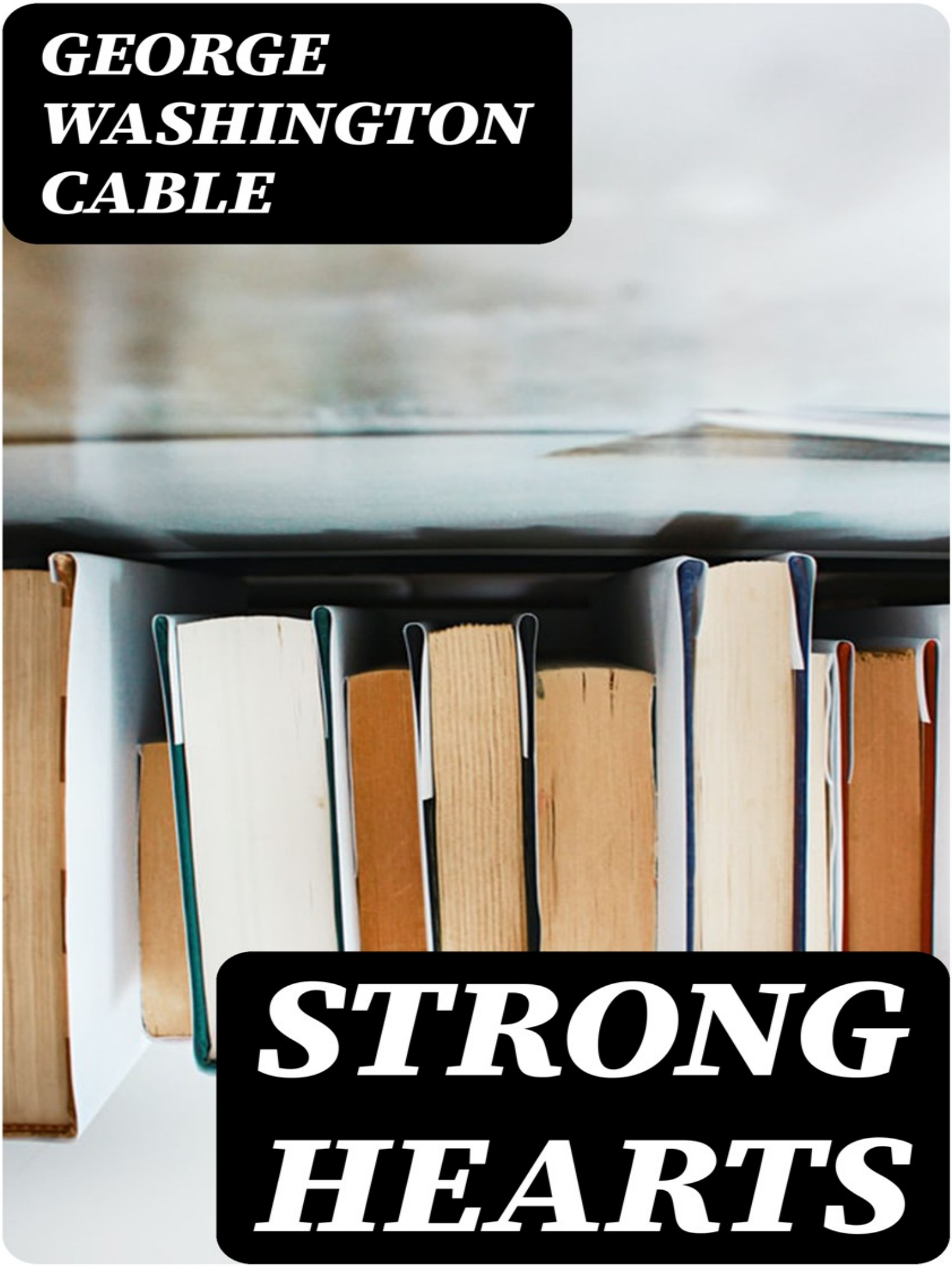
GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE



STRONG HEARTS

GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE

STRONG HEARTS

George Washington Cable

Strong Hearts

EAN 8596547127185

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I

Table of Contents

"The dream of Pharaoh is one. The seven kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one.... And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established."...

In other words: Behind three or four subtitles and changes of time, scene, characters, this tale of strong hearts is one. And for that the tale is tripled or quadrupled unto you three or four times (the number will depend); it is because in each of its three or four aspects—or separate stories, if you insist—it sets forth, in heroic natures and poetic fates, a principle which seems to me so universal that I think Joseph would say of it also, as he said to the sovereign of Egypt, "The thing is established of God."

I know no better way to state this principle, being a man, not of letters, but of commerce (and finance), than to say—what I fear I never should have learned had I not known the men and women I here tell of—that religion without poetry is as dead a thing as poetry without religion. In our practical use of them, I mean; their infusion into all our doing and being. As dry as a mummy, great Joseph would say.

