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Translated by W. J. Strachan

London

Prologue

I cannot tell my story without going a long way back. If it were possible I would go back much farther still to the very earliest years of my childhood and beyond them to my family origins.

When poets write novels they are apt to behave as if they were gods, with the power to look beyond and comprehend any human story and serve it up as if the Almighty himself, omnipresent, were relating it in all its naked truth. That I am no more able to do than the poets. But my story is more important to me than any poet's story to him, for it is my own — and it is the story of a human being — not an invented, idealised person but a real, live, unique being. What constitutes a real, live human being is more of a mystery than ever these days, and men — each one of whom is a valuable, unique experiment on the part of nature — are shot down wholesale. If, however, we were not something more than unique human beings and each man jack of us could really be dismissed from this world with a bullet, there would be no more point in relating stories at all. But evcpy man is not only himself; he is also the unique, particular, always significant and remarkable point where the phenomena of the world intersect once and for all and never again. That is why every man's story

is important, eternal, sacred; and why every man while he lives and fulfils the will of nature is a wonderful creature, deserving the utmost attention. In each individual the spirit is made -flesh, in each one the whole of creation suffers, in each one a Saviour is crucified.

Few people nowadays know what man is. Many feel it intuitively and die more easily for that reason, just as I shall die more easily when I have completed this story.

I cannot call myself a scholar. I have always been and still am a seeker but I no longer do my seeking among the stars or in books. I am beginning to hear the lessons which whisper in my blood. Mine is not a pleasant story, it does not possess the gentle harmony of invented tales; like the lives of all men who have given up trying to deceive themselves, it is a mixture of nonsense and chaos, madness and dreams.

The life of every man is a way to himself, an attempt at a way, the suggestion of a path. No man has ever been utterly himself, yet every man strives to be so, the dull, the intelligent, each one as best he can. Each man to the end of his days carries round with him vestiges of his birth — the slime and egg-shells of the primeval world. There are many who never become human; they remain frogs, lizards, ants. Many men are human beings above and fish below. Yet each one represents an attempt on the part of nature to create a human being. We enjoy a common origin in our mothers; we all come from the same pit. But each individual, who is himself an experimental throw from the depths, strives towards his own goal. We can understand each other; but each person is able to interpret himself to himself alone.

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Two Worlds

I begin my story with an event from the time when I was ten years old, attending the local grammar school in our small country town.

I can still catch the fragrance of many things which stir me with feelings of melancholy and send delicious shivers of delight through me — dark and sunlit streets, houses and towers, clock chimes and people's faces, rooms full of comfort and warm hospitality, rooms full of secret and profound, ghostly fears. It is a world that savours of warm corners, rabbits, servant girls, household remedies and dried fruit. It was the meeting-place of two worlds; day and night came thither from two opposite poles.

There was the world of my parents' house, or rather it was even more circumscribed and embraced only my parents themselves. This world was familiar to me in almost every aspect — it meant mother and father, love and severity, model behaviour and school. It was a world of quiet brilliance, clarity and cleanliness; in it gentle and friendly conversation, washed hands, clean clothes and good manners were the order of the day. In this world the morning hymn was sung, Christmas celebrated. Through it ran straight lines and paths that led into the

future; here were duty and guilt, bad conscience and

confessions, forgiveness and good resolutions, love and reverence, wisdom and Bible readings. In this world you had to conduct yourself so that life should be pure, unsullied, beautiful and Well-ordered.

The other world, however, also began in the middle of our own house and was completely different; it smelt different, spoke a different language, made different claims and promises. This second world was peopled with servant girls and workmen, ghost stories and scandalous rumours, a gay tide of monstrous, intriguing, frightful, mysterious things; it included the slaughter-house and the prison, drunken and scolding women, cows in labour, foundered horses, tales of housebreaking, murder and suicide. All these attractive and hideous,

wild and cruel things were on every side, in the next street, the neighbouring house. Policemen and tramps moved about in it, drunkards beat their wives, bunches of young women poured out of the factories in the evening, old women could put a spell on you and make you ill; thieves lived in the wood; incendiaries were caught by mounted gendarmes. Everywhere you could smell this vigorous, second world — everywhere, that is, except in our house where my mother and father lived. There it was all goodness. It was wonderful to be living in a house in a reign of peace, order, tranquillity, duty and good conscience, forgiveness and love — but it was no less wonderful to know there was the other, the loud and shrill, sullen and violent world from which you could dart back to your mother in one leap.

