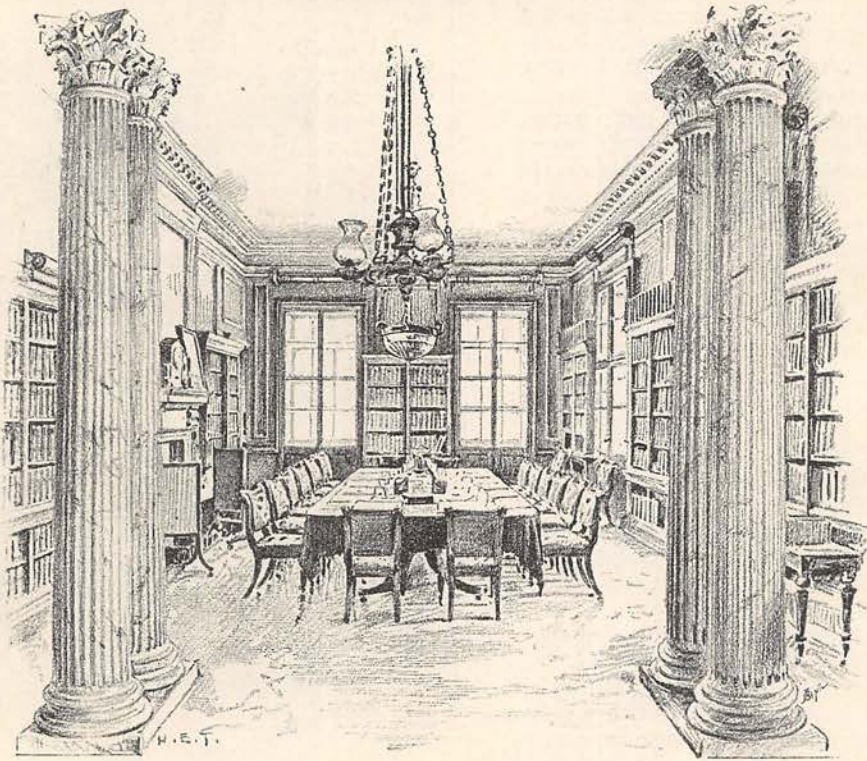
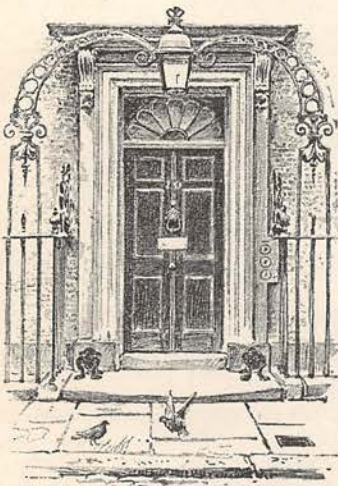


## THE CABINET AND ITS SECRETS.

BY SIR WEMYSS REID.



THE CABINET ROOM.



NO. 10, DOWNING STREET.

WITH each returning November the meetings of the Cabinet for the preparation of the programme of the coming Parliamentary Session begin. The outside world hears very little about these meetings. A paragraph appears in the papers saying that "A Cabinet Council was held yesterday in Downing Street, at which the following Ministers were present"; and then comes the usual list of

familiar names. Occasionally the reporter, who has been standing in Downing Street opposite the door of No. 10 watching Ministers come and go, adds a few descriptive touches to the bald paragraph, and tells us how "Lord Kimberley and the Home Secretary crossed over from the Foreign Office together," apparently in ignorance of the fact that the stately building which faces the tumble-down edifice where the Prime Minister of England has his official residence contains the Home, the India, and the Local Government offices as well as the Foreign Office. Or we may be told how Mr. John Morley and Lord Spencer, having met on the Horse Guards Parade, mounted the steps into Downing Street side by side. But that is all.

Ministers arrive separately or together, enter the mean old building by the venerable doorway, and are forthwith lost to sight. What they do within is known to themselves alone. No reporter follows them across the threshold. No cunning spy is hidden within the apartment in which they deliberate.



