GEORGE MEREDITH

CELT AND SAXON. VOLUME 2

George Meredith

Celt and Saxon. Volume 2

Meredith G.

Celt and Saxon. Volume 2 / G. Meredith — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

George Meredith
Celt and Saxon – Volume 2

CHAPTER XII
MISS MATTOCK

Mrs. Adister O'Donnell, in common with her family, had an extreme dislike of the task of composing epistles, due to the circumstance that she was unable, unaided, to conceive an idea disconnected with the main theme of her communication, and regarded, as an art of conjuring, the use of words independent of ideas. Her native superiority caused her to despise the art, but the necessity for employing it at intervals subjected her to fits of admiration of the conjurer, it being then evident that a serviceable piece of work, beyond her capacity to do, was lightly performed by another. The lady's practical intelligence admitted the service, and at the same time her addiction to the practical provoked disdain of so flimsy a genius, which was identified by her with the genius of the Irish race. If Irishmen had not been notoriously fighters, famous for their chivalry, she would have looked on them as a kind of footmen hired to talk and write, whose volubility might be encouraged and their affectionateness deserved by liberal wages. The promptitude of Irish blood to deliver the war-cry either upon a glove flung down or taken up, raised them to a first place in her esteem: and she was a peaceful woman abhorring sanguinary contention; but it was in her own blood to love such a disposition against her principles.

She led Patrick to her private room, where they both took seats and he selected a pen. Mr. Patrick supposed that his business would be to listen and put her words to paper; a mechanical occupation permitting the indulgence of personal phantasies; and he was flying high on them until the extraordinary delicacy of the mind seeking to deliver itself forced him to prick up all his apprehensiveness. She wished to convey that she was pleased with the news from Vienna, and desired her gratification to be imparted to her niece Caroline, yet not so as to be opposed to the peculiar feelings of her brother Edward, which had her fullest sympathy; and yet Caroline must by no means be requested to alter a sentence referring to Adiante, for that would commit her and the writer jointly to an insincerity.

'It must be the whole truth, madam,' said Patrick, and he wrote: 'My dear Caroline,' to get the start. At once a magnificently clear course for the complicated letter was distinguished by him. 'Can I write on and read it to you afterward? I have the view,' he said.

Mrs. Adister waved to him to write on.

Patrick followed his 'My dear Caroline' with greetings very warm, founded on a report of her flourishing good looks. The decision of Government to send reinforcements to Ireland was mentioned as a prelude to the information from Vienna of the birth of a son to the Princess Nikolas: and then; having conjoined the two entirely heterogeneous pieces of intelligence, the composer adroitly interfused them by a careless transposition of the prelude and the burden that enabled him to play ad libitum on regrets and rejoicings; by which device the lord of Earlsfont might be offered condolences while the lady could express her strong contentment, inasmuch as he deplored the state of affairs in the sister island, and she was glad of a crisis concluding a term of suspense thus the foreign-born baby was denounced and welcomed, the circumstances lamented and the mother congratulated, in a breath, all under cover of the happiest misunderstanding, as effective as the cabalism of Prospero's wand among the Neapolitan mariners, by the skilful Irish development on a grand scale of the rhetorical figure anastrophe, or a turning about and about.

He read it out to her, enjoying his composition and pleased with his reconcilement of differences. 'So you say what you feel yourself, madam, and allow for the feelings on the other side,' he remarked. 'Shall I fold it?

There was a smoothness in the letter particularly agreeable to her troubled wits, but with an awful taste. She hesitated to assent: it seemed like a drug that she was offered.

Patrick sketched a series of hooked noses on the blotter. He heard a lady's name announced at the door, and glancing up from his work he beheld a fiery vision.

Mrs. Adister addressed her affectionately: 'My dear Jane!' Patrick was introduced to Miss Mattock.

His first impression was that the young lady could wrestle with him and render it doubtful of his keeping his legs. He was next engaged in imagining that she would certainly burn and be a light in the dark. Afterwards he discovered her feelings to be delicate, her looks pleasant. Thereupon came one of the most singular sensations he had ever known: he felt that he was unable to see the way to please her. She confirmed it by her remarks and manner of speaking. Apparently she was conducting a business.

'You're right, my dear Mrs. Adister, I'm on my way to the Laundry, and I called to get Captain Con to drive there with me and worry the manageress about the linen they turn out: for gentlemen are complaining of their shirt-fronts, and if we get a bad name with them it will ruin us. Women will listen to a man. I hear he has gone down to the city. I must go and do it alone. Our accounts are flourishing, I'm glad to say, though we cannot yet afford to pay for a secretary, and we want one. John and I verified them last night. We're aiming at steam, you know. In three or four years we may found a steam laundry on our accumulated capital. If only we can establish it on a scale to let us give employment to at least as many women as we have working now! That is what I want to hear of. But if we wait for a great rival steam laundry to start ahead of us, we shall be beaten and have to depend on the charitable sentiments of rich people to support the Institution. And that won't do. So it's a serious question with us to think of taking the initiative: for steam must come. It 's a scandal every day that it doesn't while we have coal. I'm for grand measures. At the same time we must not be imprudent: turning off hands, even temporarily, that have to feed infants, would be quite against my policy.'

Her age struck Patrick as being about twenty-three.

