

Parable for a Lustaholic

George MacDonald

Originally written in 1878, the story recounts how a runaway boy, taken into the home of a wise old man, comes upon a marvelous scene in that enchanted place:

... [I]n the middle of [the dungeon] 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.

... [T]he man lifted his head, and his look caught and held him [the boy]. 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 was 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 has 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 reentered, 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 sprang 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, overwheeled, 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.