BESIDE STILL WATERS

By

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"I will run the way of Thy commandments;
when Thou hast set my heart at liberty."

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THE UPTON LETTERS

FROM A COLLEGE WINDOW

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Beside Still Waters

I

HUGH NEVILLE was fond of tender and minute retrospect, and often indulged himself, in lonely hours, with the meditative pleasures of memory. To look back into the old years was to him like gazing into a misty place, with sudden and bright glimpses, and then the cloud closed in again; but it was not only with his own life that he concerned himself; he liked to trace in fancy his father's eager boyhood, brought up as he had been in a great manufacturing town, by a mother of straitened means, who yet maintained, among all her restrictions, a careful tradition of gentle blood and honourable descent. The children of that household had been nurtured with no luxuries and few enjoyments. Every pound of the small income had had its appointed use; but being, as they were, ardent, emotional natures, they had contrived to extract the best kind of pleasure out

of books, art, and music; and the only trace that survived in Hugh's father of the old narrow days, was a deep-seated hatred of wastefulness and luxury, which, in a man of generous nature, produced certain anomalies, hard for his children, living in comparative wealth and ease, to interpret. His father, the boy observed, was liberal to a fault in large matters, but scrupulously and needlessly particular about small expenses. He would take the children on a foreign tour, and then practise an elaborate species of discomfort, in an earnest endeavour to save some minute disbursements. He would give his son a magnificent book, and chide him because he cut, instead of untying, the string of the parcel. Long after, the boy, disentangling his father's early life in diaries and letters, would wish, with a wistful regret, that he had only had the clue to this earlier; he would have sympathised, he thought, with the idea that lay beneath the little economies, instead of fretting over them, and discussing them rebelliously with his sisters. His father was a man of almost passionate affections; there was nothing in the world that he more desired than the company and the sympathy of his children; but he had, besides this, an intense and tremulous sense of responsibility towards them. He attached an undue importance to small indications of character;

and thus the children were seldom at ease with their father, because he rebuked them constantly, and found frequent fault, doing almost violence to his tenderness, not from any pleasure in censoriousness, but from a terror, that was almost morbid, of the consequences of the unchecked development of minute tendencies.

Hugh's mother was of a very different disposition; she was fully as affectionate as his father, but of a brighter, livelier, more facile nature; she came of a wealthy family, and had never known the hard discipline from which his father had suffered. She was a good many years younger than her husband; they were united by the intensest affection; but while she devoted herself to him with a perfect understanding of, and sympathy with, his somewhat jealous and puritanical nature, she did not escape the severity of his sense of responsibility, and his natural instinct for attempting to draw those nearest to him into the circle of his high, if rigid, standards. Long afterwards, Hugh grew to discern a greater largeness and liberality in her methods of dealing with life and other natures than his father had displayed; and no shadow of any kind had ever clouded his love and admiration for his mother; his love indeed could not have deepened; but he came gradually to discern the sweet and patient wisdom which,

after many sorrows, nobly felt and ardently endured, filled and guided her large and loving heart.

His father, after a highly distinguished academical career, entered the Church; and at the time of Hugh's birth he held an important country living, together with one of the Archdeaconries of the diocese.

Hugh was the eldest child. Two other children, both sisters, were born into the household. Hugh in later days loved to trace in family papers the full and vivid life which had surrounded his unconscious self. His mother had been married young, and was scarcely more than a girl when he was born; his father was already a man grave beyond his years, full of affairs, and constantly occupied. But his melancholy moods, and they were many, had drawn him to value with a pathetic intentness the quiet family life. Hugh could trace in old diaries the days his father and mother had spent, the walks they had taken, the books they had read together. There seemed for him to brood over those days, in imagination, a sort of singular brightness. He always thought of the old life as going on somewhere, behind the pine woods, if he could only find it. He could never feel of it as wholly past, but rather as possessing the living force of some romantic book, into the atmos-

phere of which it was possible to plunge at will.