'Could my nephew Arthur be of any use to you?' said Mrs. Adister.

'Colonel Adister?' Miss Mattock shook her head. 'No.'

'Arthur can be very energetic when he takes up a thing.' 'Can he? But, Mrs. Adister, you are looking a little troubled. Sometimes you confide in me. You are so good to us with your subscriptions that I always feel in your debt.'

Patrick glanced at his hostess for a signal to rise and depart.

She gave none, but at once unfolded her perplexity, and requested Miss Mattock to peruse the composition of Mr. Patrick O'Donnell and deliver an opinion upon it.

The young lady took the letter without noticing its author. She read it through, handed it back, and sat with her opinion evidently formed within.

'What do you think of it?' she was asked.

'Rank jesuitry,' she replied.

'I feared so!' sighed Mrs. Adister. 'Yet it says everything I wish to have said. It spares my brother and it does not belie me. The effect of a letter is often most important. I cannot but consider this letter very ingenious. But the moment I hear it is jesuitical I forswear it. But then my dilemma remains. I cannot consent to give pain to my brother Edward: nor will I speak an untruth, though it be to save him from a wound. I am indeed troubled. Mr. Patrick, I cannot consent to despatch a jesuitical letter. You are sure of your impression, my dear Jane?'

'Perfectly,' said Miss Mattock.

Patrick leaned to her. 'But if the idea in the mind of the person supposed to be writing the letter is accurately expressed? Does it matter, if we call it jesuitical, if the emotion at work behind it happens to be a trifle so, according to your definition?'

She rejoined: 'I should say, distinctly it matters.'

'Then you'd not express the emotions at all?'

He flashed a comical look of astonishment as he spoke. She was not to be diverted; she settled into antagonism.

'I should write what I felt.'

'But it might be like discharging a bullet.'

'How?'

'If your writing in that way wounded the receiver.'

'Of course I should endeavour not to wound!'

'And there the bit of jesuitry begins. And it's innocent while it 's no worse than an effort to do a disagreeable thing as delicately as you can.'

She shrugged as delicately as she could:

'We cannot possibly please everybody in life.'

'No: only we may spare them a shock: mayn't we?'

'Sophistries of any description, I detest.'

'But sometimes you smile to please, don't you?'

'Do you detect falseness in that?' she answered, after the demurest of pauses.

'No: but isn't there a soupcon of sophistry in it?'

'I should say that it comes under the title of common civility.'

'And on occasion a little extra civility is permitted!'

'Perhaps: when we are not seeking a personal advantage.'

'On behalf of the Steam Laundry?'

Miss Mattock grew restless: she was too serious in defending her position to submit to laugh, and his goodhumoured face forbade her taking offence.

'Well, perhaps, for that is in the interest of others.'

'In the interests of poor and helpless females. And I agree with you with all my heart. But you would not be so considerate for the sore feelings of a father hearing what he hates to hear as to write a roundabout word to soften bad news to him?'

She sought refuge in the reply that nothing excused jesuitry.

'Except the necessities of civilisation,' said Patrick.

'Politeness is one thing,' she remarked pointedly.

'And domestic politeness is quite as needful as popular, you'll admit. And what more have we done in the letter than to be guilty of that? And people declare it's rarer: as if we were to be shut up in families to tread on one another's corns! Dear me! and after a time we should be having rank jesuitry advertised as the specific balsam for an unhappy domesticated population treading with hard heels from desperate habit and not the slightest intention to wound.'

'My dear Jane,' Mrs. Adister interposed while the young lady sat between mildly staring and blinking, 'you have, though still of a tender age, so excellent a head that I could trust to your counsel blindfolded. It is really deep concern for my brother. I am also strongly in sympathy with my niece, the princess, that beautiful Adiante: and my conscience declines to let me say that I am not.'

'We might perhaps presume to beg for Miss Mattock's assistance in the composition of a second letter more to her taste,' Patrick said slyly.

The effect was prompt: she sprang from her seat.

'Dear Mrs. Adister! I leave it to you. I am certain you and Mr. O'Donnell know best. It's too difficult and delicate for me. I am horribly blunt. Forgive me if I seemed to pretend to casuistry. I am sure I had no such meaning. I said what I thought. I always do. I never meant that it was not a

very clever letter; and if it does exactly what you require it should be satisfactory. To-morrow evening John and I dine with you, and I look forward to plenty of controversy and amusement. At present I have only a head for work.'

'I wish I had that,' said Patrick devoutly.

She dropped her eyes on him, but without letting him perceive that he was a step nearer to the point of pleasing her.

CHAPTER XIII
THE DINNER-PARTY

Miss Mattock ventured on a prediction in her mind:

She was sure the letter would go. And there was not much to signify if it did. But the curious fatality that a person of such a native uprightness as Mrs. Adister should have been drawn in among Irishmen, set her thoughts upon the composer of the letter, and upon the contrast of his ingenuous look with the powerful cast of his head. She fancied a certain danger about him; of what kind she could not quite distinguish, for it had no reference to woman's heart, and he was too young to be much of a politician, and he was not in the priesthood. His transparency was of a totally different order from Captain Con's, which proclaimed itself genuine by the inability to conceal a shoal of subterfuges. The younger cousin's features carried a something invisible behind them, and she was just perceptive enough to spy it, and it excited her suspicions. Irishmen both she and her brother had to learn to like, owing to their bad repute for stability: they are, moreover, Papists: they are not given to ideas: that one of the working for the future has not struck them. In fine, they are not solid, not law-supporting, not disposed to be (humbly be it said) beneficent, like the good English. These were her views, and as she held it a weakness to have to confess that Irishmen are socially more fascinating than the good English, she was on her guard against them.

