



Chapter 16

Beyond these Voices

“I didn’t quite catch what you said!” were the next words that reached my ear, but certainly not in the voice either of Sylvie or of Bruno, whom I could just see, through the crowd of guests, standing by the piano, and listening to the Count’s song. Mein Herr was the speaker. “I didn’t quite catch what you said!” he repeated. But I’ve no doubt you take my view of it. Thank you very much for your kind attention. There is only but one verse left to be sung!” These last words were not in the gentle voice of Mein Herr, but in the deep bass of the French Count. And, in the silence that followed, the final stanza of “Tottles” rang through the room.

See now this couple settled down
In quiet lodgings, out of town:
Submissively the tearful wife
Accepts a plain and humble life:
Yet begs one boon on bended knee:
“My ducky-darling, don’t resent it!
Mamma might come for two or three--”
“NEVER!” yelled Tottles. And he meant it.

The conclusion of the song was followed by quite a chorus of thanks and compliments from all parts of the room, which the gratified singer responded to by bowing low in all directions. “It is to me a great privilege”, he said to Lady Muriel, “to have met with this so marvellous a song. The accompaniment to him is so strange, so mysterious: it is as if a new music were to be invented. I will play him once again so as that to show you what I mean.” He returned to the piano, but the song had vanished.

The bewildered singer searched through the heap of music lying on an adjoining table, but it was not there, either. Lady Muriel helped in the search: others soon joined: the excitement grew. “What can have become of it?” exclaimed Lady Muriel. Nobody knew: one thing only was certain, that no one had been near the piano since the Count had sung the last verse of the song.

“Nevare mind him!” he said, most good-naturedly. “I shall give it you with memory alone!” He sat down, and began vaguely fingering the notes; but nothing resembling the tune

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came out. Then he, too, grew excited. "But what oddness! How much of singularity! That I might lose, not the words alone, but the tune also--that is quite curious, I suppose?"

We all supposed it, heartily.

"It was that sweet little boy, who found it for me," the Count suggested. "Quite perhaps he is the thief?"

"Of course he is!" cried Lady Muriel. "Bruno! Where are you, my darling?"

But no Bruno replied: it seemed that the two children had vanished as suddenly, and as mysteriously, as the song.

"They are playing us a trick?" Lady Muriel gaily exclaimed. "This is only an *ex tempore* game of Hide-and-Seek! That little Bruno is an embodied Mischief!"

The suggestion was a welcome one to most of us, for some of the guests were beginning to look decidedly uneasy. A general search was set on foot with much enthusiasm: curtains were thrown back and shaken, cupboards opened, and ottomans turned over; but the number of possible hiding-places proved to be strictly limited; and the search came to an end almost as soon as it had begun.

"They must have run out, while we were wrapped up in the song," Lady Muriel said, addressing herself to the Count, who seemed more agitated than the others; "and no doubt they've found their way back to the housekeeper's room."

"Not by this door!" was the earnest protest of a knot of two or three gentlemen, who had been grouped round the door (one of them actually leaning against it) for the last half-hour, as they declared. "This door has not been opened since the song began!"

An uncomfortable silence followed this announcement. Lady Muriel ventured no further conjectures, but quietly examined the fastenings of the windows, which opened as doors. They all proved to be well fastened, inside.

Not yet at the end of her resources, Lady Muriel rang the bell. "Ask the housekeeper to step here, she said, "and to bring the children's walking-things with her."

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"I've brought them, my Lady," said the obsequious housekeeper, entering after another minute of silence. "I thought the young lady would have come to my room to put on her boots. Here's your boots, my love' she added cheerfully, looking in all directions for the children. There was no answer, and she turned to Lady Muriel with a puzzled smile. "Have the little darlings hid themselves?"

"I don't see them, just now," Lady Muriel replied, rather evasively. "You can leave their things here, Wilson. I'll dress them, when they're ready to go."

