

LILITH

By George MacDonald

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I took a walk on Spaulding's Farm the other afternoon. I saw the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately pine wood. Its golden rays straggled into the aisles of the wood as into some noble hall. I was impressed as if some ancient and altogether admirable and shining family had settled there in that part of the land called Concord, unknown to me,—to whom the sun was servant,—who had not gone into society in the village,—who had not been called on. I saw their park, their pleasure-ground, beyond through the wood, in Spaulding's cranberry-meadow. The pines furnished them with gables as they grew. Their house was not obvious to vision; their trees grew through it. I do not know whether I heard the sounds of a suppressed hilarity or not. They seemed to recline on the sunbeams. They have sons and daughters. They are quite well. The farmer's cart-path, which leads directly through their hall, does not in the least put them out,—as the muddy bottom of a pool is sometimes seen through the reflected skies. They never heard of Spaulding, and do not know that he is their neighbor,—notwithstanding I heard him whistle as he drove his team through the house. Nothing can equal the serenity of their lives. Their coat of arms is simply a lichen. I saw it painted on the pines and oaks. Their attics were in the tops of the trees. They are of no politics. There was no noise of labor. I did not perceive that they were weaving or spinning. Yet I did detect, when the wind lulled and hearing was done away, the finest imaginable sweet musical hum,—as of a distant hive in May, which perchance was the sound of their thinking. They had no idle thoughts, and no one without could see their work, for their industry was not as in knots and excrescences embayed.

But I find it difficult to remember them. They fade irrevocably out of my mind even now while I speak and endeavor to recall them, and recollect myself. It is only after a long and serious effort to recollect my best thoughts that I become again aware of their cohabitancy. If it were not for such families as this, I think I should move out of Concord.

Thoreau: "WALKING."

CHAPTER I. THE LIBRARY

I had just finished my studies at Oxford, and was taking a brief holiday from work before assuming definitely the management of the estate. My father died when I was yet a child; my mother followed him within a year; and I was nearly as much alone in the world as a man might find himself.

I had made little acquaintance with the history of my ancestors. Almost the only thing I knew concerning them was, that a notable number of them had been given to study. I had myself so far inherited the tendency as to devote a good deal of my time, though, I confess, after a somewhat desultory fashion, to the physical sciences. It was chiefly the wonder they woke that drew me. I was constantly seeing, and on the outlook to see, strange analogies, not only between the facts of different sciences of the same order, or between physical and metaphysical facts, but between physical hypotheses and suggestions glimmering out of the metaphysical dreams into which I was in the habit of falling. I was at the same time much given to a premature indulgence of the impulse to turn hypothesis into theory. Of my mental peculiarities there is no occasion to say more.

The house as well as the family was of some antiquity, but no description of it is necessary to the understanding of my narrative. It contained a fine library, whose growth began before the invention of printing, and had continued to my own time, greatly influenced, of course, by changes of taste and pursuit. Nothing surely can more impress upon a man the transitory nature of possession than his succeeding to an ancient property! Like a moving panorama mine has passed from before many eyes, and is now slowly flitting from before my own.

The library, although duly considered in many alterations of the house and additions to it, had nevertheless, like an encroaching state, absorbed one room after another until it occupied the greater part of the ground floor. Its chief room was large, and the walls of it were covered with books almost to the ceiling; the rooms into which it overflowed were of various sizes and shapes, and communicated in modes as various—by doors, by open arches, by short passages, by steps up and steps down.

In the great room I mainly spent my time, reading books of science, old as well as new; for the history of the human mind in relation to supposed knowledge was what most of all interested me. Ptolemy, Dante, the two

Bacons, and Boyle were even more to me than Darwin or Maxwell, as so much nearer the vanished van breaking into the dark of ignorance.