Of course the letter had gone. She heard of it before the commencement of the dinner, after Mrs. Adister had introduced Captain Philip O'Donnell to her, and while she was exchanging a word or two with Colonel Adister, who stood ready to conduct her to the table. If he addressed any remarks to the lady under his charge, Miss Mattock did not hear him; and she listened—who shall say why? His unlike likeness to his brother had struck her. Patrick opposite was flowing in speech. But Captain Philip O'Donnell's taciturnity seemed no uncivil gloom: it wore nothing of that look of being beneath the table, which some of our good English are guilty of at their social festivities, or of towering aloof a Matterhorn above it, in the style of Colonel Adister. Her discourse with the latter amused her passing reflections. They started a subject, and he punctuated her observations, or she his, and so they speedily ran to earth.

'I think,' says she, 'you were in Egypt this time last winter.'

He supplies her with a comma: 'Rather later.'

Then he carries on the line. 'Dull enough, if you don't have the right sort of travelling crew in your boat.'

'Naturally,' she puts her semicolon, ominous of the full stop.

'I fancy you have never been in Egypt?'

'No'

There it is; for the tone betrays no curiosity about Egypt and her Nile, and he is led to suppose that she has a distaste for foreign places.

Condescending to attempt to please, which he has reason to wish to succeed in doing, the task of pursuing conversational intercourse devolves upon him

'I missed Parlatti last spring. What opinion have you formed of her?'

'I know her only by name at present.'

'Ah, I fancy you are indifferent to Opera.'

'Not at all; I enjoy it. I was as busy then as I am now.'

'Meetings? Dorcas, so forth.'

'Not Dorcas, I assure you. You might join if you would.'

'Your most obliged.'

A period perfectly rounded. At the same time Miss Mattock exchanged a smile with her hostess, of whose benignant designs in handing her to the entertaining officer she was not conscious. She felt bound to look happy to gratify an excellent lady presiding over the duller half of a table of eighteen. She turned slightly to Captain O'Donnell. He had committed himself to speech at last, without tilting his shoulders to exclude the company by devoting himself to his partner, and as he faced the table Miss Mattock's inclination to listen attracted him. He cast his eyes on her: a quiet look, neither languid nor frigid seeming to her both open and uninviting. She had the oddest little shiver, due to she knew not what. A scrutiny she could have borne, and she might have read a signification; but the look of those mild clear eyes which appeared to say nothing save that there was fire behind them, hit on some perplexity, or created it; for she was aware of his unhappy passion for the beautiful Miss Adister; the whole story had been poured into her ears; she had been moved by it. Possibly she had expected the eyes of such a lover to betray melancholy, and his power of containing the expression where the sentiment is imagined to be most transparent may have surprised her, thrilling her as melancholy orbs would not have done.

Captain Con could have thumped his platter with vexation. His wife's diplomacy in giving the heiress to Colonel Adister for the evening had received his cordial support while he manoeuvred cleverly to place Philip on the other side of her; and now not a step did the senseless fellow take, though she offered him his chance, dead sick of her man on the right; not a word did he have in ordinary civility; he was a burning disgrace to the chivalry of Erin. She would certainly be snapped up by a man merely yawning to take the bite. And there's another opportunity gone for the old country! —one's family to boot!

Those two were in the middle of the table, and it is beyond mortal, beyond Irish, capacity, from one end of a table of eighteen to whip up the whole body of them into a lively unanimous froth, like a dish of cream fetched out of thickness to the airiest lightness. Politics, in the form of a firebrand or apple of Discord, might knead them together and cut them in batches, only he had pledged his word to his wife to shun politics as the plague, considering Mr. Mattock's presence. And yet it was tempting: the recent Irish news had stung him; he could say sharp things from the heart, give neat thrusts; and they were fairly divided and well matched. There was himself, a giant; and there was an unrecognised bard of his country, no other than himself too; and there was a profound politician, profoundly hidden at present, like powder in a mine—the same person. And opposite to him was Mr. John Mattock, a worthy antagonist, delightful to rouse, for he carried big guns and took the noise of them for the shattering of the enemy, and this champion could be pricked on to a point of assertion sure to fire the phlegm in Philip; and then young Patrick might be trusted to warm to the work. Three heroes out skirmishing on our side. Then it begins to grow hot, and seeing them at it in earnest, Forbery glows and couches his gun, the heaviest weight of the Irish light brigade. Gallant deeds! and now Mr. Marbury Dyke opens on Forbery's flank to support Mattock hardpressed, and this artillery of English Rockney resounds, with a similar object: the ladies to look on and award the crown of victory, Saxon though they be, excepting Rockney's wife, a sure deserter to the camp of the brave, should fortune frown on them, for a punishment to Rockney for his carrying off to himself a flower of the Green Island and holding inveterate against her native land in his black ingratitude. Oh! but eloquence upon a good cause will win you the hearts of all women, Saxon or other, never doubt of it. And Jane Mattock there, imbibing forced doses of Arthur Adister, will find her patriotism dissolving in the natural human current; and she and Philip have a pretty wrangle, and like one another none the worse for not agreeing: patriotically speaking, she's really unrooted by that half-thawed colonel, a creature snow-bound up to his chin; and already she's leaping to be transplanted. Jane is one of the first to give her vote for the Irish party, in spite of her love for her brother John: in common justice, she says, and because she hopes for complete union between the two islands. And thereupon we debate upon union. On the whole, yes: union, on the understanding that we have justice, before