When the gloomy portals of No. 10 have closed upon them, they are forthwith lost to the outer world; a solemn secrecy attends all their doings. Yet no meetings to be compared in importance with these winter Cabinets are held anywhere else in the civilised world. Attended by less than a score of men, they are yet the convention of the real governing body of the greatest of the world's empires.

The Queen reigns. It is the Cabinet that rules. Now and again a Minister may rise so high above his fellows—by genius, character, or long experience—as to seem to be not only the central but the sole figure in the Government; but those "behind the scenes" know better than to fall into this delusion. Even the greatest of our modern Ministers have had to acknowledge the supreme authority of the Cabinet, which deliberating in secret, wields the sceptre of the State, and decides the policy of the Government.

It is true that, more especially in times of political excitement, the news agencies profess to know all about what has happened in the Cabinet a few hours after it has broken up. Cabinet Ministers must read these revelations of their mysteries with not a little

as those of the Cabinet. Probably, every Ministry has its "leaky" man, but the leakiest of mortals would shrink from breaking not only his oath as a Privy Councillor, but his honourable obligations to his colleagues, by making known the secrets of a Cabinet meeting. As a matter of fact, successive Cabinets have been extraordinarily fortunate in keeping their counsel. It is just half a century since the last recorded case of a deliberate breach of secrecy by a Cabinet Minister. Sir Robert Peel and his colleagues had arrived at a most momentous decision with regard to the Corn Laws, and the Prime Minister was to make the announcement on a certain day in the House of Commons. On the morning of that day the *Times* came out with a leader in which the whole secret was revealed. There was wild consternation in official circles. None knew how the truth had become known. A meeting of the Cabinet was hastily summoned, and at that meeting a young member of the Government, with shame and confusion, confessed that a famous and beautiful woman had cajoled him into telling what Ministers intended to do—a piece of news which she forthwith sold for a large sum of money to the *Times*. He, of course,

had never contemplated the possibility of her making such use of the story he had confided to her; and now in his

contrition he placed his resignation in the hands of his chief. The resignation was not accepted, and the young statesman was forgiven. But never afterwards was he known to breathe a whisper as to the private doings of the Government of which he was a member.

"But do Cabinet secrets never come out accidentally?" I once

asked the most illustrious Minister of my time.

"The secrets of Ministries are almost invariably suspected and discovered," was the unexpected response. "But the public are always told *more than the truth*; and as they never know what is true and what is false, the secret is consequently kept all the same."

Anyone who is acquainted with a member of a Cabinet will know how carefully in conversation, even with his intimate friends, he will keep off anything that belongs to the



"THE EMPTY CHAIR." MR GLADSTONE'S ROOM AT NO. 10, DOWNING STREET.

amusement. The reader may depend upon it that even the most authoritative of such announcements are mere guesses at the truth, and, as a rule, very bad guesses too. No secrets are kept so jealously or so successfully



Cabinet. He may listen eagerly to what you have to say on the question of the hour; but he is himself so vague in his expressions regarding it, that you might suppose he had no opinions at all, if you did not know that he was keeping his true mind for his colleagues.



MR. ASQUITH AND LORD KIMBERLEY.

"I can say nothing about that; it is a Cabinet matter," is what I have more than once heard a Minister say when the talk, which had been perfectly unreserved up to that moment, had turned in a forbidden direction. To try to "pump" a Cabinet Minister, as many journalists do, is a well-nigh hopeless task. Up to a certain point he will be perfectly frank; but when that point is reached, and Cabinet business is touched upon, he becomes absolutely silent.

