



Chapter 8

A Shady Place

The ten days glided swiftly away: and, the day before the great party was to take place, Arthur proposed that we should stroll down to the Hall, in time for afternoon-tea.

“Hadn’t you better go alone?” I suggested. “Surely I shall be very much de trop?”

“Well, it’ll be a kind of experiment,” he said. “Fiat experimentum in corpore vili!” he added, with a graceful bow of mock politeness towards the unfortunate victim. “You see I shall have to bear the sight, to-morrow night, of my lady-love making herself agreeable to everybody except the right person, and I shall bear the agony all the better if we have a dress-rehearsal beforehand!”

“My part in the play being, apparently, that of the sample wrong person?”

“Well, no,” Arthur said musingly, as we set forth: “there’s no such part in a regular company. ‘Heavy Father’? That wo’n’t do: that’s filled already. ‘Singing Chambermaid’? Well, the ‘First Lady’ doubles that part. ‘Comic Old Man’? You’re not comic enough. After all, I’m afraid there’s no part for you but the ‘Well-dressed Villain’: only”, with a critical side-glance, “I’m a leetle uncertain about the dress!”

We found Lady Muriel alone, the Earl having gone out to make a call, and at once resumed old terms of intimacy, in the shady arbour where the tea-things seemed to be always waiting. The only novelty in the arrangements (one which Lady Muriel seemed to regard as entirely a matter of course), was that two of the chairs were placed quite close together, side by side. Strange to say, I was not invited to occupy either of them!

“We have been arranging, as we came along, about letter-writing,” Arthur began. “He will want to know how we’re enjoying our Swiss tour: and of course we must pretend we are?”

“Of course,” she meekly assented.

“And the skeleton-in-the-cupboard ” I suggested.

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“—is always a difficulty”, she quickly put in, “when you’re travelling about, and when there are no cupboards in the hotels. However, ours is a very portable one; and will be neatly packed, in a nice leather case ”

“But please don’t think about writing”, I said, “when you’ve anything more attractive on hand. I delight in reading letters, but I know well how tiring it is to write them.

“It is, sometimes,” Arthur assented. “For instance when you’re very shy of the person you have to write to.”

“Does that show itself in the letter?” Lady Muriel enquired. “Of course, when I hear any one talking—you, for instance—I can see how desperately shy he is! But can you see that in a letter?”

“Well, of course, when you hear any one talk fluently—you, for instance—you can see how desperately un-shy she is—not to say saucy! But the shyest and most intermittent talker must seem fluent in letter-writing. He may have taken half-an-hour to compose his second sentence but there it is, close after the first!”

“Then letters don’t express all that they might express?”

“That’s merely because our system of letter-writing is incomplete. A shy writer ought to be able to show that he is so. Why shouldn’t he make pauses in writing, just as he would do in speaking? He might leave blank spaces—say half a page at a time. And a very shy girl—if there is such a thing—might write a sentence on the first sheet of her letter—then put in a couple of blank sheets—then a sentence on the fourth sheet: and so on.”

“I quite foresee that we—I mean this clever little boy and myself—” Lady Muriel said to me, evidently with the kind wish to bring me into the conversation, “—are going to become famous—of course all our inventions are common property now—for a new Code of Rules for Letterwriting! Please invent some more, little boys”

“Well, another thing greatly needed, little girl, is some way of expressing that we don’t mean anything.”

“Explain yourself, little boy! Surely you can find no difficulty in expressing a total absence of meaning?”

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I mean that you should be able, when you don't mean a thing to be taken seriously, to express that wish. For human nature is so constituted that whatever you write seriously is taken as a joke, and whatever you mean as a joke is taken seriously! At any rate, it is so in writing to a lady!"

"Ah, you're not used to writing to ladies!" Lady Muriel remarked, leaning back in her chair, and gazing thoughtfully into the sky. "You should try."

"Very good," said Arthur. "How many ladies may I begin writing to? As many as I can count on the fingers of both hands?"