you think of setting to work to sow the land with affection:—and that 's a crop in a clear soil will spring up harvest- thick in a single summer night across St. George's Channel, ladies!….

Indeed a goodly vision of strife and peace: but, politics forbidden, it was entirely a dream, seeing that politics alone, and a vast amount of blowing even on the topic of politics, will stir these English to enter the arena and try a fall. You cannot, until you say ten times more than you began by meaning, and have heated yourself to fancy you mean more still, get them into any state of fluency at all. Forbery's anecdote now and then serves its turn, but these English won't take it up as a start for fresh pastures; they lend their ears and laugh a finale to it; you see them dwelling on the relish, chewing the cud, by way of mental note for their friends to-morrow, as if they were kettles come here merely for boiling purposes, to make tea elsewhere, and putting a damper on the fire that does the business for them. They laugh, but they laugh extinguishingly, and not a bit to spread a general conflagration and illumination.

The case appeared hopeless to Captain Con, bearing an eye on Philip. He surveyed his inanimate eights right and left, and folded his combative ardour around him, as the soldier's martial cloak when he takes his rest on the field. Mrs. Marbury Dyke, the lady under his wing, honoured wife of the chairman of his imagined that a sigh escaped him, and said in sympathy: 'Is the bad news from India confirmed?'

He feared it was not bright, and called to Philip for the latest.

'Nothing that you have not had already in the newspapers,' Philip replied, distinctly from afar, but very bluntly, as through a trumpet.

Miss Mattock was attentive. She had a look as good as handsome when she kindled.

The captain persevered to draw his cousin out.

'Your chief has his orders?'

'There's a rumour to that effect.'

'The fellow's training for diplomacy,' Con groaned.

Philip spoke to Miss Mattock: he was questioned and he answered, and answered dead as a newspaper telegraphic paragraph, presenting simply the corpse of the fact, and there an end. He was a rival of Arthur Adister for military brevity.

'Your nephew is quite the diplomatist,' said Mrs. Dyke, admiring Philip's head.

'Cousin, ma'am. Nephews I might drive to any market to make the most of them. Cousins pretend they're better than pigs, and diverge bounding from the road at the hint of the stick. You can't get them to grunt more than is exactly agreeable to them.'

'My belief is that if our cause is just our flag will triumph,' Miss Grace Barrow, Jane Mattock's fellow-worker and particular friend, observed to Dr. Forbery.

'You may be enjoying an original blessing that we in Ireland missed in the cradle,' said he.

She emphasised: 'I speak of the just cause; it must succeed.'

'The stainless flag'll be in the ascendant in the long run,' he assented.

'Is it the flag of Great Britain you're speaking of, Forbery?' the captain inquired.

'There's a harp or two in it,' he responded pacifically.

Mrs. Dyke was not pleased with the tone. 'And never will be out of it!' she thumped her interjection.

'Or where 's your music?' said the captain, twinkling for an adversary among the males, too distant or too dull to distinguish a note of challenge. 'You'd be having to mount your drum and fife in their places, ma'am.'

She saw no fear of the necessity.

'But the fife's a pretty instrument,' he suggested, and with a candour that seduced the unwary lady to think dubiously whether she quite liked the fife. Miss Barrow pronounced it cheerful.

'Oh, and martial!' he exclaimed, happy to have caught Rockney's deliberate gaze. 'The effect of it, I'm told in the provinces is astonishing for promoting enlistment. Hear it any morning in your

London parks, at the head of a marching regiment of your giant foot-Guards. Three bangs of the drum, like the famous mountain, and the fife announces himself to be born, and they follow him, left leg and right leg and bearskin. And what if he's a small one and a trifle squeaky; so 's a prince when the attendant dignitaries receive him submissively and hear him informing the nation of his advent. It 's the idea that 's grand.'

'The idea is everything in military affairs,' a solemn dupe, a Mr. Rumford, partly bald, of benevolent aspect, and looking more copious than his flow, observed to the lady beside him. 'The flag is only an idea.'

She protested against the barbarism of war, and he agreed with her, but thought it must be: it had always been: he deplored the fatality. Nevertheless, he esteemed our soldiers, our sailors too. A city man himself and a man of peace, he cordially esteemed and hailed the victories of a military body whose idea was Duty instead of Ambition.

'One thing,' said Mrs. Dyke, evading the ambiguous fife, 'patriotic as I am, I hope, one thing I confess; I never have yet brought myself to venerate thoroughly our Royal Standard. I dare say it is because I do not understand it.'

