

## WHAT IS COURTESY?

An eastern despot is said to have asked two interpreters the meaning of a dream which had troubled him. One of them bluntly replied, "Your Majesty will lose all your relatives and then die." He was promptly beheaded. The other put the matter less offensively, and said, "Your Majesty will survive all your relatives." He, for his equivocation and well-concealed warning, was loaded with favors. The latter was certainly more courteous than candid. The question therefore arises, What is true courtesy? Probably the derivation of the word suggests the original ideal, for it seems at first to have been used in reference to the court of a king or nobleman, whose friends or attendants were supposed to acquire a higher standard of feeling and greater grace of manners than prevailed in the lower grades of society. Although the behaviour of courtiers in the Middle Ages might be often somewhat artificial and insincere, the good old word never seems to have fallen into disrepute, or to have expressed anything but what was at least outwardly kind and graceful.

There is, of course, in the present day, a certain kind of surface-polish, which good breeding and intercourse with the higher circles of society may impart, while it may cover much insincerity and bitter feeling. But this is not courtesy worthy of the name. That springs from a proper sense of what is due to others, even to the poorest and humblest. It is prompted by benevolence as well as justice, and produces a delicate regard for the feelings and susceptibilities of all with whom we have to do. It unites kindness of heart to graciousness of manner. Even kind and generous actions are sometimes so performed as to cause the recipient more pain than pleasure, whilst a reproof or a refusal may be so sweetened by courtesy as to almost prevent a sense of mortification or disappointment. It was said of Caesar that his blame was so skillfully conveyed as to seem like praise; and Lord Chesterfield, in writing of the great Duke of Marlborough, relates, that although he frequently refused favours, he did so with a graciousness that consoled, and almost removed any feeling of vexation. This is a behaviour often appreciated by the lowest and most ill-bred persons; and although they could not describe it in so many words, they feel that they have to do with a gentleman.

I remember once landing at Kingstown from the Holyhead packet with a small hand-bag, which I was about to carry up a few hundred yards to the train for Dublin. A bright, keen-witted Irish boy ran after me, offering to relieve me of my burden. He pressed me so much that I at last asked how much he would take it for. With sparkling black eyes he replied, "Och, sir, for nothing at all, just for the honour of the thing." "Very well, my lad," I said, "you shall have the honour." So on we went to the station. When I had thanked him for his kind offices, and told him that he had enjoyed the coveted distinction, he touched his cap, and with a knowing twinkle of the eye, rejoined, "Ah! but your honour's a gentleman." He knew that that plea would be irresistible, as it proved. Young Paddy's tact was admirable, and his courtesy naturally won courteous treatment in return.

The late Dr. Chalmers laid great stress upon courtesy, especially as due from Christians to their inferiors in station. He had a very large sympathy with the common people, was quick to discover their better qualities, and never failed to treat them with the utmost politeness. He justly thought that country clergymen were particularly bound to inculcate civility and mutual respect upon their flocks, and to illustrate the lesson by their own examples. He used to tell an amusing story of a rural minister, who was so sadly deficient in this virtue, that in riding about his parish he never deigned to return the kindly and respectful greetings of the honest rustics. On one occasion the Doctor was staying with him, and was highly indignant at his ungracious conduct. "It actually appeared," said that generous, large hearted divine, "as if my friend's hat had been nailed to his head, and I was tempted to knock it off." Perhaps it might have been well if he had done so. That Scotch parson must have been very different from Henry IV. of France, who, when some one expressed surprise at his returning the salute of a poor man, inquired, "Would you have your king surpassed in politeness by the meanest of his subjects?" Very similar was the reply made in the days before the abolition of slavery by a Sir W. Johnson, who, when he had returned the salute of a negro, and had been told that this was not good form, answered, "Perhaps so; but I would not be outdone in good manners by a slave."

This reminds one of the story of the Archdeacon who was much concerned because the laborers of his parish passed him