



Chapter 22



Crossing the Line

“Let us lapse back again,” said Lady Muriel. “Take another cup of tea? I hope that’s sound common sense?”

“And all that strange adventure,” I thought, “has occupied the space of a single comma in Lady Muriel’s speech! A single comma, for which grammarians tell us to ‘count one!’” (I felt no doubt that the Professor had kindly put back the time for me, to the exact point at which I had gone to sleep.)

When, a few minutes afterwards, we left the house, Arthur’s first remark was certainly a strange one. “We’ve been there just twenty minutes,” he said, “and I’ve done nothing but listen to you and Lady Muriel talking: and yet, somehow, I feel exactly as if I had been talking with her for an hour at least!”

And so he had been, I felt no doubt: only, as the time had been put back to the beginning of the *tete-a-tete* he referred to, the whole of it had passed into oblivion, if not into nothingness! But I valued my own reputation for sanity too highly to venture on explaining to him what had happened.

For some cause, which I could not at the moment divine, Arthur was unusually grave and silent during our walk home. It could not be connected with Eric Lindon, I thought, as he had for some days been away in London: so that, having Lady Muriel almost ‘all to himself’— for I was only too glad to hear those two conversing, to have any wish to intrude any remarks of my own—he ought, theoretically, to have been specially radiant and contented with life. “Can he have heard any bad news?” I said to myself. And, almost as if he had read my thoughts, he spoke.

“He will be here by the last train,” he said, in the tone of one who is continuing a conversation rather than beginning one.

“Captain Lindon, do you mean?”

“Yes—Captain Lindon,” said Arthur: “I said ‘he,’ because I fancied we were talking about him. The Earl told me he comes tonight, though to-morrow is the day when he will know

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about the Commission that he's hoping for. I wonder he doesn't stay another day to hear the result, if he's really so anxious about it as the Earl believes he is."

"He can have a telegram sent after him," I said: "but it's not very soldier-like, running away from possible bad news!"

"He's a very good fellow," said Arthur: "but I confess it would be good news for me, if he got his Commission, and his Marching Orders, all at once! I wish him all happiness—with one exception. Good night!" (We had reached home by this time.) "I'm not good company to-night— better be alone."

It was much the same, next day. Arthur declared he wasn't fit for Society, and I had to set forth alone for an afternoon-stroll. I took the road to the Station, and, at the point where the road from the 'Hall' joined it, I paused, seeing my friends in the distance, seemingly bound for the same goal.

"Will you join us?" the Earl said, after I had exchanged greetings with him, and Lady Muriel, and Captain Lindon. "This restless young man is expecting a telegram, and we are going to the Station to meet it."

"There is also a restless young woman in the case," Lady Muriel added.

"That goes without saying, my child," said her father. "Women are always restless!"

"For generous appreciation of all one's best qualities," his daughter impressively remarked, "there's nothing to compare with a father, is there, Eric?"

"Cousins are not 'in it,'" said Eric: and then somehow the conversation lapsed into two duologues, the younger folk taking the lead, and the two old men following with less eager steps.

"And when are we to see your little friends again?" said the Earl. "They are singularly attractive children."

"I shall be delighted to bring them, when I can," I said! "But I don't know, myself, when I am likely to see them again."

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"I'm not going to question you," said the Earl: "but there's no harm in mentioning that Muriel is simply tormented with curiosity! We know most of the people about here, and she has been vainly trying to guess what house they can possibly be staying at."

"Some day I may be able to enlighten her: but just at present—"

"Thanks. She must bear it as best she can. I tell her it's a grand opportunity for practising patience. But she hardly sees it from that point of view. Why, there are the children!"

So indeed they were: waiting (for us, apparently) at a stile, which they could not have climbed over more than a few moments, as Lady Muriel and her cousin had passed it without seeing them. On catching sight of us, Bruno ran to meet us, and to exhibit to us, with much pride, the handle of a clasp-knife—the blade having been broken off—which he had picked up in the road.

"And what shall you use it for, Bruno?" I said.

"Don't know," Bruno carelessly replied: "must think."