A strong fraternal impulse moved Mr. Rumford to lean forward and show her the face of one who had long been harassed by the same incapacity to digest that one thing. He guessed it at once, without a doubt of the accuracy of the shot. Ever since he was a child the difficulty had haunted him; and as no one hitherto had even comprehended his dilemma, he beamed like a man preparing to embrace a recovered sister.

'The Unicorn!' he exclaimed.

'It is the Unicorn!' she sighed. 'The Lion is noble.'

'The Unicorn, if I may speak by my own feelings, certainly does not inspire attachment, that is to say, the sense of devotion, which we should always be led to see in national symbols,' Mr. Rumford resumed, and he looked humorously rueful while speaking with some earnestness; to show that he knew the subject to be of the minor sort, though it was not enough to trip and jar a loyal enthusiasm in the strictly meditative.

'The Saxon should carry his White Horse, I suppose,' Dr. Forbery said.

'But how do we account for the horn on his forehead?' Mr. Rumford sadly queried.

'Two would have been better for the harmony of the Unicorn's appearance,' Captain Con remarked, desirous to play a floundering fish, and tender to the known simple goodness of the ingenuous man. 'What do you say, Forbery? The poor brute had a fall on his pate and his horn grew of it, and it 's to prove that he has got something in his head, and is dangerous both fore and aft, which is not the case with other horses, who're usually wicked at the heels alone. That's it, be sure, or near it. And his horn's there to file the subject nation's grievances for the Lion to peruse at his leisure. And his colour's prophetic of the Horse to come, that rides over all.'

'Lion and Unicorn signify the conquest of the two hemispheres, Matter and
Mind,' said Dr. Forbery. 'The Lion there's no mistake about. The
Unicorn sets you thinking. So it's a splendid Standard, and means the
more for not being perfectly intelligible at a glance.'

'But if the Lion, as they've whispered of late, Forbery, happens to be stuffed with straw or with what's worse, with sawdust, a fellow bearing a pointed horn at close quarters might do him mortal harm; and it must be a situation trying to the patience of them both. The Lion seems to say "No prancing!" as if he knew his peril; and the Unicorn to threaten a playful dig at his flank, as if he understood where he's ticklish.'

Mr. Rumford drank some champagne and murmured with a shrug to the acquiescent lady beside him: 'Irishmen!' implying that the race could not be brought to treat serious themes as befitted the seriousness of the sentiments they stir in their bosoms. He was personally a little hurt, having unfolded a shy secret of his feelings, which were keenly patriotic in a phlegmatic frame, and he retired

within himself, assuring the lady that he accepted our standard in its integrity; his objection was not really an objection; it was, he explained to her, a ridiculous desire to have a perfect comprehension of the idea in the symbol. But where there was no seriousness everything was made absurd. He could, he said, laugh as well as others on the proper occasion. As for the Lion being stuffed, he warned England's enemies for their own sakes not to be deluded by any such patent calumny. The strong can afford to be magnanimous and forbearing. Only let not that be mistaken for weakness. A wag of his tail would suffice.

The lady agreed. But women are volatile. She was the next moment laughing at something she had heard with the largest part of her ear, and she thought the worthy gentleman too simple, though she knew him for one who had amassed wealth. Captain Con and Dr. Forbery had driven the Unicorn to shelter, and were now baiting the Lion. The tremendous import of that wag of his tail among the nations was burlesqued by them, and it came into collision with Mr. Rumford's legendary forefinger threat. She excused herself for laughing:

'They are so preposterous!'

'Yes, yes, I can laugh,' said he, soberly performing the act: and Mr. Rumford covered the wound his delicate sensations had experienced under an apology for Captain Con, that would redound to the credit of his artfulness were it not notorious our sensations are the creatures and born doctors of art in discovering unguents for healing their bruises. 'O'Donnell has a shrewd head for business. He is sound at heart. There is not a drop of gout in his wine.'

The lady laughed again, as we do when we are fairly swung by the tide, and underneath her convulsion she quietly mused on the preference she would give to the simple English citizen for soundness.

'What can they be discussing down there?' Miss Mattock said to Philip, enviously as poor Londoners in November when they receive letters from the sapphire Riviera.

'I will venture to guess at nonsense,' he answered.

'Nothing political, then.'

'That scarcely follows; but a host at his own table may be trusted to shelve politics.'

'I should not object.'

'To controversy?'

'Temperately conducted.'

'One would go a long way to see the exhibition.'

'But why cannot men be temperate in their political arguments?'

'The questions raised are too close about the roots of us.'

'That sounds very pessimist.'

'More duels come from politics than from any other source.'

'I fear it is true. Then women might set you an example.'

'By avoiding it?'

'I think you have been out of England for some time.'

'I have been in America.'

'We are not exactly on the pattern of the Americans.' Philip hinted a bow. He praised the Republican people.

'Yes, but in our own way we are working out our own problems over here,' said she. 'We have infinitely more to contend with: old institutions, monstrous prejudices, and a slower-minded people, I dare say: much slower, I admit. We are not shining to advantage at present. Still, that is not the fault of English women.'

'Are they so spirited?'

Spirited was hardly the word Miss Mattock would have chosen to designate the spirit in them. She hummed a second or two, deliberating; it flashed through her during the pause that he had been guilty of irony, and she reddened: and remembering a foregoing strange sensation she reddened more.

