

## Celt and Saxon

AN uncompleted novel by George Meredith\* was bound to be caught up and published for an eager world. Had it stood in manuscript for twice twenty years, not crying loud enough for its finishing? Was it, on the contrary, a *dernier mot*, never finally accented, and marked only by "senile sprightliness"? Not both, certainly; yet in either case overpoweringly Meredithian.

Himself the Celt in birth and temper, Meredith was fascinated by the Celtic contradictions. Interior contradictions, these, but brought into relief by conflict with the British setting. We know in what verses, at the very end, he sang of Ireland:

"You read her as a land distraught,  
Where bitterest rebel passions seethe.  
Look with a care of heart in thought,  
For so is known the truth beneath.  
She came to you a loathing bride,  
And it has been no happy bed.  
Believe in her as friend, allied  
By bonds as close as those who wed."

But his breathing out this appeal with his last breath is no argument for the present novel being a later work than of forty years syne. Also, this tale is unclouded by the suffrage; its ardent females aim at nothing higher than philanthropic steam laundries; they under-

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\*CELT AND SAXON. By George Meredith. New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons. \$1.50.

take at most a revolution in a shaky principality, like that of Harry Richmond's father's patron, which gave the signal for all your modern storytellers' Zendas. The subject of this book can tell us nothing of its period: Meredith was always fascinated by the Celtic problem. Here is, at any rate, a fine gallery of that problem's types: glowing Captain Conn, a Thackerayan caricature; Conn's cousins Phil and Patrick, highly differentiated yet always equal in mettle, we suspect; the dimmer Kathleen, for whom the author planned more than he carried out. One at least of these—the poet-agitator, who never winged a verse—is a volcano of vernal rhetoric, heedless of bulls and overshoot with metaphor. His is a Meredithian knack for telling phrase, tinged consciously with the color of his own wet landscape. "They're incapable of understanding a complaint a yard beyond their noses. The Englishman has an island mind, and when he's out of it he's at sea," says Captain Conn. For this is a great book for nationalistic generalizations: a youthful, perilous exercise. There is even a whole dull chapter "Of the Great Mr. Bull"—not in the best of style. Patrick O'Donnell himself reeks of aphorisms; an Hibernian Sir Austin quite before his time. An English moralist, his host, speaks the same idiom, thoughtfully mitigated; Welsh women, he avers, are all wind and water. Here is, in short, a fine monotony of wit. Perhaps it ended by wearying the humorist. For, tho a brilliant scene is set, and the characters all talk promisingly, they don't know just how to act. Perhaps it is because they have not room to turn round in—this fragment runs to less than 300 pages. And, so far as we get, it is all exposition.

Meredith's characters find talking as easy as breathing: it is affirmed by him who best knew them. Unhappily, the reading is not invariably so facile. In spite of the rich contrasts—human nature and chilled convention (Britannia a matron before she was a maid), Catholic and Protestant—the formless bulk of it all ends in a certain weariness of futility. Not even the hitting off of journalism's fickleness, or the figure of a certain

adventurer-of-letters, "who was compelled to swim perpetually without a ship to give him a rest or land in view," quite reconciles the reader. A somewhat sparkling, broken toy—that is your *Celt and Saxon*. A toy out of Mr. Meredith's shop—there's the consolation. We place it somewhere near "Sandra Beloni" and that story's sequel. Had it been deleted and completed, it would compare with "Richmond." As it stands it cannot, surely, add to the dead man's fame. For the unappeased Meredithian it does, none the less, strike intermittent fire. Such a reader will like to notice how the novelist has borrowed from his fragmentary novel in favor of those that he bore with to the very end.