The two little hats, and Sylvie's walking-jacket, were handed round among the ladies, with many exclamations of delight. There certainly was a sort of witchery of beauty about them. Even the little boots did not miss their share of favourable criticism. "Such natty little things!" the musical young lady exclaimed, almost fondling them as she spoke. "And what tiny tiny feet they must have!"

Finally, the things were piled together on the centre-ottoman, and the guests, despairing of seeing the children again, began to wish good-night and leave the house.

There were only some eight or nine left--to whom the Count was explaining, for the twentieth time, how he had had his eye on the children during the last verse of the song; how he had then glanced round the room, to see what effect "de great chest-note" had had upon his audience; and how, when he looked back again, they had both disappeared--when exclamations of dismay began to be heard on all sides, the Count hastily bringing his story to an end to join in the outcry.

The walking-things had all disappeared!

After the utter failure of the search for the children there was a very half-hearted search made for their apparel. The remaining guests seemed only too glad to get away, leaving only the Count and our four selves.

The Count sank into an easy-chair, and panted a little.

Who then are these dear children, I pray you?" he said. Why come they, why go they, in this so little ordinary a fashion? That the music should make itself vanish--that the hats, the boots, should make themselves to vanish--how is it, I pray you?"

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"I've no idea where they are!" was all I could say, on finding myself appealed to, by general consent, for an explanation.

The Count seemed about to ask further questions, but checked himself.

"The hour makes himself to become late," he said. "I wish to you a very good night, my Lady. I betake myself to my bed--to dream--if that indeed I be not dreaming now!" And he hastily left the room.

"Stay awhile, stay awhile!" said the Earl, as I was about to follow the Count. "You are not a guest, you know! Arthur's friend is at home here!"

"Thanks!" I said, as with true English instincts, we drew our chairs together round the fire-place, though no fire was burning--Lady Muriel having taken the heap of music on her knee, to have one more search for the strangely-vanished song.

"Don't you sometimes feel a wild longing", she said addressing herself to me, "to have something more to do with your hands, while you talk, than just holding a cigar, and now and then knocking off the ash? Oh, I know all that you're going to say!" (This was to Arthur, who appeared about to interrupt her.) "The Majesty of Thought supersedes the work of the fingers. A Man's severe thinking, plus the shaking-off a cigar-ash, comes to the same total as a Woman's trivial fancies, plus the most elaborate embroidery. That's your sentiment, isn't it, only better expressed?"

Arthur looked into the radiant, mischievous face, with a grave and very tender smile. "Yes," he said resignedly: that is my sentiment, exactly. "

"Rest of body, and activity of mind," I put in. "Some writer tells us that is the acme of human happiness."

"Plenty of bodily rest, at any rate!" Lady Muriel agreed, glancing at the three recumbent figures around her. "But what you call activity of mind--"

"--is the privilege of young Physicians only," said the Earl. "We old men have no claim to be active. What can old man do but die?"

"A good many other things, I should hope," Arthur said earnestly.

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“Well, maybe. Still you have the advantage of me in any ways, dear boy! Not only that your day is dawning while mine is setting, but your interest in Life--somehow I ca’n’t help envying you that. It will be many a year before you lose your hold of that.”

“Yet surely many human interests survive human Life?” I said.

“Many do, no doubt. And some forms of Science; but only some, I think. Mathematics, for instance: that seems to possess an endless interest: one ca’n’t imagine any form of Life, or any race of intelligent beings, where Mathematical truth would lose its meaning. But I fear Medicine stands on a different footing. Suppose you discover a remedy for some disease hitherto supposed to be incurable. Well, it is delightful for the moment, no doubt--full of interest--perhaps it brings you fame and fortune. But what then? Look on, a few years, into a life where disease has no existence. What is your discovery worth, then? Milton makes Jove promise too much. ‘Of so much fame in heaven expect thy need.’ Poor comfort when one’s ‘fame’ concerns matters that will have ceased to have a meaning!”

“At any rate one wouldn’t care to make any fresh medical discoveries,” said Arthur. “I see no help for that--though I shall be sorry to give up my favourite studies. Still, medicine, disease, pain, sorrow, sin--I fear they’re all linked together. Banish sin, and you banish them all!”