The odd thing about it was that these worlds should border on each other so closely. When, for example, our

servant Lina sat by the door in the living-room at evening prayers and joined in the hymn in her dear voice, her freshly washed hands folded on her smoothed down pinafore, she belonged wholly and utterly to mother and father, to us, the world of light and righteousness. But when in the kitchen or woodshed immediately afterwards she told me the story of the little headless man or started bickering with her neighbours in the little butcher's shop, she became a different person, belonged to another world and was veiled in mystery. And it was the same with everybody, most of all with myself. Doubtless I was part of the world of light and righteousness as the child of my parents, but wherever I listened or directed my gaze I found the other thing and I lived half in the other world, although it was often strangely alien to me and I inevitably suffered from panic and a bad conscience. Indeed at times I preferred life in the forbidden world and my return to the world of light — necessary and worthy though it might be — was often almost like a return something less attractive, something both more drab and tedious. I was often conscious that my destiny in life was to become like my father and mother; pure, righteous and disciplined; but that was a long way ahead; first one had to sit studying at school, do tests and examinations, and the way always

led through and past the other, dark world and it was not impossible that one might remain permanently in it. I had read, with passionate interest, stories of prodigal sons to whom this had happened. There was always the return to their father and the path of righteousness that was so fine and redeeming that I felt convinced that this

alone was the right, good, worthy thing; and yet I found the part of the story which was played among the wicked and lost souls far more, alluring. *If it had been permissible to speak out and confess, I should have admitted that it often seemed a shame to me that the Prodigal Son should atone and be 'found' again — though this feeling was only vaguely present deep down within me like a presentiment or possibility. When I pictured the devil to myself, I found no difficulty in visualizing him in the street below, disguised or undisguised, or at the fair or in a tavern but never at home.

My sisters belonged likewise to the world of light. It often seemed to me that they were closer in temperament to father and mother, better and more refined and with fewer faults than I. Of course they had their defects and their vagaries but these did not appear to me to go very deep. It was not as with me whose contact with evil could become so oppressive and painful and to whom the dark world lay so much closer. My sisters, like my parents, were to be spared and respected, and if one quarrelled with them one always felt in the wrong afterwards; as if one were the instigator, who must crave forgiveness. For in offending my sisters, I was offending my parents, which made me guilty of a breach of good conduct. There were secrets that I would have been less reluctant to tell the most reprobate street urchin than my sisters. On good days when everything seemed light and my conscience in good order, I enjoyed playing with them, being good and kind to them and seeing myself sharing their aura of nobility. It was like a foretaste of being an angel I That was the highest thing we

could conceive of and we thought it would be sweet and wonderful to be angels, surrounded with sweet music and fragrance reminiscent of Christmas and happiness. How rarely did such hours and days come along!

I would often be engaged in some harmless and authorized game which became too exciting and vigorous for my sisters and led to squabbles and misery, and when I lost my temper I was terrible and did and said things that seemed so depraved to me that they seared my heart even as I was in the act of doing and saying them. These occasions were followed by gloomy hours of sorrow and penitence and the painful moment when I begged forgiveness and then, once again, a beam of light, a tranquil, grateful unclouded goodness for hours — or moments as the case might be.

