

## MR. GLADSTONE.

BY HENRY W. LUCY.



O Mr. Gladstone has fallen the lot of being almost literally born again. When in 1874 he wrote the historic letter to "My dear Granville" there is no doubt he had convinced himself that his political career was closed, and that whatever years of life might remain to him would be dedicated to literature. He was awakened in his study by the cry of distress from Bulgaria. How he re-entered the arena, with what terrible energy he threw himself into the fray, how he carried the fiery cross over the border, and, almost single-handed, routed a powerful Ministry and a well-disciplined party, are matters written in the chronicles of the day. Once more he was defeated at the poll, suffering in 1886 a reverse not less crushing than that which fell upon him in 1874. With twelve years

added to his already exceptional burden it might reasonably have been expected that at last he would cry "Hold, enough!" take off his armour and diligently seek repose.

Again ordinary expectation was falsified. In 1886 he did not even show those signs of disappointment and discomfiture plainly marked in 1874. In a hopeless minority in the House of Commons, divided by a widening chasm from esteemed friends—one, John Bright, the close companion of twenty years—he took upon himself to the full extent the ordinary duties of Leader of the Opposition, and in Parliament, on the platform, and in the press was busier even than in his prime. The colleague to whom the valedictory letter of 1874 was written has passed away. An innumerable company of friends old and young have fallen at his side, like leaves in wintry weather. He stands erect and virile, the only mark of old age notable about him being a shade of silver-grey. Midsummer of 1892 found him embarking upon an electoral campaign in Scotland with as much vigour and as full of capacity for work as he possessed when in the same month twenty-seven years ago he set forth for South Lancashire—"unmuzzled" as he told the enthusiastic electors.

Extreme age has ever been a recommendation to the public on behalf of any man connected with public affairs. It was by virtue of his old age that Lord Palmerston remained to the last in power, after a stormy career idol of the people and leader of a party that broke up immediately upon his death, the larger and more active section who had suffered him merely on account of his age striking out for themselves a path long yearned after, but not hitherto sought because it was "not Pam's way." In the general election of this year, one of the most Radical constituencies in the Kingdom has returned unopposed a man who is in direct opposition to the prevalent local current of opinion, but who is in his ninetieth year. Mr. Gladstone is as yet only eighty-three,



but for sixty years, with increasing proportions, he has been a prominent feature in public life. Humanity has a selfish personal interest in octogenarians. Even if destined to die at twenty-seven a man likes in the meanwhile to know there are possibilities of living to eighty-three. If they had no other claims to public esteem, men like Lord Palmerston, Lord Beaconsfield, Mr. Gladstone, and Mr. Villiers *encouragent les autres*.

Aside from mere longevity Mr. Gladstone's personality is one that could not fail to fascinate the public. Politics apart—and in this brief study of the man politics have no place—he is irresistible. The tendency, equally compulsory, moves in two directions. He is at once the most passionately loved and the most fiercely hated man in England. Perhaps both are wrong, and Mr. Chamberlain may have hit the happy mean in his similitude of great men to great mountains, and his insistence on the condition of distance as a necessity of true appreciation of their proportions.

In the meanwhile it is pleasing to note that in the late House of Commons all the asperities that at one time pricked at the mere presence of Mr. Gladstone have been smoothed down. There was a memorable scene in the Parliament of 1874 when he, going out to vote on one of the Resolutions challenging the policy of the Government, was assailed by some of his fellow-members in the corridor with hoots and groans. In the final session of the late Parliament there was nothing more noticeable than the attitude of respect, almost of deference, with which the Ministerial majority bore themselves towards the Leader of the Opposition. There was, doubtless, change on both sides. Advancing age seemed to have mellowed the great Parliamentary fighter. Moreover the Conservative party were in this respect fortunate in their Leader. Mr. Gladstone always had a strong personal liking and admiration for Mr. Arthur Balfour, and when he came into the Leadership of the House bore himself towards him with something of a fatherly air, pretty to see and soothing amid the turmoil of faction fight.

It is amongst the masses that the fascination of Mr. Gladstone's personality works its way with fullest witchery. In the front rank of statesmen, a great orator, a ripe scholar, he is, they are glad to think, actually one of them. His homely domestic life is worth untold votes at a General Election. The people like to think of him with his plain prefix of "Mr.," his daughters who marry curates or work in schools, his sons who are "something in the City," and do not marry duchesses. They like his stripping to the shirt to fell a tree, his going to church on Sundays and to the theatre or concert on Wednesdays or Saturdays. It is what they do themselves, or would do if they had the chance. He is one of them, to be trusted, fought for if need be, always esteemed with a sort of family affection. People who live at home in London have no opportunity of seeing and realising the intensity of this feeling. It is, perhaps, vulgar, certainly provincial. In Scotland it exists with an intensity unequalled since the days of Prince Charlie, a citation which shows how wide and varied is the capacity of the populace to take a particular man to its heart.