She had been in her girlhood a martyr to this malady of youth; it had tied her to the stake and enveloped her in flames for no accountable reason, causing her to suffer cruelly and feel humiliated. She knew the pangs of it in public, and in private as well. And she had not conquered it yet. She was angered to find herself such a merely physical victim of the rushing blood: which condition of her senses did not immediately restore her natural colour.

'They mean nobly,' she said, to fill an extending gap in the conversation under a blush; and conscious of an ultra-swollen phrase, she snatched at it nervously to correct it: 'They are becoming alive to the necessity for action.' But she was talking to a soldier! 'I mean, their heads are opening.' It sounded ludicrous. 'They are educating themselves differently.' Were they? 'They wish to take their part in the work of the world.' That was nearer the proper tone, though it had a ring of claptrap rhetoric hateful to her: she had read it and shrunk from it in reports of otherwise laudable meetings.

'Well, spirited, yes. I think they are. I believe they are. One has need to hope so.'

Philip offered a polite affirmative, evidently formal.

Not a sign had he shown of noticing her state of scarlet. His grave liquid eyes were unalterable. She might have been grateful, but the reflection that she had made a step to unlock the antechamber of her dearest deepest matters to an ordinary military officer, whose notions of women were probably those of his professional brethren, impelled her to transfer his polished decorousness to the burden of his masculine antagonism-plainly visible. She brought the dialogue to a close. Colonel Adister sidled an eye at a three-quarter view of her face. 'I fancy you're feeling the heat of the room,' he said.

Jane acknowledged a sensibility to some degree of warmth.

The colonel was her devoted squire on the instant for any practical service. His appeal to his aunt concerning one of the windows was answered by her appeal to Jane's countenance for a disposition to rise and leave the gentlemen. Captain Con, holding the door for the passage of his wife and her train of ladies, received the injunction:

'Ten,' from her, and remarked: 'Minutes,' as he shut it. The shortness of the period of grace proposed dejection to him on the one hand, and on the other a stimulated activity to squeeze it for its juices without any delay. Winding past Dr. Forbery to the vacated seat of the hostess he frowned forbiddingly.

'It's I, is it!' cried the doctor. Was it ever he that endangered the peace and placability of social gatherings! He sat down prepared rather for a bout with Captain Con than with their common opponents, notwithstanding that he had accurately read the mock thunder of his brows.

CHAPTER XIV
OF ROCKNEY

Battles have been won and the streams of History diverted to new channels in the space of ten minutes. Ladies have been won, a fresh posterity founded, and grand financial schemes devised, revolts arranged, a yoke shaken off, in less of mortal time. Excepting an inspired Epic song and an original Theory of the Heavens, almost anything noteworthy may be accomplished while old Father Scythe is taking a trot round a courtyard; and those reservations should allow the splendid conception to pass for the performance, when we bring to mind that the conception is the essential part of it, as a bard poorly known to fame was constantly urging. Captain Con had blown his Epic bubbles, not to speak of his projected tuneful narrative of the adventures of the great Cuchullin, and his Preaching of St. Patrick, and other national triumphs. He could own, however, that the world had a right to the inspection of the Epic books before it awarded him his crown. The celestial Theory likewise would have to be worked out to the last figure by the illustrious astronomers to whom he modestly ranked himself second as a benefactor of his kind, revering him. So that, whatever we may think in our own hearts, Epic and Theory have to remain the exception. Battles indeed have been fought, but when you survey the field in preparation for them you are summoned to observe the preluding courtesies of civilised warfare in a manner becoming a chivalrous gentleman. It never was the merely flinging of your leg across a frontier, not even with the abrupt Napoleon. You have besides to drill your men; and you have often to rouse your foe with a ringing slap, if he's a sleepy one or shamming sleepiness. As here, for example: and that of itself devours more minutes than ten. Rockney and Mattock could be roused; but these English, slow to kindle, can't subside in a twinkling; they are for preaching on when they have once begun; betray the past engagement, and the ladies are chilled, and your wife puts you the pungent question: 'Did you avoid politics, Con?' in the awful solitude of domestic life after a party. Now, if only there had been freedom of discourse during the dinner hour, the ten disembarrassed minutes allotted to close it would have afforded time sufficient for hearty finishing blows and a soothing word or so to dear old innocent Mr. Rumford, and perhaps a kindly clap of the shoulder to John Mattock, no bad fellow at bottom. Rockney too was no bad fellow in his way. He wanted no more than a beating and a thrashing. He was a journalist, a hard-headed rascal, none of your good old-fashioned order of regimental scribes who take their cue from their colonel, and march this way and that, right about face, with as little impediment of principles to hamper their twists and turns as the straw he tosses aloft at midnight to spy the drift of the wind to-morrow. Quite the contrary; Rockney was his own colonel; he pretended to think independently, and tried to be the statesman of a leading article, and showed his intention to stem the current of liberty, and was entirely deficient in sympathy with the oppressed, a fanatical advocate of force; he was an inveterate Saxon, good-hearted and in great need of a drubbing. Certain lines Rockney had written of late about Irish affairs recurred to Captain Con, and the political fires leaped in him; he sparkled and said: 'Let me beg you to pass the claret over to Mr. Rockney, Mr. Rumford; I warrant it for the circulating medium of amity, if he'll try it.'

