

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### A POEM BY LORD HOUGHTON

AMONG many English noblemen who have figured in Victorian literature with more or less credit to themselves, there was perhaps nobody who could write more hauntingly at times than Lord Houghton. He did not write a great deal, but a considerable proportion of the few pieces which he did write have found their way into anthologies, and are likely to stay there. I shall quote and comment upon only one of these, which I think to be the best—not, perhaps, as mere verse, but as a bit of emotional thinking. The subject is a curious one, a subject which has driven some men almost mad. It was this subject which especially tormented the matchless French story-teller, Guy de Maupassant, shortly before he lost his reason; and he wrote a terrible essay about it. Very young men never think of the matter at all, but few men of intelligence reach middle life without having thought about it. I mean this fact,—that no one human being can ever really understand another human being. We think we know a great deal about our friends, or about our enemies—at least we think so while we are young. But later on we discover that there are depths or abysses in every human character, which we cannot know anything about. A character is really like the sea. When we look at the sea we observe only the surface,—the changes of colour, the motion of waves and the foam. When we look at our friends it is really much the same; we can see the surface only, the mood of the moment, the aspect of kindness or gratitude or sympathy passing over that other life as waves or colours play over the surface of the water. But the profundities are beyond our vision. Really the father does not

know his child, nor the husband his wife, nor the wife her husband. There is always a something hidden in the frankest child which the most loving mother cannot discern. Naturally it must be so, because every individual has something of the infinite within him; because also the feelings and tendencies of millions and millions of past lives are stored up in every present life. When you come to think about it, either from the scientific point of view or from the purely metaphysical point of view, you will perceive that it could not be otherwise. But the first time that a man learns this fact, it comes like a great shock to him. It is really a very terrible thing, and requires a little philosophical coolness to consider it. Here is what Lord Houghton said about it:

#### STRANGERS YET

Strangers yet!

After years of life together,  
 After fair and stormy weather,  
 After travel in far lands,  
 After touch of wedded hands,—  
 Why thus join'd? Why ever met,  
 If they must be strangers yet?

Strangers yet!

After childhood's winning ways,  
 After care and blame and praise,  
 Counsel ask'd and wisdom given,  
 After mutual prayers to Heaven,  
 Child and parent scarce regret  
 When they part— are strangers yet

Strangers yet!

After strife for common ends—  
 After title of 'old friends,'  
 After passions fierce and tender,  
 After cheerful self-surrender,  
 Hearts may beat and eyes be met,  
 And the souls be strangers yet.

Strangers yet!  
Oh! the bitter thought to scan  
All the loneliness of man:—  
Nature, by magnetic laws,  
Circle unto circle draws,  
But they only touch when met,  
Never mingle—strangers yet.

The comparison of each life to a complete circle or sphere, which may touch another sphere but never penetrate it, is not new, but it is used here with great force. This problem is the same thing to which of later years French psychologists have been giving so much attention under the title of Multiple Personality. It is not that there is really a hidden man within the man; it is that every personality is extraordinarily complex and that this complexity is perpetually changing, so that the individual is not really the same at all times and places in his relation to other individuals. Viewed scientifically, the fact seems to be a natural result of evolution, but that does not make it less wonderful, nor, in a certain sense, less awful.

This is the best poem that Lord Houghton ever wrote in his long life, and he wrote a great deal of fairly good poetry. But he wrote nothing else quite so good as this; it has that rare quality which appeals to universal human experience. I often fancy that the condition of his own life must have been particularly likely to inspire him with reflections upon this subject. He lived really a double existence; but the principal part of his life was given—like that of another remarkable English nobleman, the younger Lord Lytton—to diplomacy, an occupation which certainly keeps minds out of sympathy with each other. He was born in 1809, and died in 1885. After leaving the university he almost immediately entered public life, became within a few years a Member of Parliament, and remained a prominent figure in politics for more than a generation. He was known only as Richard Monckton Milnes before he was raised to the peerage. You would scarcely suppose that such a man

could have found time to devote to poetry and song. But he was really double-natured. He had a great vein of sentiment, and such a love of literature that he sought out and made friends with almost every literary person of the time. At Cambridge he had been the friend of Tennyson and Hallam and other brilliant men, but these acquaintances among the aristocracy of literature did not have the effect of making him at all exclusive. Even while a distinguished statesman, he would go out of his way to find some poor student poet and offer his friendship and assistance. Thus he became the helper of many struggling geniuses, and was looked up to by hundreds of young men with gratitude and esteem. However, once outside of the literary circle, the man was hard and cold as steel, keen as the edge of a sword. Had it been otherwise he could not have fulfilled the double duties of his life. And yet perhaps it was owing to this very fact—that he had to be one person in his literary friendship and a totally different person in his diplomatic and political sphere of action—that he began to feel at last that weird lonesomeness which inspired his little poem “Strangers Yet.”