## XXXIX. The Missionary Lady

W. Somerset Maugham

She was certainly fifty, but a life of convictions harassed by never a doubt had left her face unwrinkled. The hesitations of thought had never lined the smoothness of her brow. Her features were bold and regular, somewhat masculine, and her determined chin bore out the impression given you by her eyes. They were blue, confident, and unperturbed. They summed you up through large round spectacles. You felt that here was a woman to whom command came easily. Her charity was above all things competent and you were certain that she ran the obvious goodness of her heart on thoroughly business lines. It was possible to suppose that she was not devoid of human vanity (and this is to be counted to her for grace) since she wore a dress of violet silk, heavily embroidered, and a toque of immense pansies which on a less respectable head would have been almost saucy. But my Uncle Henry, for twenty-seven years Vicar of Whitstable, who had decided views on the proper manner of dress for a clergyman’s wife, never objected to my Aunt Sophie wearing violet, and he would have found nothing to criticise in  the missionary lady’s gown. She spoke fluently with the even flow of water turned on at a tap. Her conversation had the admirable volubility of a politician at the end of an electioneering campaign. You felt that she knew what she meant (with most of us so rare an accomplishment) and meant what she said.

“I always think,” she remarked pleasantly, “that if you know both sides of a question you’ll judge differently from what you will if you only know one side. But the fact remains that two and two make four and you can argue all night and you won’t make them five. Am I right or am I wrong?”

I hastened to assure her that she was right, though with these new theories of relativity and parallel lines behaving at infinity in such a surprising manner I was in my heart of hearts none too sure.

“No one can eat their cake and have it,” she continued, exemplifying Benedetto Croce’s theory that grammar has little to do with expression, “and one has to take the rough with the smooth, but as I always say to the children you can’t expect to have everything your own way. No one is perfect in this world and I always think that if you expect the best from people you’ll get the best.”

I confess that I was staggered, but I determined to do my part. It was only civil.

“Most men live long enough to discover that every cloud has a silver lining,” I began earnestly.  “With perseverance you can do most things that are not beyond your powers, and after all, it’s better to want what you have than to have what you want.”

I thought her eyes were glazed with a sudden perplexity when I made this confident statement, but I daresay it was only my fancy, for she nodded vigorously.

“Of course, I see your point,” she said. “We can’t do more than we can.”

But my blood was up now and I waved aside the interruption. I went on.

“Few people realise the profound truth that there are twenty shillings in every pound and twelve pence in every shilling. I’m sure it’s better to see clearly to the end of your nose than indistinctly through a brick wall. If there’s one thing we can be certain about it is that the whole is greater than the part.”

When, with a hearty shake of the hand, firm and characteristic, she bade me farewell, she said:

“Well, we’ve had a most interesting chat. It does one good in a place like this, so far away from civilisation, to exchange ideas with one’s intellectual equals.”

“Especially other people’s,” I murmured.

“I always think that one should profit by the great thoughts of the past,” she retorted. “It shows that the mighty dead have not lived in vain.”

Her conversation was devastating.