"As many as you can count on the thumbs of one hand!" his lady-love replied with much severity. "What a very naughty little boy he is! Isn't he?" (with an appealing glance at me).

"He's a little fractious," I said. "Perhaps he's cutting a tooth." While to myself I said "How exactly like Sylvie talking to Bruno!"

"He wants his tea." (The naughty little boy volunteered the information.) "He's getting very tired, at the mere prospect of the great party to-morrow!"

"Then he shall have a good rest before-hand!" she soothingly replied. "The tea isn't made yet. Come, little boy, lean well back in your chair, and think about nothing—or about me, whichever you prefer!"

"All the same, all the same!" Arthur sleepily murmured, watching her with loving eyes, as she moved her chair away to the tea table, and began to make the tea. "Then he'll wait for his tea, like a good, patient little boy!"

"Shall I bring you the London Papers?" said Lady Muriel. "I saw them lying on the table as I came out, but my father said there was nothing in them, except that horrid murder-trial." (Society was just then enjoying its daily thrill of excitement in studying the details of a specially sensational murder in a thief's den in the East of London.)

"I have no appetite for horrors," Arthur replied. "But hope we have learned the lesson they should teach us—though we are very apt to read it backwards!"

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"You speak in riddles," said Lady Muriel. "Please explain yourself. See now," suiting the action to the word "I am sitting at your feet, just as if you were a second Gamaliel! Thanks, no." (This was to me, who had risen to bring her chair back to its former place.) "Pray don't disturb yourself. This tree and the grass make a very nice easy-chair. What is the lesson that one always reads wrong?"

Arthur was silent for a minute. "I would like to be clear what it is I mean," he said, slowly and thoughtfully, "before I say anything to you—because you think about it."

Anything approaching to a compliment was so unusual an utterance for Arthur, that it brought a flush of pleasure to her cheek, as she replied "It is you, that give me the ideas to think about."

"One's first thought", Arthur proceeded, "in reading anything specially vile or barbarous, as done by a fellow-creature, is apt to be that we see a new depth of Sin revealed beneath us: and we seem to gaze down into that abyss from some higher ground, far apart from it."

"I think I understand you now. You mean that one ought to think—not 'God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are'—but 'God, be merciful to me also, who might be, but for Thy grace, a sinner as vile as he!'"

"No," said Arthur. "I meant a great deal more than that."

She looked up quickly, but checked herself, and waited in silence.

"One must begin further back, I think. Think of some other man, the same age as this poor wretch. Look back to the time when they both began life—before they had sense enough to know Right from Wrong. Then, at any rate, they were equal in God's sight—"

She nodded assent.

"We have, then, two distinct epochs at which we may contemplate the two men whose lives we are comparing. At the first epoch they are, so far as moral responsibility is concerned, on precisely the same footing: they are alike incapable of doing right or wrong. At the second epoch the one man—I am taking an extreme case, for contrast—has won the esteem and love of all around him: his character is stainless, and his name will be held in honour hereafter: the other man's history is one unvaried record of crime, and his life

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is at last forfeited to the outraged laws of his country. Now what have been the causes, in each case, of each man's condition being what it is at the second epoch? They are of two kinds—one acting from within, the other from without. These two kinds need to be discussed separately—that is, if I have not already tired you with my prosing?"

"On the contrary," said Lady Muriel, "it is a special delight to me to have a question discussed in this way— analysed and arranged so that one can understand it. Some books, that profess to argue out a question, are to me intolerably wearisome, simply because the ideas are all arranged haphazard—a sort of 'first come, first served'."

"You are very encouraging," Arthur replied, with a pleased look. "The causes, acting from within, which make a man's character what it is at any given moment, are his successive acts of volition—that is, his acts of choosing whether he will do this or that."

"We are to assume the existence of Free-Will?" I said, in order to have that point made quite clear.

"If not," was the quiet reply, "cedit quaestio: and I have no more to say."

"We will assume it!" the rest of the audience—the majority, I may say, looking at it from Arthur's point of view—imperiously proclaimed. The orator proceeded.