Shall I be more explicit? Taking that great factor of life which men, with countless lights, shades, narrownesses and breadths of meaning, call Religion, and taking it in the largest sense we can give it; in like manner taking Poetry in

the largest sense possible; this cluster of tales is one, because from each of its parts, with no argument but the souls and fates they tell of, it illustrates the indivisible twinship of Poetry and Religion; a oneness of office and of culmination, which, as they reach their highest plane, merges them into identity. Is that any clearer? You see I am no scientist or philosopher, and I do not stand at any dizzy height, even in my regular business of banking and insurance, except now and then when my colleagues of the clearing-house or board want something drawn up —"Whereas, the inscrutable wisdom of Providence has taken from among us"—something like that.

I tell the stories as I saw them occur. I tell them for your entertainment; the truth they taught me you may do what you please with. It was exemplified in some of these men and women by their failure to incarnate it. Others, through the stained glass of their imperfect humanity, showed it forth alive and alight in their own souls and bodies. One there was who never dreamed he was a bright example of anything, in a world which, you shall find him saying, God—or somebody—whoever is responsible for civilization—had made only too good and complex and big for him. We may hold that to make life a perfect, triumphant poem we must keep in beautiful, untyrannous subordination every impulse of mere self- provision, whether earthly or heavenly, while at the same time we give life its equatorial circumference. I know that he so believed. Yet, under no better conscious motive than an impulse of pure self-preservation, finding his spiritual breadth and stature too small for half the practical demands of such large theories, he humbly set to work to

narrow down the circumference of his life to limits within which he might hope to turn *some* of its daily issues into good poetry. This is the main reason why I tell of him first, and why the parts of my story—or the stories—do not fall into chronological order. I break that order with impunity, and adopt that which I believe to be best in the interest of Poetry and themselves. Only do not think hard if I get more interested in the story, or stories, than in the interpretation thereof.

II

Table of Contents

The man of whom I am speaking was a tallish, slim young fellow, shaped well enough, though a trifle limp for a Louisianian in the Mississippi (Confederate) cavalry. Some camp wag had fastened on him the nickname of "Crackedfiddle." Our acquaintance began more than a year before Lee's surrender; but Gregory came out of the war without any startling record, and the main thing I tell of him occurred some years later.

I never saw him under arms or in uniform. I met him first at the house of a planter, where I was making the most of a flesh-wound, and was, myself, in uniform simply because I hadn't any other clothes. There were pretty girls in the house, and as his friends and fellow-visitors—except me—wore the gilt bars of commissioned rank on their gray collars, and he, as a private, had done nothing glorious, his

appearance was always in civilian's dress. Black he wore, from head to foot, in the cut fashionable in New Orleans when the war brought fashion to a stand: coat-waist high, skirt solemnly long; sleeves and trousers small at the hands and feet, and puffed out—phew! in the middle. The whole scheme was dandyish, dashing, zou-zou; and when he appeared in it, dark, good-looking, loose, languorous, slow to smile and slower to speak, it was—confusing.

One sunset hour as I sat alone on the planter's veranda immersed in a romance, I noticed, too late to offer any serviceable warning, this impressive black suit and its ungenerously nicknamed contents coming in at the gate unprotected. Dogs, in the South, in those times, were not the caressed and harmless creatures now so common. A Mississippi planter's watch-dogs were kept for their vigilant and ferocious hostility to the negro of the quarters and to all strangers. One of these, a powerful, notorious, bloodthirsty brute, long-bodied, deer-legged—you may possibly know that big breed the planters called the "cur-dog" and prized so highly -darted out of hiding and silently sprang at the visitor's throat. Gregory swerved, and the brute's fangs, whirling by his face, closed in the sleeve and rent it from shoulder to elbow. At the same time another, one of the old "bear-dog" breed, was coming as fast as the light block and chain he had to drag would allow him. Gregory neither spoke, nor moved to attack or retreat. At my outcry the dogs slunk away, and he asked me, diffidently, for a thing which was very precious in those days—pins.

But he was quickly surrounded by pitying eyes and emotional voices, and was coaxed into the house, where the

young ladies took his coat away to mend it. While he waited for it in my room I spoke of the terror so many brave men had of these fierce home-guards. I knew one such beast that was sired of a wolf. He heard me with downcast eyes, at first with evident pleasure, but very soon quite gravely.

"They can afford to fear dogs," he replied, "when they've got no other fear." And when I would have it that he had shown a stout heart he smiled ruefully.

"I do everything through weakness," he soliloquized, and, taking my book, opened it as if to dismiss our theme. But I bade him turn to the preface, where heavily scored by the same feminine hand which had written on the blank leaf opposite, "Richard Thorndyke Smith, from C.O."—we read something like this:

The seed of heroism is in all of us. Else we should not forever relish, as we do, stories of peril, temptation, and exploit. Their true zest is no mere ticklement of our curiosity or wonder, but comradeship with souls that have courage in danger, faithfulness under trial, or magnanimity in triumph or defeat. We have, moreover, it went on to say, a care for human excellence *in general*, by reason of which we want not alone our son, or cousin, or sister, but *man everywhere*, the norm, *man*, to be strong, sweet, and true; and reading stories of such, we feel this wish rebound upon us as duty sweetened by a new hope, and have a new yearning for its fulfilment in ourselves.

"In short," said I, closing the book, "those imaginative victories of soul over circumstance become essentially ours by sympathy and emulation, don't they?"

