

FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANING

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French Ways and Their Meaning by Edith Wharton

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BY

EDITH WHARTON

AUTHOR OF "THE RED," "SUMMER," "THE MARNE" AND
"THE HOUSE OF MIRTH"



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PREFACE

This book is essentially a desultory book, the result of intermittent observation, and often, no doubt, of rash assumption. Having been written in Paris, at odd moments, during the last two years of the war, it could hardly be more than a series of disjointed notes; and the excuse for its publication lies in the fact that the very conditions which made more consecutive work impossible also gave unprecedented opportunities for quick notation.

The world since 1914 has been like a house on fire. All the lodgers are on the stairs, in dishabille. Their doors are swinging wide, and one gets glimpses of their furniture, revelations of their habits, and whiffs of their cooking, that a life-time of ordinary intercourse would not offer. Superficial differences vanish, and so (how much oftener) do superficial resemblances; while deep unsus-

pected similarities and disagreements, deep common attractions and repulsions, declare themselves. It is of these fundamental substances that the new link between France and America is made, and some reasons for the strength of the link ought to be discoverable in the suddenly bared depths of the French heart.

There are two ways of judging a foreign people: at first sight, impressionistically, in the manner of the passing traveller; or after residence among them, "soberly, advisedly," and with all the vain precautions enjoined in another grave contingency.

Of the two ways, the first is, even in ordinary times, often the most fruitful. The observer, if he has eyes and an imagination, will be struck first by the superficial dissemblances, and they will give his picture the sharp suggestiveness of a good caricature. If he settles down among the objects of his study he will gradually become blunted to these dissemblances, or, if he probes below the surface, he

will find them sprung from the same stem as many different-seeming characteristics of his own people. A period of confusion must follow, in which he will waver between contradictions, and his sharp outlines will become blurred with what the painters call "repentances."

From this twilight it is hardly possible for any foreigner's judgment to emerge again into full illumination. Race-differences strike so deep that when one has triumphantly pulled up a specimen for examination one finds only the crown in one's hand, and the tough root still clenched in some crevice of prehistory. And as to race-resemblances, they are so often most misleading when they seem most instructive that any attempt to catch the likeness of another people by painting ourselves is never quite successful. Indeed, once the observer has gone beyond the happy stage when surface-differences have all their edge, his only chance of getting anywhere near the truth is

to try to keep to the traveller's way, and still see his subject in the light of contrasts.

It is absurd for an Anglo-Saxon to say: "The Latin is this or that" unless he makes the mental reservation, "or at least seems so to me"; but if this mental reservation is always implied, if it serves always as the background of the picture, the features portrayed may escape caricature and yet bear some resemblance to the original.

Lastly, the use of the labels "Anglo-Saxon" and "Latin," for purposes of easy antithesis, must be defended and apologised for.

Such use of the two terms is open to the easy derision of the scholar. Yet they are too convenient as symbols to be abandoned, and are safe enough if, for instance, they are used simply as a loose way of drawing a line between the peoples who drink spirits and those who drink wine, between those whose social polity dates from the Forum, and those who still feel and legislate in terms of the primæval forest.

This use of the terms is the more justifiable because one may safely say that most things in a man's view of life depend on how many thousand years ago his land was deforested. And when, as befell our forbears, men whose blood is still full of murmurs of the Saxon Urwald and the forests of Britain are plunged afresh into the wilderness of a new continent, it is natural that in many respects they should be still farther removed from those whose habits and opinions are threaded through and through with Mediterranean culture and the civic discipline of Rome.

One can imagine the first Frenchman born into the world looking about him confidently, and saying: "Here I am; and now, how am I to make the most of it?"

The double sense of the fugacity of life, and of the many and durable things that may be put into it, is manifest in every motion of the French intelligence. Sooner than any other race the French have got rid of bogies, have "cleared the mind of shams," and gone