In the evening of a gloomy day of August I was sitting in my usual place, my back to one of the windows, reading. It had rained the greater part of the morning and afternoon, but just as the sun was setting, the clouds parted in front of him, and he shone into the room. I rose and looked out of the window. In the centre of the great lawn the feathering top of the fountain column was filled with his red glory. I turned to resume my seat, when my eye was caught by the same glory on the one picture in the room—a portrait, in a sort of niche or little shrine sunk for it in the expanse of book-filled shelves. I knew it as the likeness of one of my ancestors, but had never even wondered why it hung there alone, and not in the gallery, or one of the great rooms, among the other family portraits. The direct sunlight brought out the painting wonderfully; for the first time I seemed to see it, and for the first time it seemed to respond to my look. With my eyes full of the light reflected from it, something, I cannot tell what, made me turn and cast a glance to the farther end of the room, when I saw, or seemed to see, a tall figure reaching up a hand to a bookshelf. The next instant, my vision apparently rectified by the comparative dusk, I saw no one, and concluded that my optic nerves had been momentarily affected from within.

I resumed my reading, and would doubtless have forgotten the vague, evanescent impression, had it not been that, having occasion a moment after to consult a certain volume, I found but a gap in the row where it ought to have stood, and the same instant remembered that just there I had seen, or fancied I saw, the old man in search of a book. I looked all about the spot but in vain. The next morning, however, there it was, just where I had thought to find it! I knew of no one in the house likely to be interested in such a book.

Three days after, another and yet odder thing took place.

In one of the walls was the low, narrow door of a closet, containing some of the oldest and rarest of the books. It was a very thick door, with a projecting frame, and it had been the fancy of some ancestor to cross it with shallow shelves, filled with book-backs only. The harmless trick may be excused by the fact that the titles on the sham backs were either humorously original, or those of books lost beyond hope of recovery. I had a great liking for the masked door.

To complete the illusion of it, some inventive workman apparently had shoved in, on the top of one of the rows, a part of a volume thin enough to lie between it and the bottom of the next shelf: he had cut away diagonally a considerable portion, and fixed the remnant with one of its open corners projecting beyond the book-backs. The binding of the mutilated volume was limp vellum, and one could open the corner far enough to see that it was manuscript upon parchment.

Happening, as I sat reading, to raise my eyes from the page, my glance fell upon this door, and at once I saw that the book described, if book it may be called, was gone. Angrier than any worth I knew in it justified, I rang the bell, and the butler appeared. When I asked him if he knew what had befallen it, he turned pale, and assured me he did not. I could less easily doubt his word than my own eyes, for he had been all his life in the family, and a more faithful servant never lived. He left on me the impression, nevertheless, that he could have said something more.

In the afternoon I was again reading in the library, and coming to a point which demanded reflection, I lowered the book and let my eyes go wandering. The same moment I saw the back of a slender old man, in a long, dark coat, shiny as from much wear, in the act of disappearing through the masked door into the closet beyond. I darted across the room, found the door shut, pulled it open, looked into the closet, which had no other issue, and, seeing nobody, concluded, not without uneasiness, that I had had a recurrence of my former illusion, and sat down again to my reading.

Naturally, however, I could not help feeling a little nervous, and presently glancing up to assure myself that I was indeed alone, started again to my feet, and ran to the masked door—for there was the mutilated volume in its place! I laid hold of it and pulled: it was firmly fixed as usual!

I was now utterly bewildered. I rang the bell; the butler came; I told him all I had seen, and he told me all he knew.

He had hoped, he said, that the old gentleman was going to be forgotten; it was well no one but myself had seen him. He had heard a good deal about him when first he served in the house, but by degrees he had ceased to be mentioned, and he had been very careful not to allude to him.

“The place was haunted by an old gentleman, was it?” I said.

He answered that at one time everybody believed it, but the fact that I had never heard of it seemed to imply that the thing had come to an end and was forgotten.

I questioned him as to what he had seen of the old gentleman.

He had never seen him, he said, although he had been in the house from the day my father was eight years old. My grandfather would never hear a word on the matter, declaring that whoever alluded to it should be dismissed without a moment's warning: it was nothing but a pretext of the maids, he said, for running into the arms of the men! but old Sir Ralph believed in nothing he could not see or lay hold of. Not one of the maids ever said she had seen the apparition, but a footman had left the place because of it.