"Tis the Comet Margaux,' said Dr. Forbery, topping anything Rockney might have had to say, and anything would have served. The latter clasped the decanter, poured and drank in silence.

"Tis the doctor's antidote, and best for being antedated,' Captain Con rapped his friend's knuckles.

'As long as you're contented with not dating in double numbers,' retorted the doctor, absolutely scattering the precious minutes to the winds, for he hated a provocation.

'There's a golden mean, is there!'

'There is; there's a way between magnums of good wine and gout, and it's generally discovered too late.'

'At the physician's door, then! where the golden mean is generally discovered to be his fee. I've heard of poor souls packed off by him without an obolus to cross the ferry. Stripped they were in all conscience.'

'You remind me of a fellow in Dublin who called on me for medical advice, and found he'd forgotten his purse. He offered to execute a deed to bequeath me his body, naked and not ashamed.'

'You'd a right to cut him up at once, Forbery. Any Jury 'd have pronounced him guilty of giving up the ghost before he called.'

'I let him go, body and all. I never saw him again.'

'The fellow was not a lunatic. As for your golden mean, there's a saying: Prevention is better than cure: and another that caps it: Drink deep or taste not.'

'That's the Pierian Spring.'

'And what is the wine on my table, sir?'

'Exhaustless if your verses come of it.'

'And pure, you may say of the verses and the fount.'

'And neither heady nor over-composed; with a blush like Diana confessing her love for the young shepherd: it's one of your own comparisons.'

'Oh!' Con could have roared his own comparisons out of hearing. He was angry with Forbery for his obstructive dulness and would not taste the sneaking compliment. What could Forbery mean by paying compliments and spoiling a game! The ten minutes were dancing away like harmless wood- nymphs when the Satyr slumbers. His eyes ranged over his guests despondently, and fixed in desperation on Mr. Rumford, whom his magnanimous nature would have spared but for the sharp necessity to sacrifice him.

The wine in Rumford at any rate let loose his original nature, if it failed to unlock the animal in these other unexcitable Saxons.

'By the way, now I think of it, Mr. Rumford, the interpretation of your Royal Standard, which perplexes you so much, strikes me as easy if you 'll examine the powerfully different colours of the two beasts in it.'

Mr. Rumford protested that he had abandoned his inquiry: it was a piece of foolishness: he had no feeling in it whatever, none.

The man was a perfect snail's horn for coyness.

The circumstances did not permit of his being suffered to slip away: and his complexion showed that he might already be classed among the roast.

'Your Lion:—Mr. Rumford, you should know, is discomposed, as a thoughtful patriot, by the inexplicable presence of the Unicorn in the Royal Standard, and would be glad to account for his one horn and the sickly appearance of the beast. I'm prepared to say he's there to represent the fair one half of the population.

Your Lion, my dear sir, may have nothing in his head, but his tawniness tells us he imbibes good sound stuff, worthy of the reputation of a noble brewery. Whereas your, Unicorn, true to the character of the numberless hosts he stands for, is manifestly a consumer of doctor's drugs. And there you have the symbolism of your country. Right or left of the shield, I forget which, and it is of no importance to the point—you have Grandgosier or Great Turk in all his majesty, mane and tail; and on the other hand, you behold, as the showman says, Dyspepsia. And the pair are intended to indicate that you may see yourselves complete by looking at them separately; and so your Royal Standard is your national mirror; and when you gaze on it fondly you're playing the part of a certain Mr. Narcissus, who got liker to the Lion than to the Unicorn in the act. Now will that satisfy you?'

'Quite as you please, quite as you please,' Mr. Rumford replied. 'One loves the banner of one's country—that is all.' He rubbed his hands. 'I for one am proud of it.'

'Far be it from me to blame you, my dear sir. Or there's the alternative of taking him to stand for your sole great festival holiday, and worshipping him as the personification of your Derbyshire race.'

A glittering look was in Captain Con's eye to catch Rockney if he would but rise to it.

That doughty Saxon had been half listening, half chatting to Mr. Mattock, and wore on his drawn eyelids and slightly drawn upper lip a look of lambent pugnacity awake to the challenge, indifferent to the antagonist, and disdainful of the occasion.

'We have too little of your enthusiasm for the flag,' Philip said to Mr.

Rumford to soothe him, in a form of apology for his relative.

'Surely no! not in England?' said Mr. Rumford, tempted to open his heart, for he could be a bellicose gentleman by deputy of the flag. He recollected that the speaker was a cousin of Captain Con's, and withdrew into his wound for safety. 'Here and there, perhaps; not when we are roused; we want rousing, we greatly prefer to live at peace with the world, if the world will let us.'

'Not at any price?' Philip fancied his tone too quakerly.

'Indeed I am not one of that party!' said Mr. Rumford, beginning to glow; but he feared a snare, and his wound drew him in again.

'When are you ever at peace!' quoth his host, shocked by the inconsiderate punctuality of Mrs. Adister O'Donnell's household, for here was the coffee coming round, and Mattock and Rockney escaping without a scratch. 'There's hardly a day in the year when your scarlet mercenaries are not popping at niggers.'