“Military science is a yet stronger instance,” said the Earl. Without sin, war would surely be impossible. Still any mind, that has had in this life any keen interest, not in itself sinful, will surely find itself some congenial line of work hereafter. Wellington may have no more battles to fight--and yet--

We doubt not that, for one so true,
There must be other, nobler work to do,
Than when he fought at Waterloo,
And Victor he must ever be!”

He lingered over the beautiful words, as if he loved them: and his voice, like distant music, died away into silence.

After a minute or two he began again. “If I’m not wearying you, I would like to tell you an idea of the future Life which has haunted me for years, like a sort of waking nightmare--I ca’n’t reason myself out of it.”

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“Pray do,” Arthur and I replied, almost in a breath. Lady Muriel put aside the heap of music, and folded her hands together.

“The one idea”, the Earl resumed, “that has seemed to me to overshadow all the rest, is that of Eternity--involving, as it seems to do, the necessary exhaustion of all subjects of human interest. Take Pure Mathematics, for instance--a Science independent of our present surroundings. I have studied it, myself, a little. Take the subject of circles and ellipses--what we call ‘curves of the second degree’. In a future Life, it would only be a question of so many years (or hundreds of years, if you like) for a man to work out all their properties. Then he might go to curves of the third degree. Say that took ten times as long (you see we have unlimited time to deal with). I can hardly imagine his interest in the subject holding out even for those; and, though there is no limit to the degree of the curves he might study, yet surely the time, needed to exhaust all the novelty and interest of the subject, would be absolutely finite? And so of all other branches of Science. And, when I transport myself, in thought, through some thousands or millions of years, and fancy myself possessed of as much Science as one created reason can carry, I ask myself ‘What then? With nothing more to learn, can one rest content on knowledge, for the eternity yet to be lived through?’ It has been a very wearying thought to me. I have sometimes fancied one might, in that event, say ‘It is better not to be’, and pray for personal annihilation--the Nirvana of the Buddhists.”

“But that is only half the picture,” I said. “Besides working for oneself, may there not be the helping of others?”

“Surely, surely!” Lady Muriel exclaimed in a tone of relief, looking at her father with sparkling eyes.

“Yes,” said the Earl, “so long as there were any others needing help. But, given ages and ages more, surely all created reasons would at length reach the same dead level of satiety. And then what is there to look forward to?”

“I know that weary feeling,” said the young Doctor. “I have gone through it all, more than once. Now let me tell you how I have put it to myself. I have imagined a little child, playing with toys on his nursery-floor, and yet able to reason, and to look on, thirty years ahead. Might he not say to himself ‘By that time I shall have had enough of bricks and ninepins. How weary Life will be!’ Yet, if we look forward through those thirty years, we find him a great statesman, full of interests and joys far more intense than his baby-life could give--joys wholly inconceivable to his baby-mind--joys such as no baby-language

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could in the faintest degree describe. Now, may not our life, a million years hence, have the same relation, to our life now, that the man's life has to the child's? And, just as one might try, all in vain, to express to that child, in the language of bricks and ninepins, the meaning of 'politics', so perhaps all those descriptions of Heaven, with its music, and its feasts, and its streets of gold, may be only attempts to describe, in our words, things for which we really have no words at all. Don't you think that in your picture of another life, you are in fact transplanting that child into political life, without making any allowance for his growing up?"

"I think I understand you," said the Earl. "The music of Heaven may be something beyond our powers of thought. Yet the music of Earth is sweet! Muriel, my child, sing us something before we go to bed!"

"Do," said Arthur, as he rose and lit the candles on the cottage-piano, lately banished from the drawing-room to make room for a "semi-grand". "There is a song here, that I have never heard you sing.

'Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart!' "

he read from the page he had spread open before her.

"And our little life here", the Earl went on, "is, to that grand time, like a child's summer-day! One gets tired as night draws on," he added, with a touch of sadness in his voice, "and one gets to long for bed! For those welcome words 'Come, child, 'tis bed-time!' "