The last recorded case of a great secret being preserved with scrupulous care was Mr. Gladstone's resignation. That resignation did not take effect until the beginning of March in the present year; but in December last the Cabinet knew that, in certain circumstances, it was coming. Yet no hint of it was breathed from any authoritative source for nearly three months after it had been decided upon. The announcement in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which appeared in January, was wrong in its dates and in other particulars, and, as is now generally understood, was based upon gossip that lay far outside the limits of

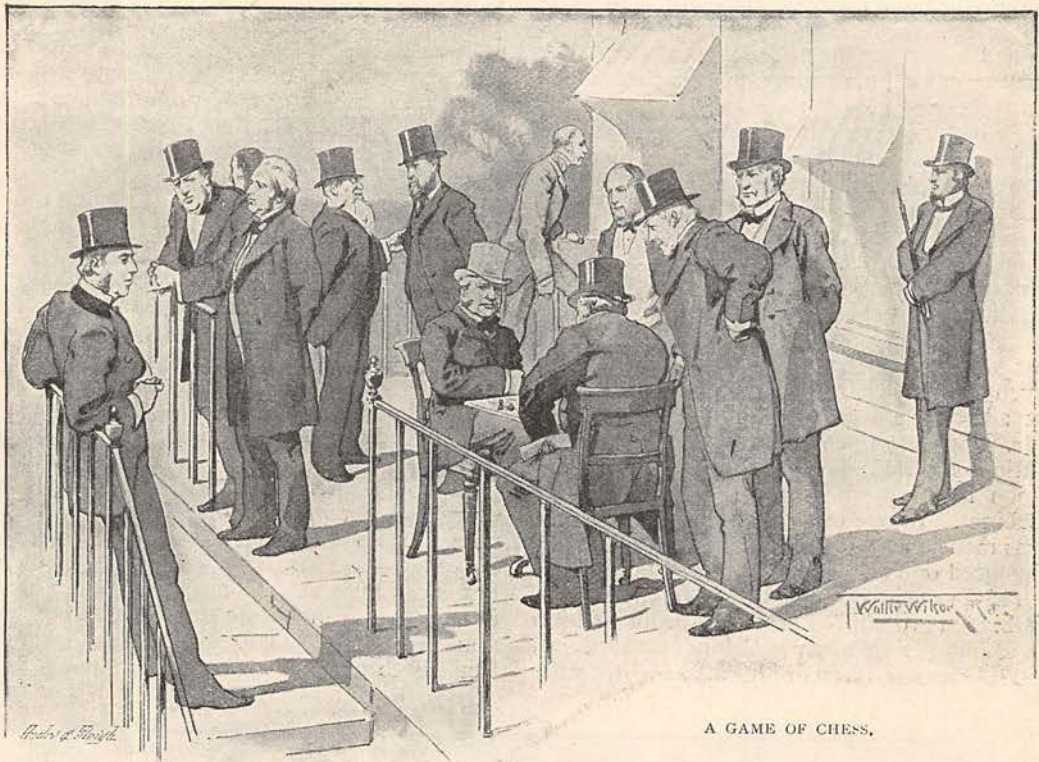
the Cabinet. Thus for many weeks a most important State secret was kept intact, and it was preserved in spite of the fact that the *Pall Mall* announcement had put everybody on the alert, so that for all those weeks every member of the Cabinet was subject to an examination and cross-examination of the most rigid kind. One Cabinet Minister, when the truth was at last made known, said to me, with a sigh of relief—"Well; the great secret is out at last, you see. Thank heaven! I feel as if a mountain had been lifted off my shoulders." It must, indeed, be no light matter for a man to go about carrying so momentous a secret as this locked up in his bosom. Yet this is the burden which is constantly laid upon Cabinet Ministers.

It is all the more surprising that these secrets should be kept so well, seeing that they cannot be confined entirely to the actual members of the Cabinet. The private secretaries of the Prime Minister and of at least one or two other Ministers know many of the most important secrets. Yet there is only one recorded instance of a private secretary betraying his chief. Nor is this all. When the Cabinets are being held small despatch boxes are constantly being sent round among the members. These contain the most confidential documents, important despatches, drafts of Bills, memoranda addressed by individual members of the Cabinet to their colleagues, and the comments of the latter upon



LORD SPENCER AND MR. JOHN MORLEY.