An ancient woman in the village had told him a legend concerning a Mr. Raven, long time librarian to "that Sir Upward whose portrait hangs there among the books." Sir Upward was a great reader, she said—not of such books only as were wholesome for men to read, but of strange, forbidden, and evil books; and in so doing, Mr. Raven, who was probably the devil himself, encouraged him. Suddenly they both disappeared, and Sir Upward was never after seen or heard of, but Mr. Raven continued to show himself at uncertain intervals in the library. There were some who believed he was not dead; but both he and the old woman held it easier to believe that a dead man might revisit the world he had left, than that one who went on living for hundreds of years should be a man at all.

He had never heard that Mr. Raven meddled with anything in the house, but he might perhaps consider himself privileged in regard to the books. How the old woman had learned so much about him he could not tell; but the description she gave of him corresponded exactly with the figure I had just seen.

"I hope it was but a friendly call on the part of the old gentleman!" he concluded, with a troubled smile.

I told him I had no objection to any number of visits from Mr. Raven, but it would be well he should keep to his resolution of saying nothing about him to the servants. Then I asked him if he had ever seen the mutilated volume out of its place; he answered that he never had, and had always thought it a fixture. With that he went to it, and gave it a pull: it seemed immovable.

CHAPTER II. THE MIRROR

Nothing more happened for some days. I think it was about a week after, when what I have now to tell took place.

I had often thought of the manuscript fragment, and repeatedly tried to discover some way of releasing it, but in vain: I could not find out what held it fast.

But I had for some time intended a thorough overhauling of the books in the closet, its atmosphere causing me uneasiness as to their condition. One day the intention suddenly became a resolve, and I was in the act of rising from my chair to make a beginning, when I saw the old librarian moving from the door of the closet toward the farther end of the room. I ought rather to say only that I caught sight of something shadowy from which I received the impression of a slight, stooping man, in a shabby dress-coat reaching almost to his heels, the tails of which, disparting a little as he walked, revealed thin legs in black stockings, and large feet in wide, slipper-like shoes.

At once I followed him: I might be following a shadow, but I never doubted I was following something. He went out of the library into the hall, and across to the foot of the great staircase, then up the stairs to the first floor, where lay the chief rooms. Past these rooms, I following close, he continued his way, through a wide corridor, to the foot of a narrower stair leading to the second floor. Up that he went also, and when I reached the top, strange as it may seem, I found myself in a region almost unknown to me. I never had brother or sister to incite to such romps as make children familiar with nook and cranny; I was a mere child when my guardian took me away; and I had never seen the house again until, about a month before, I returned to take possession.

Through passage after passage we came to a door at the bottom of a winding wooden stair, which we ascended. Every step creaked under my foot, but I heard no sound from that of my guide. Somewhere in the middle of the stair I lost sight of him, and from the top of it the shadowy shape was nowhere visible. I could not even imagine I saw him. The place was full of shadows, but he was not one of them.

I was in the main garret, with huge beams and rafters over my head, great spaces around me, a door here and there in sight, and long vistas whose gloom was thinned by a few lurking cobwebbed windows and small dusky

skylights. I gazed with a strange mingling of awe and pleasure: the wide expanse of garret was my own, and unexplored!

In the middle of it stood an unpainted inclosure of rough planks, the door of which was ajar. Thinking Mr. Raven might be there, I pushed the door, and entered.

The small chamber was full of light, but such as dwells in places deserted: it had a dull, disconsolate look, as if it found itself of no use, and regretted having come. A few rather dim sunrays, marking their track through the cloud of motes that had just been stirred up, fell upon a tall mirror with a dusty face, old-fashioned and rather narrow—in appearance an ordinary glass. It had an ebony frame, on the top of which stood a black eagle, with outstretched wings, in his beak a golden chain, from whose end hung a black ball.

I had been looking at rather than into the mirror, when suddenly I became aware that it reflected neither the chamber nor my own person. I have an impression of having seen the wall melt away, but what followed is enough to account for any uncertainty:—could I have mistaken for a mirror the glass that protected a wonderful picture?

I saw before me a wild country, broken and heathy. Desolate hills of no great height, but somehow of strange appearance, occupied the middle distance; along the horizon stretched the tops of a far-off mountain range; nearest me lay a tract of moorland, flat and melancholy.

