

CHAPTER LXXXIII

SIR GALAHAD

WHEN Lord Derby resigned, there was a doubt as to his successor. Lord John Russell was set aside and, on grounds of health, Lord Lansdowne refused the office.

It is of Lord Lansdowne that Greville uses what is perhaps the most delicious phrase in all his pages:

London, January 19, 1849: . . . Stanley and Aberdeen will do their best or their worst in the House of Lords, but all their blows will fall on the soft, non-resisting cushion of Lansdowne's evasive urbanity.

Lord Aberdeen, therefore, headed a coalition. And of Aberdeen Greville etches a slight portrait:

July 27, 1831: Yesterday Aberdeen asked Lord Grey some questions in a very few words, accompanied as usual with a sneer, which is very unbecoming, and of course gave Lord Grey the advantage of repelling it with scorn.

He was Sir Robert Peel's Foreign Secretary:

November 24, 1841: . . . They tell me that Aberdeen is doing very well, working very hard, taking up every question, writing well on them all, and displaying much greater firmness than he did before.

According to Henry Reeve it was "the deep distrust and dislike" of Sir Robert Peel and "the hostility" of Aberdeen that kept Palmerston out of the Tory party:

March 25, 1849: Lord Aberdeen made a strong attack on Palmerston on Thursday night about the affairs of Piedmont, denouncing his partiality for Sardinia and against Austria, and particularly his suppression of an important despatch in the papers he had laid before Parliament at the beginning of the last session. . . . But Lord John was amazed at what had occurred, and said that he never saw the Blue Books before

they are presented, and therefore had not known what was put before Parliament and what was not. It was a very damaging discussion to Palmerston, as far as *character* is concerned.

The difficulty was (June 3, 1849) that Peel, "though abhorring the foreign policy" of Palmerston, was "in dread of doing anything to damage the [Free Trade] Government."

The first question was whether Palmerston would join Aberdeen or insist on "going into furious opposition":

December 23, 1852: It appears that on Tuesday [21st] Aberdeen went to Palmerston, who received him very civilly, even cordially, talked of old times, and reminded him that they had been acquainted for sixty years (since they were at Harrow together), and had lived together in the course of their political lives more than most men.

They parted, ostensibly on "very friendly terms." It was Lord Lansdowne who later "hooked Palmerston."

June, 22, 1863: . . . [Clarendon] says the difficulty is made greater by Aberdeen's unfortunate manner, who cannot avoid some of that sneering tone in discussion which so seriously affects his popularity in the House of Lords. He is therefore obliged to take a great deal upon himself, in order to prevent any collision between Palmerston and Aberdeen.

So "the new Ministers took their places on the Treasury bench and the Derby and Co., moved over to the other side." Only the Radicals were "sulky and suspicious."

London, January 24, 1853: . . . The Duke told me that the Queen is delighted to have got rid of Derby and his crew. She felt, as everybody else does, that their government was disgraced by its falsehood, shuffling, and prevarication. . . . She said that Harcourt's pamphlet (which was all true) was sufficient to show what they were. As she is very honourable and true herself, it was natural she should disapprove their conduct.

September 2, 1853: . . . She has heard (I know not how, but she hears everything) of his shabby practices on the turf, and she said that his political conduct was of a piece with his racing. It appears that when Derby went to take leave of her, he told her the government which was to succeed his, would never go

on, which was not very becoming, and he was quite ready to do all he could to bring about the accomplishment of his own prediction by thwarting their measures, if he had been able to do so.

London, December 28, 1852: . . . We are just going down to Windsor, the old Government to give up seals, wands, etc., the new to be sworn in. They go by different railways, that they may not meet.

March 1, 1853: . . . Aberdeen seems to have no notion of being anything but a *real* Prime Minister. He means to exercise a large influence in the management of foreign affairs, which he considers to be the peculiar, if not exclusive, province of himself and Clarendon. Palmerston does not interfere with them at all.