A GAME OF CHESS.

them; and all these documents are printed. It is true that each bears upon it the words: "Most secret; for the use of the Cabinet." But, remembering how other private and confidential documents have become public, one may well wonder at the almost complete immunity from disasters of this kind that these Cabinet documents have enjoyed. They are printed, I ought to say, in the confidential printing department at the Foreign Office, where the subordinates are as trustworthy as if they were private secretaries or even Cabinet Ministers themselves.

Accidents happen sometimes, of course; but it is wonderful how even then good fortune seems to follow the attempt to guard these august secrets from the profane gaze. When the Home Rule Bill of 1893 was being prepared by the Cabinet, and when the most intense curiosity prevailed everywhere as to its character, a member of a certain famous club went up to a table in the club library to write a letter. He noticed that some printed documents had been left on the table by the gentleman who last sat there, and he was about to push them carelessly on one side when his eye caught certain words. Among the documents was the secret draft copy of

the Home Rule Bill as printed for the use of the Cabinet only! One can imagine the sensation that would have been created if that draft copy had fallen into unscrupulous or even into merely hostile hands. But the gentleman who made the discovery was himself the private secretary of a Cabinet Minister. He knew his duty, and instantly enclosing the awful document in an envelope he sealed it up and carried it to Downing Street.

"I'll show you the Bill itself, if you would like to see it," said a certain Minister to a friend of mine, who was trying to draw him as to the nature of a very important measure then before the Cabinet.

My friend gave a gasp of delight.

"Here it is," said the Minister, holding up the print of the Bill, but folded and securely tied up with red tape. It was a cruel disappointment.

"It does not matter what we say; but remember, we must all say the same thing." This is one of the sayings attributed to Lord Melbourne, when he was Prime Minister. It marks, perhaps, the most important of all the characteristics of the Cabinet system. That is, that the Cabinet is strictly impersonal. Its decisions are not Mr. A's or Mr. B's, but the decisions of the Cabinet. There are, as we know, frequent discussions and even divisions inside Cabinets; but unless they lead to the



resignation of a member, they are kept carefully from the knowledge of the outer world. When a decision has been taken, no matter how strongly some individual Ministers may have been opposed to it, all are bound by their oath and their honour to defend it with equal warmth and earnestness. It is this fact which gives solidarity to a Cabinet. As soon as the chinks in the structure appear, the Cabinet itself is doomed. Members of the Cabinet will admit that they only arrived at a particular decision after long and anxious consideration; but wild horses will not drag from them any revelation as to the numbers for or against that decision, nor will they even admit that they were divided upon it at all. Once I remember I was allowed by Mr. Gladstone to consult him as to the publication of certain political documents bearing upon important but bygone matters in the Cabinet. In one of these documents, the fact was mentioned that a majority of the Cabinet favoured one course and a minority the other. "This I take it," Mr. Gladstone wrote to me, "is forbidden ground." There must be no mention of majority or minority in Cabinet proceedings. Only under one condition is the member

of a Cabinet released from his oath of secrecy. That is, when he differs so far from the policy of his colleagues as to find himself compelled to resign office. Then, if he wishes to explain his reasons for resigning to Parliament, he makes humble application to the Queen for permission to speak, and the application having been granted, he makes his statement.

Space forbids me to say more about those Cabinet secrets which ignorant gossips are always pretending to reveal. It is time to say something very briefly about the meetings at which these secrets are concocted and discussed. The meetings of the Cabinet are usually fixed some days beforehand, and the members duly warned. Occasionally, however, when some important event happens unexpectedly, the summons is sent by special messenger and only a few hours' notice is given. Whether the notice be long or short, every member of the Cabinet must be in his place, unless some overpowering reason for his absence exists. No social engagement however important, no business matter however urgent, can be pleaded as a reason for non-attendance. Only two reasons will in fact suffice as an excuse—serious illness and



MR. GLADSTONE'S FAREWELL TO HIS COLLEAGUES.