"A child's first view of life," the Earl remarked, with that sweet sad smile of his, "is that it is a period to be spent in accumulating portable property. That view gets modified as the years glide away." And he held out his hand to Sylvie, who had placed herself by me, looking a little shy of him.

But the gentle old man was not one with whom any child, human or fairy, could be shy for long; and she had very soon deserted my hand for his—Bruno alone remaining faithful to his first friend. We overtook the other couple just as they reached the Station, and both Lady Muriel and Eric greeted the children as old friends—the latter with the words "So you got to Babylon by candlelight, after all?"

"Yes, and back again!" cried Bruno.

Lady Muriel looked from one to the other in blank astonishment. "What, you know them, Eric?" she exclaimed. "This mystery grows deeper every day!"

"Then we must be somewhere in the Third Act," said Eric. "You don't expect the mystery to be cleared up till the Fifth Act, do you?"

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"But it's such a long drama!" was the plaintive reply. "We must have got to the Fifth Act by this time!"

"Third Act, I assure you," said the young soldier mercilessly. "Scene, a railway-platform. Lights down. Enter Prince (in disguise, of course) and faithful Attendant. This is the Prince—" (taking Bruno's hand) "and here stands his humble Servant!" What is your Royal Highness next command.?" And he made a most courtier-like low bow to his puzzled little friend.

"Oo're not a Servant!" Bruno scornfully exclaimed. "Oo're a Gemplun!"

"Servant, I assure your Royal Highness!" Eric respectfully insisted. "Allow me to mention to your Royal Highness my various situations—past, present, and future."

"What did oo begin wiz?" Bruno asked, beginning to enter into the jest. "Was oo a shoe-black?"

"Lower than that, your Royal Highness! Years ago, I offered myself as a Slave—as a 'Confidential Slave,' I think it's called?" he asked, turning to Lady Muriel.

But Lady Muriel heard him not: something had gone wrong with her glove, which entirely engrossed her attention.

"Did oo get the place?" said Bruno.

"Sad to say, Your Royal Highness, I did not! So I had to take a situation as—as Waiter, which I have now held for some years haven't I?" He again glanced at Lady Muriel.

"Sylvie dear, do help me to button this glove!" Lady Muriel whispered, hastily stooping down, and failing to hear the question.

"And what will oo be next?" said Bruno.

"My next place will, I hope, be that of Groom. And after that—"

"Don't puzzle the child so!" Lady Muriel interrupted. "What nonsense you talk!"

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“—after that,” Eric persisted, “I hope to obtain the situation of Housekeeper, which—Fourth Act!” he proclaimed, with a sudden change of tone. “Lights turned up. Red lights. Green lights. Distant rumble heard. Enter a passenger-train!”

And in another minute the train drew up alongside of the platform, and a stream of passengers began to flow out from the booking office and waiting-rooms.

“Did you ever make real life into a drama?” said the Earl. “Now just try. I’ve often amused myself that way. Consider this platform as our stage. Good entrances and exits on both sides, you see. Capital background scene: real engine moving up and down. All this bustle, and people passing to and fro, must have been most carefully rehearsed! How naturally they do it! With never a glance at the audience! And every grouping is quite fresh, you see. No repetition!”

It really was admirable, as soon as I began to enter into it from this point of view. Even a porter passing, with a barrow piled with luggage, seemed so realistic that one was tempted to applaud. He was followed by an angry mother, with hot red face, dragging along two screaming children, and calling, to some one behind, “John! Come on!” Enter John, very meek, very silent, and loaded with parcels. And he was followed, in his turn, by a frightened little nursemaid, carrying a fat baby, also screaming. All the children screamed.

“Capital byplay!” said the old man aside. “Did you notice the nursemaid’s look of terror? It was simply perfect!”

“You have struck quite a new vein,” I said. “To most of us Life and its pleasures seem like a mine that is nearly worked out.”

