated a good many people!—your wife, of course, among the rest!’

‘Ah, I begin, I be-gin—But—I must have been a long time somewhere!—I really forget!—There! your damned, miserable bit of grass is breaking!—We used to get on *pretty* well together—eh?’

‘Not that I remember, my lord. The only happy moments I had in your company were scattered over the first week of our marriage.’

‘Was that the way of it? Ha! ha!—Well, it’s over now, thank goodness!’

‘I wish I could believe it! Why were we sitting there in that carriage together? It wakes apprehension!’

‘I think we were divorced, my lady!’

‘Hardly enough: we are still together!’

‘A sad truth, but capable of remedy: the forest seems of some extent!’

‘I doubt! I doubt!’

‘I am sorry I cannot think of a compliment to pay you—without lying, that is. To judge by your figure and complexion you have lived hard since I saw you last! I cannot surely be *quite* so naked as your ladyship!—I beg your pardon, madam! I trust you will take it I am but jesting in a dream! It is of no consequence, however; dreaming or waking, all’s one—all merest appearance!’

You can't be certain of anything, and that's as good as knowing there is nothing! Life may teach any fool that!

'It has taught me the fool I was to love you!'

'You were not the only fool to do that! Women had a trick of falling in love with me:—I had forgotten that you were one of them!'

'I did love you, my lord—a little—at one time!'

'Ah, there was your mistake, my lady! You should have loved me much, loved me devotedly, loved me savagely—loved me eternally! Then I should have tired of you the sooner, and not hated you so much afterward!—But let bygones be bygones!—*Where* are we? Locality is the question! To be or not to be, is not the question!'

'We are in the other world, I presume!'

'Granted!—but in which or what sort of other world? This can't be hell!'

'It must: there's marriage in it! You and I are damned in each other.'

'Then I'm not like Othello, damned in a fair wife!—Oh, I remember my Shakspeare, madam!'

She picked up a broken branch that had fallen into a bush, and steadying herself with it, walked away, tossing her little skull.

'Give that stick to me,' cried her late husband; 'I want it more than you.'

She returned him no answer.

'You mean to make me beg for it?'

'Not at all, my lord. I mean to keep it,' she replied, continuing her slow departure.

'Give it me at once; I mean to have it! I require it.'

'Unfortunately, I think I require it myself!' returned the lady, walking a little quicker, with a sharper cracking of her joints and clinking of her bones.

He started to follow her, but nearly fell: his knee-grass had burst, and with an oath he stopped, grasping his leg again.

'Come and tie it up properly!' he would have thundered, but he only piped and whistled!

She turned and looked at him.

'Come and tie it up instantly!' he repeated.

She walked a step or two farther from him.

'I swear I will not touch you!' he cried.

'Swear on, my lord! there is no one here to believe you. But, pray, do not lose your temper, or you will shake yourself to pieces, and where to find string enough to tie up all your crazy joints, is more than I can tell.'

She came back, and knelt once more at his side—first, however, laying the stick in dispute beyond his reach and within her own.

The instant she had finished retying the joint, he made a grab at her, thinking, apparently, to seize her by the hair; but his hard fingers slipped on the smooth poll.

'Disgusting!' he muttered, and laid hold of her upper arm-bone.

'You will break it!' she said, looking up from her knees.

'I will, then!' he answered, and began to strain at it.

'I shall not tie your leg again the next time it comes loose!' she threatened.

He gave her arm a vicious twist, but happily her bones were in better condition than his. She stretched her other hand toward the broken branch.

'That's right: reach me the stick!' he grinned.

She brought it round with such a swing that one of the bones of the sounder leg snapped. He fell, choking with curses. The lady laughed.

‘Now you will have to wear splints always!’ she said; ‘such dry bones never mend!’

‘You devil!’ he cried.

‘At your service, my lord! Shall I fetch you a couple of wheel-spokes? Neat—but heavy, I fear!’

He turned his bone-face aside, and did not answer, but lay and groaned. I marvelled he had not gone to pieces when he fell. The lady rose and walked away—not all ungracefully, I thought.

‘What can come of it?’ I said to myself. ‘These are too wretched for any world, and this cannot be hell, for the Little Ones are in it, and the sleepers too! What can it all mean? Can things ever come right for skeletons?’

‘There are words too big for you and me: *all* is one of them, and *ever* is another,’ said a voice near me which I knew.

I looked about, but could not see the speaker.

‘You are not in hell,’ it resumed. ‘Neither am I in hell. But those skeletons are in hell!’

Ere he ended I caught sight of the raven on the bough of a beech, right over my head. The same moment he left it, and alighting on the ground, stood there, the thin old man of the library, with long nose and long coat.

‘The male was never a gentleman,’ he went on, ‘and in the bony stage of retrogression, with his skeleton through his skin, and his character outside his manners, does not look like one. The female is less vulgar, and has a little heart. But, the restraints of society removed, you see them now just as they are and always were!’

‘Tell me, Mr Raven, what will become of them,’ I said.

‘We shall see,’ he replied. ‘In their day they were the handsomest couple at court; and now, even in their dry bones, they seem to regard their former repute as an inalienable possession; to see their faces, however, may yet do something for them! They felt themselves rich too while they had pockets, but they have already begun to feel rather pinched! My lord used to regard my lady as a worthless encumbrance, for he was tired of her beauty and had spent her money; now he needs her to cobble his joints for him! These changes have roots of hope in them. Besides, they cannot now get far away from each other, and they see none else of their own kind: they must at last grow weary of their mutual repugnance, and begin to love one another! for love, not hate, is deepest in what Love “loved into being.”’

‘I saw many more of their kind an hour ago, in the hall close by!’ I said.

‘Of their kind, but not of their sort,’ he answered. ‘For many years these will see none such as you saw last night. Those are centuries in advance of these. You saw that those could even dress themselves a little! It is true they cannot yet retain their clothes so long as they would—only, at present, for a part of the night; but they are pretty steadily growing more capable, and will by and by develop faces; for every grain of truthfulness adds a fibre to the show of their humanity. Nothing but truth can appear; and whatever is must seem.’

‘Are they upheld by this hope?’ I asked.

‘They are upheld by hope, but they do not in the least know their hope; to understand it, is yet immeasurably beyond them,’ answered Mr Raven.

His unexpected appearance had caused me no astonishment. I was like a child, constantly wondering, and surprised at nothing.

‘Did you come to find me, sir?’ I asked.

‘Not at all,’ he replied. ‘I have no anxiety about you. Such as you always come back to us.’

‘Tell me, please, who are you such as?’ I said.

‘I cannot make my friend the subject of conversation,’ he answered, with a smile.

‘But when that friend is present!’ I urged.

‘I decline the more strongly,’ he rejoined.

‘But when that friend asks you!’ I persisted.

‘Then most positively I refuse,’ he returned.

‘Why?’

‘Because he and I would be talking of two persons as if they were one and the same. Your consciousness of yourself and my knowledge of you are far apart!’

The lapels of his coat flew out, and the lappets lifted, and I thought the metamorphosis of *homo* to *corvus* was about to take place before my eyes. But the coat closed again in front of him, and he added, with seeming inconsequence,

‘In this world never trust a person who has once deceived you. Above all, never do anything such a one may ask you to do.’

‘I will try to remember,’ I answered; ‘—but I may forget!’

‘Then some evil that is good for you will follow.’

‘And if I remember?’

‘Some evil that is not good for you, will not follow.’

The old man seemed to sink to the ground, and immediately I saw the raven several yards from me, flying low and fast.