the fact that the Minister is in attendance upon the Queen at a distance from London. The meetings of the Cabinet are held at present in the Pillar Room at Downing Street, a spacious apartment which was used as a drawing-room by Mrs. Gladstone during her husband's last Premiership. During that period the Cabinets were held in the dining-room of the Prime Minister's official residence. This was a somewhat inconvenient apartment for the purpose, and Ministers have been heard to complain of the fact that they were crowded together, with no proper accommodation for their papers. Indeed stories have been told of important Cabinets at which some Ministers had to squat on the floor. In the Pillar Room each Minister has his own seat and portfolio at a long table. Until the reign of George the Second the Sovereign always presided in person at a meeting of the Cabinet Council, and in the room now occupied by Sir William Harcourt at No. 11, Downing Street—which happens to be that in which Cabinets were held in former days—the throne on which the Monarch sat when attending the deliberations of his Ministers may still be seen. George the Second understood so little English that the meetings of the Cabinet became irksome to him, and, instead of attending them in person, he gave directions that the Prime Minister should furnish him with a written account of the proceedings after the meeting. This course has been adopted ever since, and one of the duties of the Premier is, immediately after the close of a Cabinet, to despatch to the Queen a full account of its deliberations. This is the only record of the Cabinet meeting that is kept; for not the least remarkable characteristic of this supreme and unrivalled body is the absolute informality of all its proceedings. When the members of the Cabinet have assembled the door is immediately closed, and under no circumstances is it re-opened except at the bidding of the Prime Minister. It is guarded outside by two trusty Treasury servants, whilst the private secretaries of the Premier are at hand to receive any communication or direction from their chief. The Prime Minister is, of course, always the president at a Cabinet meeting; and, as a rule, his decisions as to the course taken are those which prevail. His vote counts, it is true, for no more than that of his youngest colleague; but, whereas the resignation of the latter might be a matter of little consequence, the retirement of the Premier would probably involve the fall of the Cabinet.

The proceedings at a Cabinet are usually short—an hour to an hour and a half sees the end of the deliberations. But occasionally

in times of grave crisis, chiefly in foreign affairs, the meetings last much longer. Whether long or short a Cabinet Minister must sustain himself during the sitting with no more appetising refreshment than a glass of iced water and a hard biscuit. And the proceedings themselves? The reader would like to know what is done at a Cabinet meeting. So would I. But then the only people who can tell are bound to keep silent. One may say, however, that the Cabinet, like all other committees, enjoys a certain amount of variety in its proceedings. Sometimes it is very grave, and at other times its tone is almost jocular. Occasionally there is something which amongst less exalted personages would be described as a wrangle; for even Cabinet Ministers have their personal likes and dislikes, and can hit hard at each other when the doors are closed and they are discussing important questions in private.

Among famous Cabinet meetings known to history, is that in the Government of Lord Aberdeen, which Kinglake has described for us—the meeting when many of the members of the Cabinet were dozing while the fateful despatches that led to the Crimean War were being read. Another was the Cabinet held in 1872, at the time of the Geneva Arbitration, when Ministers found themselves face to face with the American claim for "indirect damages."

It was my fortune to be allowed to lift the veil from the secrecy in which that particular meeting of the Cabinet was involved, by printing in the "Life of William Edward Forster" the passage from his diary in which he told the story of how the members of the Cabinet, tired of waiting for the news from Geneva which did not come, but afraid to separate without it, were all falling asleep, when Lord Granville suggested that he and Forster might have a game of chess to pass the time. A chess-board was smuggled into the Cabinet-room by one of the private secretaries, and as the day was warm Granville and Forster went out upon the terrace to play. They were naturally followed by their colleagues; and by a lucky chance, they were observed by a clerk in the Colonial Office, who made a sketch of the scene. He never knew what it meant until Mr. Forster's "Life" was published.