Being short-sighted, I stepped closer to examine the texture of a stone in the immediate foreground, and in the act espied, hopping toward me with solemnity, a large and ancient raven, whose purply black was here and there softened with gray. He seemed looking for worms as he came. Nowise astonished at the appearance of a live creature in a picture, I took another step forward to see him better, stumbled over something—doubtless the frame of the mirror—and stood nose to beak with the bird: I was in the open air, on a houseless heath!

CHAPTER III. THE RAVEN

I turned and looked behind me: all was vague and uncertain, as when one cannot distinguish between fog and field, between cloud and mountain-side. One fact only was plain—that I saw nothing I knew. Imagining myself involved in a visual illusion, and that touch would correct sight, I stretched my arms and felt about me, walking in this direction and that, if haply, where I could see nothing, I might yet come in contact with something; but my search was vain. Instinctively then, as to the only living thing near me, I turned to the raven, which stood a little way off, regarding me with an expression at once respectful and quizzical. Then the absurdity of seeking counsel from such a one struck me, and I turned again, overwhelmed with bewilderment, not unmingled with fear. Had I wandered into a region where both the material and psychical relations of our world had ceased to hold? Might a man at any moment step beyond the realm of order, and become the sport of the lawless? Yet I saw the raven, felt the ground under my feet, and heard a sound as of wind in the lowly plants around me!

“How DID I get here?” I said—apparently aloud, for the question was immediately answered.

“You came through the door,” replied an odd, rather harsh voice.

I looked behind, then all about me, but saw no human shape. The terror that madness might be at hand laid hold upon me: must I henceforth place no confidence either in my senses or my consciousness? The same instant I knew it was the raven that had spoken, for he stood looking up at me with an air of waiting. The sun was not shining, yet the bird seemed to cast a shadow, and the shadow seemed part of himself.

I beg my reader to aid me in the endeavour to make myself intelligible—if here understanding be indeed possible between us. I was in a world, or call it a state of things, an economy of conditions, an idea of existence, so little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world—which we are apt to think the only world, that the best choice I can make of word or phrase is but an adumbration of what I would convey. I begin indeed to fear that I have undertaken an impossibility, undertaken to tell what I cannot tell because no speech at my command will fit the forms in my mind. Already I have set down statements I would gladly change did I know how to substitute a truer utterance; but as often as I try to fit the

reality with nearer words, I find myself in danger of losing the things themselves, and feel like one in process of awaking from a dream, with the thing that seemed familiar gradually yet swiftly changing through a succession of forms until its very nature is no longer recognisable.

I bethought me that a bird capable of addressing a man must have the right of a man to a civil answer; perhaps, as a bird, even a greater claim.

A tendency to croak caused a certain roughness in his speech, but his voice was not disagreeable, and what he said, although conveying little enlightenment, did not sound rude.

“I did not come through any door,” I rejoined.

“I saw you come through it!—saw you with my own ancient eyes!” asserted the raven, positively but not disrespectfully.

“I never saw any door!” I persisted.

“Of course not!” he returned; “all the doors you had yet seen—and you haven’t seen many—were doors in; here you came upon a door out! The strange thing to you,” he went on thoughtfully, “will be, that the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in!”

“Oblige me by telling me where I am.”

“That is impossible. You know nothing about whereness. The only way to come to know where you are is to begin to make yourself at home.”

“How am I to begin that where everything is so strange?”

“By doing something.”

“What?”

“Anything; and the sooner you begin the better! for until you are at home, you will find it as difficult to get out as it is to get in.”

“I have, unfortunately, found it too easy to get in; once out I shall not try again!”

“You have stumbled in, and may, possibly, stumble out again. Whether you have got in UNFORTUNATELY remains to be seen.”

“Do you never go out, sir?”

“When I please I do, but not often, or for long. Your world is such a half-baked sort of place, it is at once so childish and so self-satisfied—in fact, it is not sufficiently developed for an old raven—at your service!”

“Am I wrong, then, in presuming that a man is superior to a bird?”

“That is as it may be. We do not waste our intellects in generalising, but take man or bird as we find him.—I think it is now my turn to ask you a question!”