I happened to see a good deal of it in the last Midlothian campaign. Politics of course had much to do with drawing together the multitudes that surged round the platform wherever Mr. Gladstone spoke, or in the streets, as Glasgow filled on the Saturday afternoon he drove through the city. I was more struck with the demonstrations made in the remoter country districts through which he occasionally drove. There was no cottager too poor to decorate his house on the day "Mester Gledstane" was to honour it by passing by. The decoration was often only a red cotton pocket-handkerchief or a bit of ribbon of the Gladstone colour. But it had the value of being home-made and spontaneous. An old lady, housekeeper at a lodge in Haddingtonshire, told me in her musically spoken Doric a little story which, better than pages of narrative or analysis, illustrates the hold Mr. Gladstone has on the common people.

"An auld man, Geordie Paul," she said, "lived all alone in a wee cot up there," pointing to a hill close by. "He used to sit at his door reading the paper spread on his knee, and many's the time, when he thought naebody was looking, I've seen him greeting, and the tears drapt down on the paper and he often muttered to himself 'to think they'd use Gledstane sae ill and he sic a man!' The nicht afore Geordie deed I went in to see what I could dae for him. There he was, sitting in the corner of his bed so weak he could not get on more than one arm of his jacket, but he had the paper propped up against the other (upside down), and the last words he said to me were: 'There's wan thing, Liz; if I could only see that Irish question settled!'"

This of course will sound very ridiculous in Mayfair. The poor man knew nothing



about the Irish question, the intricacies of which have baffled more fully-cultured persons. But he knew that "Mester Gledstane" had made the question his own, had devoted the closing days of his life to its settlement. That was enough for the Scottish cotter, and his dimmed eyes turned upon his newspaper, searching in its blurred columns if peradventure, before they finally closed, they might alight upon some indication of the accomplishment of Mr. Gladstone's heart's desire.

In addition to a phenomenal physical constitution nature has been lavish to Mr. Gladstone in other ways. Education, association, and instinct early led him into the political arena, where he immediately made his mark. But there are half a dozen other professions he might have embarked upon with equal certainty of success. Had he followed the line one of his brothers took he would have become a prince among the merchants of Liverpool. Had he taken to the legal profession he would have filled the courts with his fame. Had he entered the Church its highest honours would have been within his grasp. If the stage had allured him the world would have been richer by another great actor—an opportunity some of his critics say not altogether lost in existing circumstances. To the personal gifts of a mobile countenance, a voice sonorous and flexible, and a fine presence, Mr. Gladstone possesses dramatic instincts frequently brought into play in House of Commons debate or in his platform speeches. In both his tendency is rather towards comedy than tragedy. It is the fashion to deny him a sense of humour, a judgment that could be passed only by a superficial observer. In private conversation his marvellous memory gives forth from its apparently illimitable store an appropriate and frequently humorous illustration of the current topic. If his fame had not been established on a loftier line he would be known as one of the most delightful conversationalists of the day.

It is in this respect that his tirelessness habitually amazes those who come in contact with him. Ordinary men of half his age, having spent themselves in oratorical effort, are glad to benefit by a brief period of seclusion and rest. Mr. Gladstone, like all great workers, finds recreation in change of employment. One night at the beginning of last session he had before the dinner hour delivered an important and critical speech which compelled the admiration of the House of Commons. It was one of those, of late not infrequent, crises in which he has, to borrow an episcopal simile, endeavoured to walk on both sides of the road at the same time. Ministers were attacked on a question of policy from below the gangway on the Opposition side. Mr. Gladstone believed the attack was undeserved and impolitic. The task he had set himself on interposing in debate was to justify Ministers without affronting an important section of his own party. This he did with a skill, a dexterity, and an exact niceness of proportion, that won the applause of both sides. His speech, exceeding an hour in the delivery, was concluded at half-past seven, and the most natural thing expected in such circumstance from a gentleman over eighty was that he would straightway drive home, dispose of a judiciously selected meal, and go early to bed. What actually happened was that half an hour later, punctual to the appointed time, Mr. Gladstone turned up to keep a dinner engagement, having in the meantime changed his dress and driven some distance. Throughout the dinner he talked as freshly and as brilliantly as if he had spent the afternoon lolling on the lawn at Dollis Hill, and had leisurely made his way into town. Nor was this all. The Clergy Discipline Bill stood on the Orders, and might, or might not, be reached before the House rose. The strong probability, realised in the event, was that it would not. But Mr. Gladstone, much interested in the question, would not miss opportunity to take part in the debate, and returned to the House at eleven o'clock, prepared to contribute a second important speech to the proceedings of the sitting.