And then his own life; how vivid and delicate the perceptions were! Looking back, it always seemed to be summer in those days. He could remember the grassy walks of the pleasant garden, which wound among the shrubberies; the old-fashioned flowers, sweet-williams and Canterbury-bells, that filled the deep borders; the rose-garden, with the pointed white buds, or the large pink roses, full of scent, that would fall at a touch and leave nothing but an orange-seeded stump. But there had been no thought of pathos to him in those years, as there came to be afterwards, in the fading of sweet things; it was all curious, delightful, strange. The impressions of sense were tyrannously strong, so that there was hardly room for reflection or imagination; there was the huge chestnut covered with white spires, that sent out so heavy a fragrance in the spring that it was at last cut down; but the felling of the tree was a mere delightful excitement, not a thing to be grieved over. The country was very wild all round, with tracts of heath and sand. The melodious buzzing of nightjars in hot mid-summer evenings, as they swept softly along the heather, lived constantly in his memory. In the moorland, half a mile away, stood some brick-kilns,

strange plastered cones, with blackened tops, from which oozed a pungent smoke; those were too terrible to be visited alone; but as he walked past with his nurse, it was delightful and yet appalling to look into the door of the kiln, and see its fiery, glowing heart, Two things in particular the boy grew to love; one was the sight of water in all its forms; a streamlet near the house trickled out of a bog, full of cotton-grass; there were curious plants to be found here, a low pink marsh-bugle, and the sundew, with its strange, viscid red hands extended; the stream passed by clear dark pools to a lake among the pines, and fell at the farther end down a steep cascade; the dark gliding water, the mysterious things that grew beneath, the fish that paused for an instant and were gone, had all a deep fascination for the boy, speaking, as they seemed to do, of a world near and yet how far removed from his own!

And then still more wonderingly, with a kind of interfusion of terror and mystery, did he love the woodlands of that forest country. To steal along the edge of the covert, with the trees knee-deep in fern, to hear the flies hum angrily within, to find the glade in spring carpeted with blue-bells—all these sights and sounds took hold of his childish heart with a deep passion that never left him.

All this life was, in memory, as I have said, a series of vignettes and pictures; the little dramas of the nursery, the fire that glowed in the grate, the savour of the fresh-cut bread at meal-times, the games on wet afternoons, with a tent made out of shawls and chairs, or a fort built of bricks; these were the pictures that visited Hugh in after days, small concrete things and sensations; he could trace, he often thought, in later years, that his early life had been one more of perception than anything else; sights and sounds and scents had filled his mind, to the exclusion of almost all beside. He could remember little of his relations with those about him; the figures of the family and servants were accepted as all part of the environment. The only very real figure was the old nurse, whose rare displeasure he had sorrowed over more than anything else in the world, and whose chance words, uttered to another servant and overheard by the child, that she was thinking of leaving them, had given him a deeper throb of emotion than anything he had before known, or was for many years to know.

But the time for the eager and romantic association with other people, which was to play so large a part in Hugh's life, was not yet come. People had to be taken as they came, and their value depended entirely upon their kindness or

unkindness. There was no sense of gratitude as yet, or desire to win affection. If they were kind, they were unthinkingly and instinctively liked. If they thwarted or interfered with the child's little theory of existence, his chosen amusements, his hours of leisure, his loved pursuits, they were simply obstacles around which his tiny stream of life must find its way as it best could.

There was indeed one other chief delight for the child: the ordered services of the Church hard by the house. He loved with all his heart the fallen day, the pillared vault, the high dusty cornices, the venerable scent; and the services, with their music solemn and sweet, the postures of the ministers, the faces, clothes, and habits of the congregation—all was a delightful field of pleasing experience. Yet religion was a wholly unreal thing to the child. He learned his Bible lessons and psalms; he knew the liturgy by heart; but the religious idea, the thought of God, the Christian life of effort, were all things that he merely accepted as so many facts that were taught him, but without the least interest in them, or even the shadowiest attempt to apply them to his own life. It seemed strange to Hugh when, in years long after, religion came to have so deep a meaning to him, that it should have been so entirely

a blank to him in the early days. God was no more to him than a far-off monarch; a mighty and shadowy person, very remote and powerful, but the circle of whose influence never touched his own. And yet one of the deepest desires of his father's mind had been to bring a sense of religion home to his children. Hugh used to wonder how he had missed it; but the practical application of religion, to which the Bible lessons had led up, had been to the child a mere relief from the tension of thought, because at last he had escaped from the material teaching about which he might be questioned, and which he would be expected to remember.

