

## CHAPTER XXX - SAXON AND CELT

WHEN amicable relations between two men happen to be in jeopardy, there is least danger of an ensuing quarrel if the friendly intercourse has been of artificial growth, on either side. In this case, the promptings of self-interest, and the laws of politeness, have been animating influences throughout; acting under conditions which assist the effort of self-control. And for this reason: the man who has never really taken a high place in our regard is unprovided with those sharpest weapons of provocation, which make unendurable demands on human fortitude. In a true attachment, on the other hand, there is an innocent familiarity implied, which is forgetful of ceremony, and blind to consequences. The affectionate freedom which can speak kindly without effort is sensitive to offence, and can speak harshly without restraint. When the friend who wounds us has once been associated with the sacred memories of the heart, he strikes at a tender place, and no considerations of propriety are powerful enough to stifle our cry of rage and pain. The enemies who have once loved each other are the bitterest enemies of all.

Thus, the curt exchange of question and answer, which had taken place in the cottage at Passy, between two gentlemen artificially friendly to one another, led to no regrettable result. Lord Harry had been too readily angry: he remembered what was due to Mr. Mountjoy. Mr. Mountjoy had been too thoughtlessly abrupt: he remembered what was due to Lord Harry. The courteous Irishman bowed, and pointed to a chair. The well-bred Englishman returned the polite salute, and sat down. My lord broke the silence that followed.

"May I hope that you will excuse me," he began, "if I walk about the room? Movement seems to help me when I am puzzled how to put things nicely. Sometimes I go round and round the subject, before I get at it. I'm afraid I'm going round and round, now. Have you arranged to make a long stay in Paris?"

Circumstances, Mountjoy answered, would probably decide him.

"You have no doubt been many times in Paris before this," Lord Harry continued. "Do you find it at all dull, now?"

Wondering what he could possibly mean, Hugh said he never found Paris dull--and waited for further enlightenment. The Irish lord persisted:

"People mostly think Paris isn't as gay as it used to be. Not such good plays and such good actors as they had at one time. The restaurants inferior, and society very much mixed. People don't stay there as long as they used. I'm told that Americans are getting disappointed, and are trying London for a change."

Could he have any serious motive for this irrelevant way of talking? Or was he, to judge by his own account of himself, going round and round the subject of his wife and his guest, before he could get at it?

Suspecting him of jealousy from the first, Hugh failed--naturally perhaps in his position--to understand the regard for Iris, and the fear of offending her, by which her jealous husband was restrained. Lord Harry was attempting (awkwardly indeed!) to break off the relations between his wife and her friend, by means which might keep the true state of his feelings concealed from both of them. Ignorant of this claim on his forbearance, it was Mountjoy's impression that he was being trifled with. Once more, he waited for enlightenment, and waited in silence.

"You don't find my conversation interesting?" Lord Harry remarked, still with perfect good-humour.

"I fail to see the connection," Mountjoy acknowledged, "between what you have said so far, and the subject on which you expressed your intention of speaking to me. Pray forgive me if I appear to hurry you--or if you have any reasons for hesitation."

Far from being offended, this incomprehensible man really appeared to be pleased. "You read me like a book!" he exclaimed. "It's hesitation that's the matter with me. I'm a variable man. If there's something disagreeable to say, there are times when I dash at it, and times when I hang back. Can I offer you any refreshment?" he asked, getting away from the subject again, without so much as an attempt at concealment.

Hugh thanked him, and declined.

"Not even a glass of wine? Such white Burgundy, my dear sir, as you seldom taste."

Hugh's British obstinacy was roused; he repeated his reply. Lord Harry looked at him gravely, and made a nearer approach to an open confession of feeling than he had ventured on yet.

"With regard now to my wife. When I went away this morning with Vimpany--he's not such good company as he used to be; soured by misfortune, poor devil; I wish he would go back to London. As I was saying--I mean as I was about to say--I left you and Lady Harry together this morning; two old friends, glad (as I supposed) to have a gossip about old times. When I come back, I find you left here alone, and I am told that Lady Harry is in her room. What do I see when I get there? I see the finest pair of eyes in the world; and the tale they tell me is, We have been crying. When I ask what may have happened to account for this--'Nothing, dear,' is all the answer I get. What's the impression naturally produced on my mind? There has been a quarrel perhaps between you and my wife."

"I fail entirely, Lord Harry, to see it in that light."

"Ah, likely enough! Mine's the Irish point of view. As an Englishman you fail to understand it. Let that be. One thing; Mr. Mountjoy, I'll take the freedom of saying at once. I'll thank you, next time, to quarrel with Me."

"You force me to tell you, my lord, that you are under a complete delusion, if you suppose that there has been any quarrel, or approach to a quarrel, between Lady Harry and myself."

"You tell me that, on your word of honour as a gentleman?"

"Most assuredly!"

"Sir! I deeply regret to hear it."

"Which does your lordship deeply regret? That I have spoken to you on my word of honour, or that I have not quarrelled with Lady Harry?"

"Both, sir! By the piper that played before Moses, both!"

Hugh got up, and took his hat: "We may have a better chance of understanding each other," he suggested, "if you will be so good as to write to me."

"Put your hat down again, Mr. Mountjoy, and pray have a moment's patience. I've tried to like you, sir--and I'm bound in candour to own that I've failed to find a bond of union between us. Maybe, this frank confession annoys you."

"Far from it! You are going straight to your subject at last, if I may venture to say so."

The Irish lord's good-humour had completely disappeared by this time. His handsome face hardened, and his voice rose. The outbreak of jealous feeling, which motives honourable to himself had hitherto controlled, now seized on its freedom of expression. His language betrayed (as on some former occasions) that association with unworthy companions, which had been one of the evil results of his adventurous life.

"Maybe I'll go straighter than you bargain for," he replied; "I'm in two humours about you. My common-sense tells me that you're my wife's friend. And the best of friends do sometimes quarrel, don't they? Well, sir, you deny it, on your own account. I find myself forced back on my other humour--and it's a black humour, I can tell you. You may be my wife's friend, my fine fellow, but you're something more than that. You have always been in love with her--and you're in love with her now. Thank you for your visit, but don't repeat it. Say! do we understand each other at last?"

"I have too sincere a respect for Lady Harry to answer you," Mountjoy said. "At the same time, let me acknowledge my obligations to your lordship. You have reminded me that I did a foolish thing when I called here without an invitation. I agree with you that the sooner my mistake is set right the better."

He replied in those words, and left the cottage.

On the way back to his hotel, Hugh thought of what Mrs. Vimpany had said to him when they had last seen each other: "Don't forget that there is an obstacle between you and Iris which will put even your patience and your devotion to a hard trial." The obstacle of the husband had set itself up, and had stopped him already.

His own act (a necessary act after the language that had been addressed to him) had closed the doors of the cottage, and had put an end to future meetings between Iris and himself. If they attempted to communicate by letter, Lord Harry would have opportunities of discovering their correspondence, of which his jealousy would certainly avail itself. Through the wakeful night, Hugh's helpless situation was perpetually in his thoughts. There seemed to be no present alternative before him but resignation, and a return to England.