Mr. Gladstone's table talk is so charming that any company privileged to hear it would be content that he should monopolise the conversation. But though he is a lavish contributor he avoids the unpardonable sin laid in similar circumstances to the charge of Coleridge and Lord Macaulay. In conversation he seems rather to be led than to lead, and certainly misses no opportunity of adding to his stock of information from any who chance to be authorities on particular subjects, whether important or immaterial. At eighty-three he is always ready and anxious to learn. After a colloquy on the relative merits of Scott and Burns as poets (in which, probably from desire to bring others out, he assumed that points of comparison are possible) he observes that at the hospital the table round which the guests are



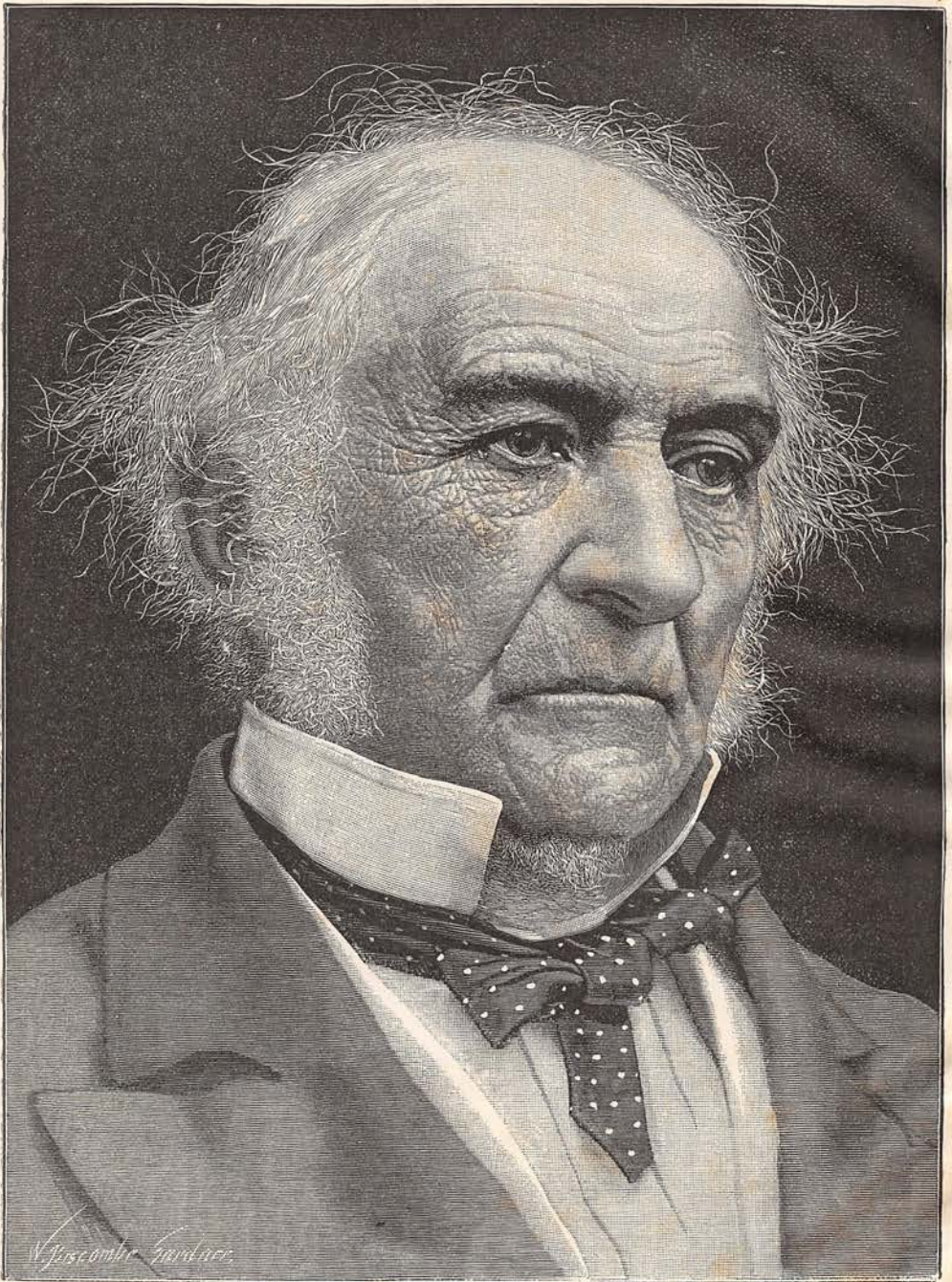
gathered fish-knives are not provided. Fish-knives *per se* do not proffer a favourable subject for conversation. But when Mr. Gladstone leads the way fish-knives are found to possess quite a remarkable interest. He remembers quite well when they were a novelty. Thirty years ago is the date he unhesitatingly fixes for their appearance on English dinner tables. Where did they come from? He thinks he saw them first at Liverpool, and surmises that they may be of Transatlantic origin. These and other details are discussed with contagious intensity, in the very climax of a political campaign, on the evening of a day spent in the turmoil of a great city which had turned its population *en masse* to welcome him in the streets, and had been subsequently addressed by him in a powerful speech impeaching the Ministry.