“Worked out!” exclaimed the Earl. “For any one with true dramatic instincts, it is only the Overture that is ended! The real treat has yet to begin. You go to a theatre, and pay your ten shillings for a stall, and what do you get for your money? Perhaps it’s a dialogue between a couple of farmers—unnatural in their overdone caricature of farmers’ dress—more unnatural in their constrained attitudes and gestures—most unnatural in their attempts at ease and geniality in their talk. Go instead and take a seat in a third-class railway-carriage, and you’ll get the same dialogue done to the life! Front-seats—no orchestra to block the view—and nothing to pay!”

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"Which reminds me," said Eric. "There is nothing to pay on receiving a telegram! Shall we enquire for one?" And he and Lady Muriel strolled off in the direction of the Telegraph-Office.

"I wonder if Shakespeare had that thought in his mind," I said, "when he wrote 'All the world's a stage'?"

The old man sighed. "And so it is," he said, "look at it as you will. Life is indeed a drama; a drama with but few encores—and no bouquets!" he added dreamily. "We spend one half of it in regretting the things we did in the other half!"

"And the secret of enjoying it," he continued, resuming his cheerful tone, "is intensity!"

"But not in the modern aesthetic sense, I presume? Like the young lady, in Punch, who begins a conversation with 'Are you intense?'"

"By no means!" replied the Earl. "What I mean is intensity of thought—a concentrated attention. We lose half the pleasure we might have in Life, by not really attending. Take any instance you like: it doesn't matter how trivial the pleasure may be—the principle is the same. Suppose A and B are reading the same second-rate circulating-library novel. A never troubles himself to master the relationships of the characters, on which perhaps all the interest of the story depends: he 'skips' over all the descriptions of scenery, and every passage that looks rather dull: he doesn't half attend to the passages he does read: he goes on reading merely from want of resolution to find another occupation—for hours after he ought to have put the book aside: and reaches the 'FINIS' in a state of utter weariness and depression! B puts his whole soul into the thing—on the principle that 'whatever is worth doing is worth doing well': he masters the genealogies: he calls up pictures before his 'mind's eye' as he reads about the scenery: best of all, he resolutely shuts the book at the end of some chapter, while his interest is yet at its keenest, and turns to other subjects; so that, when next he allows himself an hour at it, it is like a hungry man sitting down to dinner: and, when the book is finished, he returns to the work of his daily life like 'a giant refreshed'!"

"But suppose the book were really rubbish—nothing to repay attention?"

"Well, suppose it," said the Earl. "My theory meets that case, I assure you! A never finds out that it is rubbish, but maunders on to the end, trying to believe he's enjoying himself."

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B quietly shuts the book, when he's read a dozen pages, walks off to the Library, and changes it for a better! I have yet another theory for adding to the enjoyment of Life—that is, if I have not exhausted your patience? I'm afraid you find me a very garrulous old man."

"No indeed!" I exclaimed earnestly. And indeed I felt as if one could not easily tire of the sweet sadness of that gentle voice.

"It is, that we should learn to take our pleasures quickly, and our pains slowly."

"But why? I should have put it the other way, myself."

"By taking artificial pain—which can be as trivial as you please—slowly, the result is that, when real pain comes, however severe, all you need do is to let it go at its ordinary pace, and it's over in a moment!"

"Very true," I said, "but how about the pleasure?"

"Why, by taking it quick, you can get so much more into life. It takes you three hours and a half to hear and enjoy an opera. Suppose I can take it in, and enjoy it, in half-an-hour. Why, I can enjoy seven operas, while you are listening; to one!"

"Always supposing you have an orchestra capable of playing them," I said. "And that orchestra has yet to be found!"

The old man smiled. "I have heard an 'air played," he said, "and by no means a short one—played right through, variations and all, in three seconds!"

"When? And how?" I asked eagerly, with a half-notion that I was dreaming again.

"It was done by a little musical-box," he quietly replied. "After it had been wound up, the regulator, or something, broke, and it ran down, as I said, in about three seconds. But it must have played all the notes, you know!"

"Did you enjoy it? I asked, with all the severity of a cross-examining barrister.

"No, I didn't!" he candidly confessed. "But then, you know, I hadn't been trained to that kind of music!"

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"I should much like to try your plan," I said, and, as Sylvie and Bruno happened to run up to us at the moment, I left them to keep the Earl company, and strolled along the platform, making each person and event play its part in an extempore drama for my especial benefit. "What, is the Earl tired of you already?" I said, as the children ran past me.