Rockney had the flick on the cheek to his manhood now, it might be hoped.

'Our what?' asked Mr. Rumford, honestly unable to digest the opprobrious term.

'Paid soldiery, hirelings, executioners, whom you call volunteers, by a charming euphemism, and send abroad to do the work of war while you propound the doctrines of peace at home.'

Rockney's forehead was exquisitely eruptive, red and swelling. Mattock lurched on his chair. The wine was in them, and the captain commended the spiriting of it, as Prospero his Ariel.

Who should intervene at this instant but the wretched Philip, pricked on the point of honour as a soldier! Are we inevitably to be thwarted by our own people?

'I suppose we all work for pay,' said he. 'It seems to me a cry of the streets to call us by hard names. The question is what we fight for.'

He spoke with a witless moderation that was most irritating, considering the latest news from the old country.

'You fight to subjugate, to enslave,' said Con, 'that's what you're doing, and at the same time your journals are venting their fine irony at the Austrians and the Russians and the Prussians for tearing Poland to strips with their bloody beaks.'

'We obey our orders, and leave you to settle the political business,'

Philip replied.

Forbery declined the fray. Patrick was eagerly watchful and dumb. Rockney finished his coffee with a rap of the cup in the saucer, an appeal for the close of the sitting; and as Dr. Forbery responded to it by pushing back his chair, he did likewise, and the other made a movement.

The disappointed hero of a fight unfought had to give the signal for rising. Double the number of the ten minutes had elapsed. He sprang up, hearing Rockney say: 'Captain Con O'Donnell is a politician or nothing,' and as he was the most placable of men concerning his personality, he took it lightly, with half a groan that it had not come earlier, and said, 'He thinks and he feels, poor fellow!'

All hope of a general action was over.

'That shall pass for the epitaph of the living,' said Rockney.

It was too late to catch at a trifle to strain it to a tussle. Con was obliged to subjoin: 'Inscribe it on the dungeon-door of tyranny.' But the note was peaceful.

He expressed a wish that the fog had cleared for him to see the stars of heaven before he went to bed, informing Mr. Mattock that a long look in among them was often his prayer at night, and winter a holy season to him, for the reason of its showing them bigger and brighter.

'I can tell my wife with a conscience we've had a quiet evening, and you're a witness to it,' he said to Patrick. That consolation remained.

'You know the secret of your happiness,' Patrick answered.

'Know you one of the secrets of a young man's fortune in life, and give us a thrilling song at the piano, my son,' said Con: 'though we don't happen to have much choice of virgins for ye to-night. Irish or French. Irish are popular. They don't mind having us musically. And if we'd go on joking to the end we should content them, if only by justifying their opinion that we're born buffoons.'

His happy conscience enabled him to court his wife with assiduity and winsomeness, and the ladies were once more elated by seeing how chivalrously lover-like an Irish gentleman can be after years of wedlock.

Patrick was asked to sing. Miss Mattock accompanied him at the piano. Then he took her place on the music-stool, and she sang, and with an electrifying splendour of tone and style.

'But it's the very heart of an Italian you sing with!' he cried.

'It will surprise you perhaps to hear that I prefer German music,' said she.

'But where—who had the honour of boasting you his pupil?'

She mentioned a famous master. Patrick had heard of him in Paris. He begged for another song and she complied, accepting the one he selected as the favourite of his brother Philip's, though she said: 'That one?' with a superior air. It was a mellifluous love-song from a popular Opera somewhat out of date. 'Well, it's in Italian!' she summed up her impressions of the sickly words while scanning them for delivery. She had no great admiration of the sentimental Sicilian composer, she confessed, yet she sang as if possessed by him. Had she, Patrick thought, been bent upon charming Philip, she could not have thrown more fire into the notes. And when she had done, after thrilling the room, there was a gesture in her dismissal of the leaves displaying critical loftiness. Patrick noticed it and said, with the thrill of her voice lingering in him: 'What is it you do like? I should so like to know.'

She was answering when Captain Con came up to the piano and remarked in an undertone to Patrick: 'How is it you hit on the song Adiante Adister used to sing?'

Miss Mattock glanced at Philip. He had applauded her mechanically, and it was not that circumstance which caused the second rush of scarlet over her face. This time she could track it definitely to its origin. A lover's favourite song is one that has been sung by his love. She detected herself now in the full apprehension of the fact before she had sung a bar: it had been a very dim fancy: and she denounced herself guilty of the knowledge that she was giving pain by singing the stuff fervidly, in the same breath that accused her of never feeling things at the right moment vividly. The reminiscences of those pale intuitions made them always affectingly vivid.

But what vanity in our emotional state in a great jarring world where we are excused for continuing to seek our individual happiness only if we ally it and subordinate it to the well being of our fellows! The interjection was her customary specific for the cure of these little tricks of her blood. Leaving her friend Miss Barrow at the piano, she took a chair in a corner and said; 'Now, Mr. O'Donnell, you will hear the music that moves me.'

'But it's not to be singing,' said Patrick. 'And how can you sing so gloriously what you don't care for? It puzzles me completely.'

She assured him she was no enigma: she hushed to him to hear.

He dropped his underlip, keeping on the conversation with his eyes until he was caught by the masterly playing of a sonata by the chief of the poets of sound.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.