I attended the local grammar school. The mayor's son and the head forester's son were in my class and sometimes joined me. They were wild fellows, yet they belonged to the 'respectable' world. But I also had dose relations with neighbours' sons, village lads on whom

we normally looked down. It is with one of these that my story begins

One half-holiday — I was little more than ten years old — I was playing around with two boys from the neighbourhood. A bigger boy joined us, a rough, burly lad of about thirteen from the village school, the tailor's son. His father drank, and the whole family had a bad name. I knew Franz Kromer well, and went about in fear of him so that I felt very uneasy when he came along. He had already acquired grown-up ways and imitated the walk and speech of the young factory workers. With him

as ringleader we climbed down the river bank near the bridge and hid ourselves away from the world under the first arch. The narrow strip between the vaulted bridge and the lazily flowing river consisted of nothing but general rubbish and broken pots, tangles of rusty barbed

wire and similar jetsam. Occasionally we came across things we could make use of. We had to comb these stretches of bank under Franz Kromer's orders and show him our discoveries. These he either kept himself or threw into the water. We were told to notice whether there were any items made of lead, brass or tin He retained these together with an old comb made of horn. I was very uncomfortable in his presence, not because I knew my father would forbid this relationship but out of fear of Franz himself, but I was grateful for being included, and treated like the others. He gave the orders and we obeyed as if it was an old custom, although it was my first time.

At length we sat down on the ground; Franz spat into the water and looked like a grown-up; he spat through a gap between his teeth and scored a hit wherever he aimed. A conversation started and the boys boasted about their grand deeds and beastly tricks. I remained silent and yet feared to offend by my silence and incur Kromer's wrath. Both my comrades had made up to him, and avoided me from the start. I was a stranger among them and felt that my clothes and manners were taken as a kind of challenge. Franz could not possibly have any love for me, a grammar schoor boy and a gentleman's son and I was in no doubt that the other

two, if it came to it, would disown and desert me.

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TWO WORLDS

Finally, out of sheer nervousness, I began to talk. I invented a long story of robbery, in which I featured as the hero. One night in the corner by the mill a friend and I had stolen a whole sackful of apples, not just ordinary apples but pippins, golden pippins of the best kind at that. I was taking refuge in my story from the dangers of the moment and found no difficulty in inventing and relating it. In order not to dry up too soon and perhaps become involved in something worse, I gave full rein to my narrative powers. One of us, I reported, had always stood guard while the other sat in the tree and chucked the apples down, and the sack had got so heavy that in the end we had to open it and leave half behind, but we came back half an hour later and fetched them too.

I hoped for some applause at the end of my story; I had warmed up to the narrative at last, carried away by my own eloquence. The two smaller boys were silent, waiting, but Franz Kromer gave me a penetrating look through his narrowH. eyes. "Is that yarn true?" he asked in a menacing tone.

"Yes," I said.

"Really and truly?"

"Yes, really and truly," I asserted defiantly while I choked inwardly with fear.

"Can you swear to it?"

I was very afraid but I said 'Yes' without hesitation.

"Hand on your heart?"

"Hand on my heart;"

"Right then," he said and turned away.

I thought this was all very satisfactory and I was glad

when he got up and turned to go home. When we were on the bridge I ventured timidly that I must go home.

"No desperate hurry/' Franz laughed. "We go the same way."

He sauntered along slowly and I did not dare to go .ahead, but he was in fact going in the direction of our house. When we arrived, and I saw our front door and the fat doorknocker, the sun in the windows and the curtains in my mother's room, I breathed a sigh of relief. Back home I O good, blessed home-coming back to the world of light and peace I

When I had quickly opened the door and slipped in ready to slam it behind me, Franz Kromer edged in too. In the cool, gloomy paved passage which was lit solely from the courtyard he stood close to me and said in a low voice, "No hurry, you I "

I looked at him terrified. His grip on my arm was like a vice. I tried to guess what was going on in his mind and whether he was going to do me some mischief. If I were to let out a loud and vigorous shriek would some one above be quick enough to save me? But I gave up the idea.

"What is it?" I asked, "what do you want?"

"Oh nothing much, I merely wanted to ask you some-thing. The others needn't hear."

"Well? What do you want me to tell you? I must go up, you know."

"I suppose you know who owns the orchard by the corner mill?"

"No, I don't. The miller I think."

Franz had put his arm round me and drawn me close