"No!" Sylvie replied with great emphasis. "He wants the evening-paper. So Bruno's going to be a little news-boy!"

"Mind you charge a good price for it!" I called after them.

Returning up the platform, I came upon Sylvie alone. "Well, child," I said, "where's your little news-boy? Couldn't he get you an evening-paper?"

"He went to get one at the book-stall at the other side," said Sylvie; "and he's coming across the line with it—oh, Bruno, you ought to cross by the bridge!" for the distant thud, thud, of the Express was already audible.

Suddenly a look of horror came over her face. "Oh, he's fallen down on the rails!" she cried, and darted past me at a speed that quite defied the hasty effort I made to stop her.

But the wheezy old Station-Master happened to be close behind me: he wasn't good for much, poor old man, but he was good for this; and, before I could turn round, he had the child clasped in his arms, saved from the certain death she was rushing to. So intent was I in watching this scene, that I hardly saw a flying figure in a light grey suit, who shot across from the back of the platform, and was on the line in another second. So far as one could take note of time in such a moment of horror, he had about ten clear seconds, before the Express would be upon him, in which to cross the rails and to pick up Bruno. Whether he did so or not it was quite impossible to guess: the next thing one knew was that the Express had passed, and that, whether for life or death, all was over. When the cloud of dust had cleared away, and the line was once more visible, we saw with thankful hearts that the child and his deliverer were safe.

"All right!" Eric called to us cheerfully, as he recrossed the line. "He's more frightened than hurt!"

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He lifted the little fellow up into Lady Muriel's arms, and mounted the platform as gaily as if nothing had happened: but he was as pale as death, and leaned heavily on the arm I hastily offered him, fearing he was about to faint. "I'll just—sit down a moment—" he said dreamily: "—where's Sylvie?"

Sylvie ran to him, and flung her arms round his neck, sobbing as if her heart would break. "Don't do that, my darling!" Eric murmured, with a strange look in his eyes. "Nothing to cry about now, you know. But you very nearly got yourself killed for nothing!"

"For Bruno!" the little maiden sobbed. "And he would have done it for me. Wouldn't you, Bruno?"

"Course I would!" Bruno said, looking round with a bewildered air.

Lady Muriel kissed him in silence as she put him down out of her arms. Then she beckoned Sylvie to come and take his hand, and signed to the children to go back to where the Earl was seated. "Tell him," she whispered with quivering lips, "tell him—all is well!" Then she turned to the hero of the day. "I thought it was death," she said. "Thank God, you are safe! Did you see how near it was?"

"I saw there was just time, Eric said lightly.

"A soldier must learn to carry his life in his hand, you know. I'm all right now. Shall we go to the telegraph-office again? I daresay it's come by this time."

I went to join the Earl and the children, and we waited—almost in silence, for no one seemed inclined to talk, and Bruno was half-asleep on Sylvie's lap—till the others joined us. No telegram had come.



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"I'll take a stroll with the children," I said, feeling that we were a little de trop, "and I'll look in, in the course of the evening."

"We must go back into the wood, now," Sylvie said, as soon as we were out of hearing.

"We ca'n't stay this size any longer."

"Then you will be quite tiny Fairies again, next time we meet?"

"Yes," said Sylvie: "but we'll be children again some day—if you'll let us. Bruno's very anxious to see Lady Muriel again."

"She are welly nice," said Bruno.

"I shall be very glad to take you to see her again," I said. "Hadn't I better give you back the Professor's Watch? It'll be too large for you to carry when you're Fairies, you know."

Bruno laughed merrily. I was glad to see he had quite recovered from the terrible scene he had gone through. "Oh no, it won't!" he said. "When we go small, it'll go small!"

"And then it'll go straight to the Professor," Sylvie added, "and you won't be able to use it anymore: so you'd better use it all you can, now. We must go small when the sun sets. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" cried Bruno. But their voices sounded very far away, and, when I looked round, both children had disappeared.

"And it wants only two hours to sunset!" I said as I strolled on. "I must make the best of my time!"