Hatchford, Friday, December 24, 1852: . . . The Cabinet . . . will be wonderfully strong in point of ability, and in this respect exhibit a marked contrast with the last; but its very excellence in this respect may prove a source of weakness, and eventually of disunion. The late Cabinet had two paramount chiefs, and all the rest nonentities, and the nominal head was also a real and predominant head. In the present Cabinet are five or six first-rate men of equal or nearly equal pretensions, none of them likely to acknowledge the superiority or defer to the opinions of any other, and every one of these five or six considering himself abler and more important than their Premier. They are all at present on very good terms and perfectly satisfied with each other; but this satisfaction does not extend beyond the Cabinet itself.

February 11, 1853: . . . He is unfortunately a very bad speaker at all times, and, what is worse in a Prime Minister, has no readiness whatever. Lord Lansdowne would have made a very pretty and dexterous flourish, and answered the question.

During Derby's Administration, Gladstone had been "leader of the Opposition" in the House of Commons. He was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer in succession to Disraeli.

February 25, 1853: . . . The man in the House of Commons whom he [Disraeli] most fears as an opponent is Gladstone. He has the highest opinion of his ability, and he respects Graham as a statesman.

Bath, February 15, 1860: . . . They say that he betrays in the House of Commons a sort of consciousness of his inferiority to Gladstone, and of fear of encountering him in debate.

The anger of the Tories against Gladstone was unrestrained: *December 23, 1852:* . . . The other day twenty ruffians of the Carlton Club gave a dinner there to Beresford, to celebrate what they consider his acquittal! After dinner, when they got drunk, they went upstairs, and finding Gladstone alone in the drawing room, some of them proposed to throw him out of the window. This they did not quite dare to do, but contented themselves with giving some insulting message or order to the waiter, and then went away.

Oxford, though sober, showed less hesitation:

January 5, 1853: The elections are all going on well, except Gladstone's, who appears in great jeopardy. Nothing could exceed the disgraceful conduct of his opponents, lying, tricking, and shuffling, as might be expected from such a party. The best thing that could happen for Gladstone would be to be beaten, if it were not for the triumph it would be to the blackguards who have got up the contest; for the representation of Oxford is always an embarrassment to a statesman, and Peel's losing his election there in 1829 was the most fortunate event possible for him.

Gladstone's advance toward Liberalism had been slow. Even as late as February 3, 1847, when a Tory government was possible, we read, "Gladstone they expect to get."

The Government began (April 21, 1853) by "sustaining defeats in the House of Commons on detached questions of taxation":

London, April 21, 1853: . . . They were caused by the meddling and absurd crotchets of some of their friends, and the malignity and unprincipled conduct of their enemies: the first bringing forward motions for reduction of certain items, merely to gratify clients or constituents, and the Tories joining with the Radicals in voting for things which they opposed when they were themselves in office, reckless of consistency or of consequences.

But "these little battles were . . . of little moment compared with the great event of Gladstone's Budget":

London, April 21, 1853: . . . He had kept his secret so well that nobody had the least idea what it was to be, only it oozed out that the Income Tax was not to be differentiated. He spoke for five hours, and by universal consent it was one of the grandest displays and most able financial statement that ever was heard in the House of Commons; a great scheme, boldly, skilfully, and honestly devised, disdaining popular clamour and pressure from without, and the execution of it absolute perfection. Even those who do not admire the Budget, or who are injured by it, admit the merit of the performance. It has raised Gladstone to a great political elevation, and, what is of far greater consequence than the measure itself, has given the country assurance of a *man* equal to great political necessities, and fit to lead parties and direct governments.

April 22, 1853: I met Gladstone last night, and had the pleasure of congratulating him and his wife, which I did with great sincerity, for his success is a public benefit. They have been overwhelmed with compliments and congratulations. Prince Albert and the Queen both wrote to him, and John Russell, who is spitefully reported to have been jealous, has, on the contrary, shown the warmest interest and satisfaction in his success. The only one of his colleagues who may have been mortified is Charles Wood, who must have compared Gladstone's triumph with his own failures.