“You have the best of rights,” I replied, “in the fact that you CAN do so!”

“Well answered!” he rejoined. “Tell me, then, who you are—if you happen to know.”

“How should I help knowing? I am myself, and must know!”

“If you know you are yourself, you know that you are not somebody else; but do you know that you are yourself? Are you sure you are not your own father?—or, excuse me, your own fool?—Who are you, pray?”

I became at once aware that I could give him no notion of who I was. Indeed, who was I? It would be no answer to say I was who! Then I understood that I did not know myself, did not know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another. As for the name I went by in my own world, I had forgotten it, and did not care to recall it, for it meant nothing, and what it might be was plainly of no consequence here. I had indeed almost forgotten that there it was a custom for everybody to have a name! So I held my peace, and it was my wisdom; for what should I say to a creature such as this raven, who saw through accident into entity?

“Look at me,” he said, “and tell me who I am.”

As he spoke, he turned his back, and instantly I knew him. He was no longer a raven, but a man above the middle height with a stoop, very thin, and wearing a long black tail-coat. Again he turned, and I saw him a raven.

“I have seen you before, sir,” I said, feeling foolish rather than surprised.

“How can you say so from seeing me behind?” he rejoined. “Did you ever see yourself behind? You have never seen yourself at all!—Tell me now, then, who I am.”

“I humbly beg your pardon,” I answered: “I believe you were once the librarian of our house, but more WHO I do not know.”

“Why do you beg my pardon?”

“Because I took you for a raven,” I said—seeing him before me as plainly a raven as bird or man could look.

“You did me no wrong,” he returned. “Calling me a raven, or thinking me one, you allowed me existence, which is the sum of what one can demand of his fellow-beings. Therefore, in return, I will give you a lesson:—No one can say he is himself, until first he knows that he IS, and then what HIMSELF is. In fact, nobody is himself, and himself is nobody. There is more in it than you can see now, but not more than you need to see. You have, I fear, got into this region too soon, but none the less you must get to be at home in it; for home, as you may or may not know, is the only place where you can go out and in. There are places you can go into, and places you can go out of; but the one place, if you do but find it, where you may go out and in both, is home.”

He turned to walk away, and again I saw the librarian. He did not appear to have changed, only to have taken up his shadow. I know this seems nonsense, but I cannot help it.

I gazed after him until I saw him no more; but whether distance hid him, or he disappeared among the heather, I cannot tell.

Could it be that I was dead, I thought, and did not know it? Was I in what we used to call the world beyond the grave? and must I wander about seeking my place in it? How was I to find myself at home? The raven said I must do something: what could I do here?—And would that make me somebody? for now, alas, I was nobody!

I took the way Mr. Raven had gone, and went slowly after him. Presently I saw a wood of tall slender pine-trees, and turned toward it. The odour of it met me on my way, and I made haste to bury myself in it.

Plunged at length in its twilight glooms, I spied before me something with a shine, standing between two of the stems. It had no colour, but was like the translucent trembling of the hot air that rises, in a radiant summer noon, from the sun-baked ground, vibrant like the smitten chords of a musical instrument. What it was grew no plainer as I went nearer, and when I came close up, I ceased to see it, only the form and colour of the trees beyond seemed strangely uncertain. I would have passed between the stems, but received a slight shock, stumbled, and fell. When I rose, I

saw before me the wooden wall of the garret chamber. I turned, and there was the mirror, on whose top the black eagle seemed but that moment to have perched.

Terror seized me, and I fled. Outside the chamber the wide garret spaces had an UNCANNY look. They seemed to have long been waiting for something; it had come, and they were waiting again! A shudder went through me on the winding stair: the house had grown strange to me! something was about to leap upon me from behind! I darted down the spiral, struck against the wall and fell, rose and ran. On the next floor I lost my way, and had gone through several passages a second time ere I found the head of the stair. At the top of the great stair I had come to myself a little, and in a few moments I sat recovering my breath in the library.