"The causes, acting from without, are his surroundings—what Mr. Herbert Spencer calls his 'environment'. Now the point I want to make clear is this, that a man is responsible for his act of choosing, but not responsible for his environment. Hence, if these two men make, on some given occasion, when they are exposed to equal temptation, equal efforts to resist and to choose the right, their condition, in the sight of God, must be the same. If He is pleased in the one case, so will He be in the other, if displeased in the one case, so also in the other."

"That is so, no doubt: I see it quite clearly," Lady Muriel put in.

"And yet, owing to their different environments, the one may win a great victory over the temptation, while the other falls into some black abyss of crime."

"But surely you would not say those men were equally guilty in the sight of God?"

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“Either that”, said Arthur, “or else I must give up my belief in God’s perfect justice. But let me put one more case, which will show my meaning even more forcibly. Let the one man be in a high social position—the other say, a common thief. Let the one be tempted to some trivial act of unfair dealing—something which he can do with the absolute certainty that it will never be discovered—something which he can with perfect ease forbear from doing—and which he distinctly knows to be a sin. Let the other be tempted to some terrible crime—as men would consider it—but, under an almost overwhelming pressure of motives—of course not quite overwhelming, as that would destroy all responsibility. Now, in this case, let the second man make a greater effort at resistance than the first. Also suppose both to fall under the temptation—I say that the second man is, in God’s sight, less guilty than the other.”

Lady Muriel drew a long breath. “It upsets all one’s ideas of Right and Wrong—just at first! Why, in that dreadful murder-trial, you would say, I suppose, that it was possible that the least guilty man in the Court was the murderer, and that possibly the judge who tried him, by yielding to the temptation of making one unfair remark, had committed a crime outweighing the criminal’s whole career!”

“Certainly I should,” Arthur firmly replied. “It sounds like a paradox, I admit. But just think what a grievous sin it must be, in God’s sight, to yield to some very slight temptation, which we could have resisted with perfect ease, and to do it deliberately, and in the full light of God’s Law. What penance can atone for a sin like that?”

“I ca’n’t reject your theory,” I said. “But how it seems to widen the possible area of Sin in the world!”

“Is that so?” Lady Muriel anxiously enquired.

“Oh, not so, not so!” was the eager reply. “To me it seems to clear away much of the cloud that hangs over the world’s history. When this view first made itself clear to me, I remember walking out into the fields, repeating to myself that line of Tennyson ‘There seemed no room for sense of wrong!’ The thought, that perhaps the real guilt of the human race was infinitely less than I fancied it— that the millions, whom I had thought of as sunk in hopeless depths of sin, were perhaps, in God’s sight, scarcely sinning at all—was more sweet than words can tell! Life seemed more bright and beautiful, when once that thought had come! ‘A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass, A purer sapphire melts into the sea!’” His voice trembled as he concluded, and the tears stood in his eyes.

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Lady Muriel shaded her face with her hand, and was silent for a minute. "It is a beautiful thought," she said, looking up at last. "Thank you—Arthur, for putting it into my head!"

The Earl returned in time to join us at tea, and to give us the very unwelcome tidings that a fever had broken out in the little harbour-town that lay below us—a fever of so malignant a type that, though it had only appeared a day or two ago, there were already more than a dozen down in it, two or three of whom were reported to be in imminent danger.

In answer to the eager questions of Arthur—who of course took a deep scientific interest in the matter—he could give very few technical details, though he had met the local doctor. It appeared, however, that it was an almost new disease—at least in this century, though it might prove to be identical with the "Plague" recorded in History—very infectious, and frightfully rapid in its action. "It will not, however, prevent our party tomorrow," he said in conclusion. "None of the guests belong to the infected district, which is, as you know, exclusively peopled by fishermen: so you may come with out any fear."

Arthur was very silent, all the way back, and, on reaching our lodgings, immediately plunged into medical studies, connected with the alarming malady of whose arrival he had just heard.