

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

My Utopian Self

Section 1

It falls to few of us to interview our better selves. My Utopian self is, of course, my better self--according to my best endeavours--and I must confess myself fully alive to the difficulties of the situation. When I came to this Utopia I had no thought of any such intimate self-examination.

The whole fabric of that other universe sways for a moment as I come into his room, into his clear and ordered work-room. I am trembling. A figure rather taller than myself stands against the light.

He comes towards me, and I, as I advance to meet him, stumble against a chair. Then, still without a word, we are clasping hands.

I stand now so that the light falls upon him, and I can see his face better. He is a little taller than I, younger looking and sounder looking; he has missed an illness or so, and there is no scar over his eye. His training has been subtly finer than mine; he has made himself a better face than mine.... These things I might have

counted upon. I can fancy he winces with a twinge of sympathetic understanding at my manifest inferiority. Indeed, I come, trailing clouds of earthly confusion and weakness; I bear upon me all the defects of my world. He wears, I see, that white tunic with the purple band that I have already begun to consider the proper Utopian clothing for grave men, and his face is clean shaven. We forget to speak at first in the intensity of our mutual inspection. When at last I do gain my voice it is to say something quite different from the fine, significant openings of my premeditated dialogues.

"You have a pleasant room," I remark, and look about a little disconcerted because there is no fireplace for me to put my back against, or hearthrug to stand upon. He pushes me a chair, into which I plump, and we hang over an immensity of conversational possibilities.

"I say," I plunge, "what do you think of me? You don't think I'm an impostor?"

"Not now that I have seen you. No."

"Am I so like you?"

"Like me and your story--exactly."

"You haven't any doubt left?" I ask.

"Not in the least, since I saw you enter. You come from the world beyond Sirius, twin to this. Eh?"

"And you don't want to know how I got here?"

"I've ceased even to wonder how I got here," he says, with a laugh that echoes mine.

He leans back in his chair, and I in mine, and the absurd parody of our attitude strikes us both.

"Well?" we say, simultaneously, and laugh together.

I will confess this meeting is more difficult even than I anticipated.

Section 2

Our conversation at that first encounter would do very little to develop the Modern Utopia in my mind. Inevitably, it would be personal and emotional. He would tell me how he stood in his world, and I how I stood in mine. I should have to tell him things, I should have to explain things----.

No, the conversation would contribute nothing to a modern Utopia.

And so I leave it out.

Section 3

But I should go back to my botanist in a state of emotional relaxation. At first I should not heed the fact that he, too, had been in some manner stirred. "I have seen him," I should say, needlessly, and seem to be on the verge of telling the untellable. Then I should fade off into: "It's the strangest thing."

He would interrupt me with his own preoccupation. "You know," he would say, "I've seen someone."

I should pause and look at him.

"She is in this world," he says.

"Who is in this world?"

"Mary!"

I have not heard her name before, but I understand, of course, at

once.

"I saw her," he explains.

"Saw her?"

"I'm certain it was her. Certain. She was far away across those gardens near here--and before I had recovered from my amazement she had gone! But it was Mary."

He takes my arm. "You know I did not understand this," he says. "I did not really understand that when you said Utopia, you meant I was to meet her--in happiness."

"I didn't."

"It works out at that."

"You haven't met her yet."

"I shall. It makes everything different. To tell you the truth I've rather hated this Utopia of yours at times. You mustn't mind my saying it, but there's something of the Gradgrind----"

Probably I should swear at that.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing."

"But you spoke?"

"I was purring. I'm a Gradgrind--it's quite right--anything you can say about Herbert Spencer, vivisectors, materialistic Science or Atheists, applies without correction to me. Begbie away! But now you think better of a modern Utopia? Was the lady looking well?"

"It was her real self. Yes. Not the broken woman I met--in the real world."

"And as though she was pining for you."

He looks puzzled.

"Look there!" I say.

He looks.

We are standing high above the ground in the loggia into which our apartments open, and I point across the soft haze of the public gardens to a tall white mass of University buildings that rises with a free and fearless gesture, to lift saluting pinnacles against the

clear evening sky. "Don't you think that rather more beautiful than--say--our National Gallery?"

He looks at it critically. "There's a lot of metal in it," he objects. "What?"

I purred. "But, anyhow, whatever you can't see in that, you can, I suppose, see that it is different from anything in your world--it lacks the kindly humanity of a red-brick Queen Anne villa residence, with its gables and bulges, and bow windows, and its stained glass fanlight, and so forth. It lacks the self-complacent unreasonableness of Board of Works classicism. There's something in its proportions--as though someone with brains had taken a lot of care to get it quite right, someone who not only knew what metal can do, but what a University ought to be, somebody who had found the Gothic spirit enchanted, petrified, in a cathedral, and had set it free."

"But what has this," he asks, "to do with her?"