Nothing should ever again make me go up that last terrible stair! The garret at the top of it pervaded the whole house! It sat upon it, threatening to crush me out of it! The brooding brain of the building, it was full of mysterious dwellers, one or other of whom might any moment appear in the library where I sat! I was nowhere safe! I would let, I would sell the dreadful place, in which an aërial portal stood ever open to creatures whose life was other than human! I would purchase a crag in Switzerland, and thereon build a wooden nest of one story with never a garret above it, guarded by some grand old peak that would send down nothing worse than a few tons of whelming rock!

I knew all the time that my thinking was foolish, and was even aware of a certain undertone of contemptuous humour in it; but suddenly it was checked, and I seemed again to hear the croak of the raven.

“If I know nothing of my own garret,” I thought, “what is there to secure me against my own brain? Can I tell what it is even now generating?—what thought it may present me the next moment, the next month, or a year away? What is at the heart of my brain? What is behind my THINK? Am I there at all?—Who, what am I?”

I could no more answer the question now than when the raven put it to me in—at—“Where in?—where at?” I said, and gave myself up as knowing anything of myself or the universe.

I started to my feet, hurried across the room to the masked door, where the mutilated volume, sticking out from the flat of soulless, bodiless, non-existent books, appeared to beckon me, went down on my knees, and opened it as far as its position would permit, but could see nothing. I got

up again, lighted a taper, and peeping as into a pair of reluctant jaws, perceived that the manuscript was verse. Further I could not carry discovery. Beginnings of lines were visible on the left-hand page, and ends of lines on the other; but I could not, of course, get at the beginning and end of a single line, and was unable, in what I could read, to make any guess at the sense. The mere words, however, woke in me feelings which to describe was, from their strangeness, impossible. Some dreams, some poems, some musical phrases, some pictures, wake feelings such as one never had before, new in colour and form—spiritual sensations, as it were, hitherto unproved: here, some of the phrases, some of the senseless half-lines, some even of the individual words affected me in similar fashion—as with the aroma of an idea, rousing in me a great longing to know what the poem or poems might, even yet in their mutilation, hold or suggest.

I copied out a few of the larger shreds attainable, and tried hard to complete some of the lines, but without the least success. The only thing I gained in the effort was so much weariness that, when I went to bed, I fell asleep at once and slept soundly.

In the morning all that horror of the empty garret spaces had left me.

CHAPTER IV. SOMEWHERE OR NOWHERE?

The sun was very bright, but I doubted if the day would long be fine, and looked into the milky sapphire I wore, to see whether the star in it was clear. It was even less defined than I had expected. I rose from the breakfast-table, and went to the window to glance at the stone again. There had been heavy rain in the night, and on the lawn was a thrush breaking his way into the shell of a snail.

As I was turning my ring about to catch the response of the star to the sun, I spied a keen black eye gazing at me out of the milky misty blue. The sight startled me so that I dropped the ring, and when I picked it up the eye was gone from it. The same moment the sun was obscured; a dark vapour covered him, and in a minute or two the whole sky was clouded. The air had grown sultry, and a gust of wind came suddenly. A moment more and there was a flash of lightning, with a single sharp thunder-clap. Then the rain fell in torrents.

I had opened the window, and stood there looking out at the precipitous rain, when I descried a raven walking toward me over the grass, with solemn gait, and utter disregard of the falling deluge. Suspecting who he was, I congratulated myself that I was safe on the ground-floor. At the same time I had a conviction that, if I were not careful, something would happen.

He came nearer and nearer, made a profound bow, and with a sudden winged leap stood on the window-sill. Then he stepped over the ledge, jumped down into the room, and walked to the door. I thought he was on his way to the library, and followed him, determined, if he went up the stair, not to take one step after him. He turned, however, neither toward the library nor the stair, but to a little door that gave upon a grass-patch in a nook between two portions of the rambling old house. I made haste to open it for him. He stepped out into its creeper-covered porch, and stood looking at the rain, which fell like a huge thin cataract; I stood in the door behind him. The second flash came, and was followed by a lengthened roll of more distant thunder. He turned his head over his shoulder and looked at me, as much as to say, "You hear that?" then swivelled it round again, and anew contemplated the weather, apparently with approbation. So human were his pose and carriage and the way he kept turning his head, that I remarked almost involuntarily,

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