



Chapter 25 Looking Eastward

“It’s just a week,” I said, three days later, to Arthur, “since we heard of Lady Muriel’s engagement. I think I ought to call, at any rate, and offer my congratulations. Won’t you come with me?”

A pained expression passed over his face.

“When must you leave us?” he asked.

“By the first train on Monday.”

“Well—yes, I will come with you. It would seem strange and unfriendly if I didn’t. But this is only Friday. Give me till Sunday afternoon. I shall be stronger then.”

Shading his eyes with one hand, as if half-ashamed of the tears that were coursing down his cheeks, he held the other out to me. It trembled as I clasped it.

I tried to frame some words of sympathy; but they seemed poor and cold, and I left them unspoken. “Good night!” was all I said.

“Good night, dear friend!” he replied. There was a manly vigour in his tone that convinced me he was wrestling with, and triumphing over, the great sorrow that had so nearly wrecked his life—and that, on the stepping-stone of his dead self, he would surely rise to higher things!

There was no chance, I was glad to think, as we set out on Sunday afternoon, of meeting Eric at the Hall, as he had returned to town the day after his engagement was announced. His presence might have disturbed the calm—the almost unnatural calm—with which Arthur met the woman who had won his heart, and murmured the few graceful words of sympathy that the occasion demanded.

Lady Muriel was perfectly radiant with happiness: sadness could not live in the light of such a smile: and even Arthur brightened under it, and, when she remarked “You see I’m watering my flowers, though it is the Sabbath-Day,” his voice had almost its old ring of

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cheerfulness as he replied "Even on the Sabbath-Day works of mercy are allowed. But this isn't the Sabbath-Day. The Sabbath-day has ceased to exist."

"I know it's not Saturday," Lady Muriel replied; "but isn't Sunday often called 'the Christian Sabbath'?"

"It is so called, I think, in recognition of the spirit of the Jewish institution, that one day in seven should be a day of rest. But I hold that Christians are freed from the literal observance of the Fourth Commandment."

"Then where is our authority for Sunday observance?"

"We have, first, the fact that the seventh day was 'sanctified', when God rested from the work of Creation. That is binding on us as Theists. Secondly, we have the fact that 'the Lord's Day' is a Christian institution. That is binding on us as Christians."

"And your practical rules would be—?"

"First, as Theists, to keep it holy in some special way, and to make it, so far as is reasonably possible, a day of rest. Secondly, as Christians, to attend public worship."

"And what of amusements?"

"I would say of them, as of all kinds of work, whatever is innocent on a week-day, is innocent on Sunday, provided it does not interfere with the duties of the day."

"Then you would allow children to play on Sunday?"

"Certainly I should. Why make the day irksome to their restless natures?"

"I have a letter somewhere," said Lady Muriel, "from an old friend, describing the way in which Sunday was kept in her younger days. I will fetch it for you."

"I had a similar description, *viva voce*, years ago," Arthur said when she had left us, "from a little girl. It was really touching to hear the melancholy tone in which she said 'On Sunday I mustn't play with my doll! On Sunday I mustn't run on the sands! On Sunday I mustn't dig in the garden!' Poor child! She had indeed abundant cause for hating Sunday!"

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“Here is the letter,” said Lady Muriel, returning. “Let me read you a piece of it.”

“When, as a child, I first opened my eyes on a Sunday-morning, a feeling of dismal anticipation, which began at least on the Friday, culminated. I knew what was before me, and my wish, if not my word, was ‘Would God it were evening!’ It was no day of rest, but a day of texts, of catechisms (Watts’), of tracts about converted swearers, godly charwomen, and edifying deaths of sinners saved.

“Up with the lark, hymns and portions of Scripture had to be learned by heart till 8 o’clock, when there were family-prayers, then breakfast, which I was never able to enjoy, partly from the fast already undergone, and partly from the outlook I dreaded.

“At 9 came Sunday-School; and it made me indignant to be put into the class with the village-children, as well as alarmed lest, by some mistake of mine, I should be put below them.

“The Church-Service was a veritable Wilderness of Zin. I wandered in it, pitching the tabernacle of my thoughts on the lining of the square family-pew, the fidgets of my small brothers, and the horror of knowing that, on the Monday, I should have to write out, from memory, jottings of the rambling disconnected extempore sermon, which might have had any text but its own, and to stand or fall by the result.

“This was followed by a, cold dinner at 1 (servants to have no work), Sunday-School again from 2 to 4, and Evening-Service at 6. The intervals were perhaps the greatest trial of all, from the efforts I had to make, to be less than usually sinful, by reading books and sermons as barren as the Dead Sea. There was but one rosy spot, in the distance, all that day: and that was ‘bed-time,’ which never could come too early!”

“Such teaching was well meant, no doubt,” said Arthur; “but it must have driven many of its victims into deserting the Church-Services altogether.”

“I’m afraid I was a deserter this morning,” she gravely said. “I had to write to Eric. Would you—would you mind my telling you something he said about prayer? It had never struck me in that light before.”

“In what light?” said Arthur.

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“Why, that all Nature goes by fixed, regular laws—Science has proved that. So that asking God to do anything (except of course praying for spiritual blessings) is to expect a miracle: and we’ve no right to do that. I’ve not put it as well as he did: but that was the outcome of it, and it has confused me. Please tell me what you can say in answer to it.”