"Very much," I say. "This is not the same world. If she is here, she will be younger in spirit and wiser. She will be in many ways more refined----"

"No one----" he begins, with a note of indignation.

"No, no! She couldn't be. I was wrong there. But she will be different. Grant that at any rate. When you go forward to speak to her, she may not remember--very many things you may remember. Things that happened at Frogna--dear romantic walks through the Sunday summer evenings, practically you two alone, you in your adolescent silk hat and your nice gentlemanly gloves.... Perhaps that did not happen here! And she may have other memories--of things--that down there haven't happened. You noted her costume. She wasn't by any chance one of the samurai?"

He answers, with a note of satisfaction, "No! She wore a womanly dress of greyish green."

"Probably under the Lesser Rule."

"I don't know what you mean by the Lesser Rule. She wasn't one of the samurai."

"And, after all, you know--I keep on reminding you, and you keep on losing touch with the fact, that this world contains your double."

He pales, and his countenance is disturbed. Thank Heaven, I've touched him at last!

"This world contains your double. But, conceivably, everything may

be different here. The whole romantic story may have run a different course. It was as it was in our world, by the accidents of custom and proximity. Adolescence is a defenceless plastic period. You are a man to form great affections,--noble, great affections. You might have met anyone almost at that season and formed the same attachment."

For a time he is perplexed and troubled by this suggestion.

"No," he says, a little doubtfully. "No. It was herself." ... Then, emphatically, "No!"

Section 4

For a time we say no more, and I fall musing about my strange encounter with my Utopian double. I think of the confessions I have just made to him, the strange admissions both to him and myself. I have stirred up the stagnations of my own emotional life, the pride that has slumbered, the hopes and disappointments that have not troubled me for years. There are things that happened to me in my adolescence that no discipline of reason will ever bring to a just proportion for me, the first humiliations I was made to suffer, the waste of all the fine irrecoverable loyalties and passions of my youth. The dull base caste of my little personal tragi-comedy--I have ostensibly forgiven, I have for the most part forgotten--and

yet when I recall them I hate each actor still. Whenever it comes into my mind--I do my best to prevent it--there it is, and these detestable people blot out the stars for me.

I have told all that story to my double, and he has listened with understanding eyes. But for a little while those squalid memories will not sink back into the deeps.

We lean, side by side, over our balcony, lost in such egotistical absorptions, quite heedless of the great palace of noble dreams to which our first enterprise has brought us.

Section 5

I can understand the botanist this afternoon; for once we are in the same key. My own mental temper has gone for the day, and I know what it means to be untempered. Here is a world and a glorious world, and it is for me to take hold of it, to have to do with it, here and now, and behold! I can only think that I am burnt and scarred, and there rankles that wretched piece of business, the mean unimaginative triumph of my antagonist----

I wonder how many men have any real freedom of mind, are, in truth, unhampered by such associations, to whom all that is great and noble in life does not, at times at least, if not always, seem secondary

to obscure rivalries and considerations, to the petty hates that are like germs in the blood, to the lust for self-assertion, to dwarfish pride, to affections they gave in pledge even before they were men.

The botanist beside me dreams, I know, of vindications for that woman.

All this world before us, and its order and liberty, are no more than a painted scene before which he is to meet Her at last, freed from "that scoundrel."

He expects "that scoundrel" really to be present and, as it were, writhing under their feet....

I wonder if that man was a scoundrel. He has gone wrong on earth, no doubt, has failed and degenerated, but what was it sent him wrong? Was his failure inherent, or did some net of cross purposes tangle about his feet? Suppose he is not a failure in Utopia!...

I wonder that this has never entered the botanist's head.

He, with his vaguer mind, can overlook--spite of my ruthless reminders--all that would mar his vague anticipations. That, too, if I suggested it, he would overcome and disregard. He has the most amazing power of resistance to uncongenial ideas; amazing that is,

to me. He hates the idea of meeting his double, and consequently so soon as I cease to speak of that, with scarcely an effort of his will, it fades again from his mind.

Down below in the gardens two children pursue one another, and one, near caught, screams aloud and rouses me from my reverie.

I follow their little butterfly antics until they vanish beyond a thicket of flowering rhododendra, and then my eyes go back to the great facade of the University buildings.

But I am in no mood to criticise architecture.

Why should a modern Utopia insist upon slipping out of the hands of its creator and becoming the background of a personal drama--of such a silly little drama?

The botanist will not see Utopia in any other way. He tests it entirely by its reaction upon the individual persons and things he knows; he dislikes it because he suspects it of wanting to lethal chamber his aunt's "dear old doggie," and now he is reconciled to it because a certain "Mary" looks much younger and better here than she did on earth. And here am I, near fallen into the same way of dealing!

We agreed to purge this State and all the people in it of

traditions, associations, bias, laws, and artificial entanglements,
and begin anew; but we have no power to liberate ourselves. Our
past, even its accidents, its accidents above all, and ourselves,
are one.