"O yes," he sighed, and added an indistinct word about "spasms of virtue." But I claimed a special charm and use for unexpected and detached heroisms, be they fact or fiction. "If adventitious virtue," I argued, "can spring up from unsuspected seed and without the big roots of character—"

"You think," interrupted Gregory, "there's a fresh chance for me."

"For all the common run of us!" I cried. "Why not? And even if there isn't, hasn't it a beauty and a value? Isn't a rose a rose, on the bush or off? Gold is gold wherever you find it, and the veriest spasm of true virtue, coined into action, is true virtue, and counts. It may not work my nature's whole redemption, but it works that way, and is just so much solid help toward the whole world's uplift." I was young enough then to talk in that manner, and he actually took comfort in my words, confessing that it had been his way to count a good act which was not in character with its doer as something like a dead loss to everybody.

"I'm glad it's not," he said, "for I reckon my ruling motive is always fear."

"Was it fear this evening?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "it was. It was fear of a coward's name, and a sort of abject horror of being one."

"Too big a coward inside," I laughed, "to be a big stout coward outside," and he assented.

"Smith," he said, and paused long, "if I were a hard drinker and should try to quit, it wouldn't be courage that would carry me through, but fear; quaking fear of a drunkard's life and a drunkard's death."

I was about to rejoin that the danger was already at his door, but he read the warning accusation in my eye.

"I'm afraid so," he responded. "I had a strange experience once," he presently added, as if reminded of it by what we had last said. "I took a prisoner."

"By the overwhelming power of fear?" I inquired.

"Partly, yes. I saw him before he saw me and I felt that if I didn't take him he'd either take me or shoot me, so I covered him and he surrendered. We were in an old pine clearing grown up with oak bushes."

"Would it have been less strange," I inquired, "if you had been in an old oak clearing grown up with pine bushes?"

"No, he'd have got away just the same."

"What! you didn't bring him in?"

"Only part of the way. Then he broke and ran."

"And you had to shoot him?"

"No, I didn't even shoot at him. I couldn't, Smith; *he looked so much like me*. It was like seeing my own ghost. All the time I had him something kept saying to me, 'You're your own prisoner—you're your own prisoner.' And—do you know?—that thing comes back to me now every time I get into the least sort of a tight place!"

"I wish it would come to me," I responded. A slave girl brought his coat and our talk remained unfinished until five years after the war.

III

Table of Contents

Gregory had been brought up on the shore of Mississippi Sound, a beautiful region fruitful mainly in apathy of character. He was a skilled lover of sail-boats. When we all got back to New Orleans, paroled, and cast about for a living in the various channels "open to gentlemen," he, largely, I think, owing to his timid notion of his worth, went into the rough business of owning and sailing a small, handsome schooner in the "Lake trade," which, you know, includes Mississippi Sound. I married, and for some time he liked much to come and see us—on rainy evenings, when he knew we should be alone. He was in love yet, as he had been when we were fellow-absentees from camp, and with the same girl. But his passion had never presumed to hope, and the girl was of too true a sort ever to thrust hope upon him. What his love lacked in courage it made up in constancy, however, and morning, noon, and night—sometimes midnight too, I venture to say—his all too patient heart had bowed mutely down toward its holy city across the burning sands of his diffidence. When another fellow stepped in and married her, he simply loved on, in the same innocent, dumb, harmless way as before. He gave himself some droll consolations. One of these was a pretty, sloop-rigged sail-boat, trim and swift, on which he lavished the tendernesses he knew he should never bestow upon any living she. He named her Sweetheart; a general term; but he knew that we all knew it meant the mender of his coat. By and by his visits fell off and I met him oftenest on the street. Sometimes we stopped for a moment's sidewalk

chat, New Orleans fashion, and I still envied the clear bronze of his fine skin, which the rest of us had soon lost. But after a while certain changes began to show for the worse, until one day in the summer of the fifth year he tried to hurry by me. I stopped him, and was thinking what a handsome fellow he was even yet, with such a quiet, modest fineness about him, when he began, with a sudden agony of face, "My schooner's sold for debt! You know the reason; I've seen you read it all over me every time we have met, these twelve months—O *don't* look at me!"

His slim, refined hands—he gave me both?-were clammy and tremulous. "Yes," he babbled on, "it's a fixed fact, Smith; the cracked fiddle's a smashed fiddle at last!"

I drew him out of the hot sun and into a secluded archway, he talking straight on with a speed and pitiful grandiloquence totally unlike him. "I've finished all the easy parts—the first ecstasies of pure license— the long down-hill plunge, with all its mad exhilarations—the wild vanity of venturing and defying—that bigness of the soul's experiences which makes even its anguish seem finer than the old bitterness of tame propriety—they are all behind me, now?-the valley of horrors is before! You can't understand it, Smith. O you can't understand——"

O couldn't I! And, anyhow, one does not have to put himself through a whole criminal performance to apprehend its spiritual experiences. I understood all, and especially what he unwittingly betrayed even now; that deep thirst for the dramatic element in one's own life, which, when social conformity fails to supply it, becomes, to an eager soul, sin's cunningest allurement.