Sometimes there are scenes of a graver and more pathetic character than this within the secret chamber. Mr. Forster has told us how, in 1873, when Mr. Gladstone met his Cabinet after the defeat on the Irish University question, he began to address them in a jocular manner, but suddenly broke down and could say no more by way of thanks to his faithful



subordinates. He has told us too how, when he himself left the Ministry in 1882, he went round, after telling them he must go, and shook hands with all the other members of the Cabinet, many of whom were visibly affected. There is another and still more memorable scene of the same kind of which I have had a private account. On the second of March last, Mr. Gladstone was present at a meeting of the Cabinet for the last time. He knew it, and his colleagues knew it, but the outer world did not know. That he was about to retire was by this time known to all; but only the initiated knew that this was to be his last Cabinet. The man who had been present at a greater number of Cabinet meetings than any other Englishman of this century,

he who had in four successive Ministries presided over the secret deliberations of his colleagues, was now meeting them for the last time, and meeting them simply to say farewell. There was a pathetic scene at that particular meeting of the Cabinet. One who was present has so far violated the secrecy of his office as to tell me that nearly all were in tears as for the last time they gathered round their veteran leader and silently shook hands with him. No more would they hear his voice in the innermost councils of the State; the foremost figure in the Parliamentary life of their time was passing from them. Such a meeting was an event of historic interest, and it has furnished a subject which the painter will probably some day make his own.



## PYRRHA AND SMUGG.

BY ANTHONY HOPE, AUTHOR OF "THE PRISONER OF ZENDA," "FATHER STAFFORD," &c.



It was common knowledge that Smugg was engaged to be married. Familiarity had robbed the fact of some of its surprisingness, but there remained a substratum of wonder, not removed even by the sight of his betrothed's

photograph and the information that she was a distant relative who had been brought up with him from infancy. The features and the explanation between them rescued Smugg from the incongruity of a romance, but we united in the opinion that the lady was ill-advised in preferring Smugg to solitude. Still, for all that he was a ridiculous creature, she did, and hence it happened that Smugg, desiring to form a furnishing fund, organised a reading-party, which Gayford, Tritton, Bird, and I at once joined. Such a nonentity as Smugg is a treasure when one's people insist on a tutor for the Long, and, if he did not teach us anything, he earned his money by the agony of mind which he suffered under the consciousness of failure.

Every morning at nine Smugg, his breakfast finished, cleared his corner of the table, opened his books, and assumed an expectant air: so Mary the maid told us; we were never there ourselves; we breakfasted at 9.30 or 10 o'clock, and only about 11 did we clear our corners, light our pipes, open our books, and discuss the prospects of the day. As we discussed them, Smugg construed in a gentle bleat; what he construed or why he construed

it (seeing that nobody heeded him) was a mystery; the whole performance was simply a tribute to Smugg's conscience, and, as such, was received with good-natured scornful toleration.

Suddenly a change came. One morning there was no Smugg! Yet he had breakfasted—Mary and an egg-shell testified to that effect. He re-appeared at 11.30, confused and very warm (he had exceptional powers in the way of being warm). We said nothing, and he began to bleat Horace. In a minute of silence I happened to hear what it was: it referred to a lady of the name of Pyrrha; the learned may identify the passage for themselves. The next day the same thing happened, except that it was close on twelve before Smugg appeared. Gayford and Tritton took no notice of the aberration; Bird congratulated Smugg on the increased docility of his conscience. I watched him closely as he wiped his brow—he was very warm indeed. A third time the scene was enacted; my curiosity was aroused; I made Mary call me very early, and from my window I espied Smugg leaving the house at 9.15, and going with rapid furtive steps along the little path that led to old Dill's tiny farm. I slipped downstairs, bolted a cup of tea, seized a piece of toast, and followed Smugg. He was out of sight, but presently I met Joe Shanks, the butcher's son, who brought us our chops. Joe was a stout young man, about twenty-one, red-faced, burly, and greasy. We used to have many jokes with Joe; even Smugg had before now broken a mild shaft of classical wit on him; in fact, we made a butt of Joe, and his good-humoured muttoney smile told us that he thought it a compliment.