“I don’t propose to discuss Captain Lindon’s difficulties,” Arthur gravely replied; “specially as he is not present. But, if it is your difficulty,” (his voice unconsciously took a tenderer tone) “then I will speak.”

“It is my difficulty,” she said anxiously.

“Then I will begin by asking ‘Why did you except spiritual blessings?’ Is not your mind a part of Nature?”

“Yes, but Free-Will comes in there—I can choose this or that; and God can influence my choice.”

“Then you are not a Fatalist?”

“Oh, no!” she earnestly exclaimed.

“Thank God!” Arthur said to himself, but in so low a whisper that only I heard it. “You grant then that I can, by an act of free choice, move this cup,” suiting the action to the word, “this way or that way?”

“Yes, I grant it.”

“Well, let us see how far the result is produced by fixed laws. The cup moves because certain mechanical forces are impressed on it by my hand. My hand moves because certain forces—electric, magnetic, or whatever ‘nerve-force’ may prove to be—are impressed on it by my brain. This nerve-force, stored in the brain, would probably be traceable, if Science were complete, to chemical forces supplied to the brain by the blood, and ultimately derived from the food I eat and the air I breathe.”

“But would not that be Fatalism? Where would Free-Will come in?”

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“In choice of nerves,” replied Arthur. “The nerve-force in the brain may flow just as naturally down one nerve as down another. We need something more than a fixed Law of Nature to settle which nerve shall carry it. That ‘something’ is Free-Will.”

Her eyes sparkled.” “I see what you mean!” she exclaimed. “Human Free-Will is an exception to the system of fixed Law. Eric said something like that. And then I think he pointed out that God can only influence Nature by influencing Human Wills. So that we might reasonably pray ‘give us this day our daily bread,’ because many of the causes that produce bread are under Man’s control. But to pray for rain, or fine weather, would be as unreasonable as—” she checked herself, as if fearful of saying something irreverent.

In a hushed, low tone, that trembled with emotion, and with the solemnity of one in the presence of death, Arthur slowly replied “Shalt he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? Shall we ‘the swarm that in the noontide beam were born,’ feeling in ourselves the power to direct, this way or that, the forces of Nature—of Nature, of which we form so trivial a part—shall we, in our boundless arrogance, in our pitiful conceit, deny that power to the Ancient of Days? Saying, to our Creator, ‘Thus far and no further. Thou madest, but thou canst not rule!’?”

Lady Muriel had covered her face in her hands, and did not look up. She only murmured “Thanks, thanks!” again and again.

We rose to go. Arthur said, with evident effort, “One word more. If you would know the power of Prayer—in anything and everything that Man can need try it. Ask, and it shall be given you. I—have tried it. I know that God answers prayer!”

Our walk home was a silent one, till we had nearly reached the lodgings: then Arthur murmured—and it was almost an echo of my own thoughts—”What knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband?”

The subject was not touched on again. We sat on, talking, while hour after hour, of this our last night together, glided away unnoticed. He had much to tell me about India, and the new life he was going to, and the work he hoped to do. And his great generous soul seemed so filled with noble ambition as to have no space left for any vain regret or selfish repining.

“Come, it is nearly morning! Arthur said at last, rising and leading the way upstairs.

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“The sun will be rising in a few minutes: and, though I have basely defrauded you of your last chance of a night’s rest here, I’m sure you’ll forgive me: for I really couldn’t bring myself to say ‘Good night’ sooner. And God knows whether you’ll ever see me again, or hear of me!”

“Hear of you I am certain I shall!” I warmly responded, and quoted the concluding lines of that strange poem ‘Waring’ :—

”Oh, never star
Was lost here, but it rose afar
Look East, where whole new thousands are!
In Vishnu-land what Avatar?”

“Aye, look Eastward!” Arthur eagerly replied, pausing at the stair-case window, which commanded a fine view of the sea and the eastward horizon. “The West is the fitting tomb for all the sorrow and the sighing, all the errors and the follies of the Past: for all its withered Hopes and all its buried Loves! From the East comes new strength, new ambition, new Hope, new Life, new Love! Look Eastward! Aye, look Eastward!”

His last words were still ringing in my ears as I entered my room, and undrew the window-curtains, just in time to see the sun burst in glory from his ocean-prison, and clothe the world in the light of a new day.

“So may it be for him, and me, and all of us!” I mused. “All that is evil, and dead, and hopeless, fading with the Night that is past! All that is good, and living, and hopeful, rising with the dawn of Day!

“Fading, with the Night, the chilly mists, and the noxious vapours, and the heavy shadows, and the wailing gusts, and the owl’s melancholy hootings: rising, with the Day, the darting shafts of light, and the wholesome morning breeze, and the warmth of a dawning life, and the mad music of the lark! Look Eastward!

“Fading, with the Night, the clouds of ignorance, and the deadly blight of sin, and the silent tears of sorrow: and ever rising, higher, higher, with the Day, the radiant dawn of knowledge, and the sweet breath of purity, and the throb of a world’s ecstasy! Look Eastward!

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“Fading, with the Night, the memory of a dead love, and the withered leaves of a blighted hope, and the sickly repinings and moody regrets that numb the best energies of the soul: and rising, broadening, rolling upward like a living flood, the manly resolve, and the dauntless will, and the heavenward gaze of faith—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen!

“Look Eastward! Aye, look Eastward!”