Personal relations, then, had scarcely existed for Hugh as a child. Older and bigger people, armed with a vague authority, had to be obeyed, and the boy had no theory which could account for their inconsequent behaviour; they were amiable or ill-humoured, just or unjust; he never attempted to criticise or condemn them by a moral standard; he simply accepted them as they were, and kept as much as possible out of the way of those who manifested sharpness or indifference. With children of his own age it was in many ways the same, though there seemed to the boy to be more hope of influencing their behaviour; threats, anger, promises, compliance could be applied; but of

the affection that simply desired to please the object of its love, the boy knew nothing. Once or twice he went away from home on a visit, and because he wept on his departure, he was supposed to have a tender and emotional nature; it was not tenderness, at least not tenderness for others, that made him weep. It was partly the terror of the unknown and the unfamiliar; it was partly the interruption to the even tenor of his life and the customary engagements of his day; and in this respect the boy had what may be called a middled-aged temperament, an intense dislike of any interference with his own ways; he had no enterprise, none of the high-hearted enjoyment of novelty, unless he was surrounded by a bulwark of familiar personalities; but partly, too, his love was all given to inanimate things; and as he drove out of the gate on one of these visits, the thought that the larches of the copse should be putting out their rosy buds, the rhododendrons thrusting out their gummy, spiky cases, the stream passing slowly through its deep pools, the beehive in the little birch avenue beginning to wake to life, and that he should not be there to go his accustomed rounds, and explore all the minute events of his dear domain—it was this that

brought out the tears afresh, with a bitter, uncomforted sense of loss and bereavement.

So the early years passed for the boy, in a dream full to the brim of small wonders and fragrant mysteries. How pleasant it was to sink to sleep on summer evenings with the imagination of voyaging all night in a little boat or carriage; how delightful to wake, with the morning sun streaming in at the window, to hear the casement ivy tap on the pane, and to rehearse in the mind all the tiny pleasures of the long day! His short lessons were easy enough for the boy; he was quick and acute, and had a good memory; but he took not the smallest interest in them, except the interest of making a situation go smoothly; the only interest was in the thought of the unmolested lonely play that was to follow. He cared little for games, though they had a certain bitter excitement, the desire of emulation, the joy of triumph about them. He loved best an aimless wending from haunt to haunt, an accumulation of small treasures in places unknown to others; and, most of all, the rich sense of observation of a hundred curious and delicate things; the nests of birds in the shrubbery, the glossy cones of the young pines, the green, uncurling fingers of the bracken, the fresh green sword-grass that grew beneath

the firs; he did not care to know the nature of the reasons of these things; it was enough simply to see them, to explore them with restless fingers, to recognise their scents, hues, and savours, with the sharp and unblunted perceptions of childhood.

Then came the intellectual awakening. Hugh's mother, who had an extraordinary gift for improvisation, began to tell the children stories in the nursery evenings; and these tales of giants and fairies grew to have an extreme fascination for the child; not that he peopled his own world with them, as some imaginative children do; the boy's perceptions were too definite for that; such beings belonged to a different region; he had no idea that they existed or had ever existed. They belonged to the story world, which was associated in his mind with bright fires and toys put away, when he nestled as close as he could to his mother's knee, with her hand in both his own, exploring every ring and every finger, till he could recall, many years after, each turn and curve, and even each finger-nail of those dear hands. And then at last came the supremest joy of all; the children used to be summoned down to their mother's room, and she began to read aloud *Ivanhoe* to them; and then indeed a new

world, a world that had really existed sprang to light.

Hugh used to wonder afterwards how much he had really understood of what was read; but the whole thing seemed absolutely alive to him; his pictorial fancy came into play, and the details of woods and heaths that he knew so well began to serve him in good stead; and then the child, who had before thought of reading as merely a tiresome art that he was forced to practise, found that it was the key that admitted him into this wonderful world. It did not indeed destroy his relish for the outer world of nature, for at all hours of the day, when it was possible to slip out of doors, he went his solitary way, looking, looking; until every tree and flower-border and thicket of the small domain became so sharply imprinted upon the mind that, years after, he could walk in memory through the sunny garden, and recall the minutest details with an astonishing accuracy.

But books became for the child a large part of his life. It was a story that he desired, something that should create a scene for him, personalities like or unlike his own, whose deeds and words he could survey, leaning, so it seemed to him, from a magic casement into the new scene. His father, whose taste was for the improving in literature, was willing enough that the boy