In this capacity for, and habit of, throwing all his soul and body into whatever business he undertakes lies the secret of Mr. Gladstone's commanding force and influence. Whatever he is doing or discussing at a particular moment is regarded by him a matter worthy of the concentration of the whole of his forces. This though good in itself implies a lack of sense of proportion, and sometimes leads him into positions or predicaments that are undignified, even ridiculous. In the House of Commons it has come to be a well-known fact, happily less patent now than it was ten years ago, that any one, however insignificant, can "draw Gladstone." There are several men, not all as eminent as Lord Randolph Churchill, who directly owe their political advancement to this weakness on the part of a great man. At the present time there is a gentleman comfortably provided for as a judge at the Antipodes, whose sole claim to recognition by the Government of the day was that when Mr. Gladstone rose to address the House this otherwise inarticulate member used to shout "Oh! oh!" or "Ah! ah!" Such an interruption would not in the least have disconcerted Mr. Disraeli when he occupied a similar position. He would have ignored it from the first, and the gentleman in question would never have been a colonial judge. Mr. Gladstone when thus assailed was wont to halt in his speech, display irritation, and sometimes personally address the wholly inconsiderable interrupter, so encouraging him to persist. With all his learning he has never mastered the philosophy of the ancient saying that an eagle does not catch flies.

Mr. Gladstone remains to this day what he was even in Mr. Bright's prime, the finest orator in the House of Commons. In sheer debating power he is excelled by Mr. Chamberlain, who with not less of his adroitness and command of language has a way of going straight to a point and hammering it down which Mr. Gladstone, allured by by-paths of illustration or commentary, sometimes fails to find. But when it comes to lofty and sustained oratory Mr. Gladstone is inapproachable. This is shown in half a dozen ways. One, peculiar and convincing, appears in connection with the duty which from time to time calls upon a leader of the House to lament the death of an eminent member. Mr. Disraeli felt the difficulty of this situation so acutely that on a famous occasion he borrowed from a French statesman when he desired to pronounce a eulogy at the grave of an English Captain. Mr. Bright when he rose to speak to the House of Commons of his dead friend Cobden was movingly eloquent. But it was the eloquence of broken speech and faltering tongue. The last occasion on which this duty was performed in the House of Commons followed upon the death of John Bright, and as, owing to peculiar circumstances, an unusually large number of members took part in the scene there was fuller opportunity of estimating the difficulties of the situation. Of the five members who spoke Mr. Chamberlain ranked lowest, his method of approaching the subject, and certain passages of his speech, visibly grating on the feeling of the House. The brief speeches of Mr. W. H. Smith and Lord Hartington were simple and unaffected; but they were not eloquence, a height more nearly approached by Mr. Justin McCarthy, who on this occasion reached the loftiest level of his Parliamentary speech. Mr. Gladstone at the outset instinctively touched the right chord, and throughout his speech played upon it, satisfying the exacting taste of the audience.

It is on occasions such as this the House of Commons sees through the haze of party conflict how noble are the proportions of the figure that has dwelt amongst it for more than fifty years, and how wide will be the space created when it finally withdraws from the scene.





*W. Gladstone*

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