Sir Charles Wood, soon to be Viscount Halifax, was not an orator:

St. Leonards, June 7, 1853: . . . The India Bill has been tolerably received on the whole, but Charles Wood's speech of five hours was the dullest that ever was heard. The Speaker told Charles Villiers that it was the very worst speech he had ever heard since he had sat in the Chair.

It was Disraeli who appreciated the force of the blow:

April 22, 1853: . . . Why, he asked, did not the Peelites join us again, as they might have done, and got as good terms as they have now, and then there would have been a strong government again? As I don't want to quarrel with anybody, I restrained

what it was on my lips to say—"You could not possibly expect them to join you." . . . To be sure, the Protectionist seceders from Peel have now drunk the cup of mortification, disgrace, and disaster to the very dregs.

"From first to last," adds Greville, "their [the Protectionists'] conduct has been suicidal."

May 22, 1853: I met in a train a day or two ago Graham and the Speaker. . . . Graham seemed in excellent spirits about their political state and prospects, all owing to Gladstone and the complete success of his Budget. The long and numerous Cabinets, which were attributed by the *Times* to disunion, were occupied in minute consideration of the Budget, which was there fully discussed, and Gladstone spoke in the Cabinet one day for three hours, rehearsing his speech in the House of Commons, though not quite at such length. . . . Palmerston he thinks much changed and more feeble, his energy much less, and his best days gone by.

May 15, 1853: At Newmarket last week, during which the Budget is making its way very successfully through the House of Commons, where Gladstone has it all his own way. The Speaker told me he was doing his business there admirably well.

On Gladstone's financial policy, there fell at once the strain of the Crimean War. Greville, who was no economist, feared (March 29, 1854) lest he "had forfeited by the failure of his financial schemes a good deal of the credit he had obtained."

April 2, 1854: . . . Notwithstanding his extraordinary capacity, most people who are conversant with the subject of finance think he has greatly mismanaged his affairs, and suffered his notions or crotchets to get the better of his prudence, and consequently that he has prepared for himself as Chancellor of the Exchequer very great difficulties. His Budget last year was so popular, and his wonderful readiness and skill in dealing with everything relating to finance excited so much admiration, that his reputation was prodigious, and he was not only the strength of the Government, but was marked out as the future Prime Minister whenever changes took place. All this *prestige* is very much diminished; and although his failures are in great measure attributable to accidents over which he had no con-

trol, many who are not unfriendly to him think he has been rash, obstinate, and injudicious and no longer feel the same confidence in him which they did a short time ago.

May 7, 1854: The failure of Gladstone's Exchequer Bill scheme has been very injurious to the Government, and particularly to him. The prodigious applause and admiration with which he was greeted last year have given way to distrust and apprehension of him as a finance minister. . . . All practical men in the City severely blame him for having exposed himself to the risk. . . . The diminution of public confidence in Gladstone is a public misfortune. . . .

I hear nothing but complaints of his rashness and passion for experiments; and on all sides, from men, for example, like Tom Baring and Robarts, one a Tory, the other a Whig, that the City and the moneyed men have lost all confidence in him. To-morrow night he is to make his financial statement, and intense curiosity prevails to see how he will provide the ways and means for carrying on the war. Everybody expects that he will make an able speech; but brilliant speeches do not produce very great effect, and more anxiety is felt for the measures he will propose than for the dexterity and ingenuity he may display in proposing them. Parliament is ready to vote without grumbling any money that is asked for, and as yet public opinion has not begun to waver and complain; but we are only yet at the very beginning of this horrible mess, and people are still looking with eager interest to the successes they anticipate, and have not yet begun to feel the cost.

But Gladstone had a way of recovering lost prestige:

May 10, 1854: Gladstone made a great speech on Monday night. He spoke for nearly four hours, occupying the first half of the time in an elaborate and not unsuccessful defence of his former measures. His speech, which was certainly very able, was well received, and the Budget pronounced an honourable and creditable one. If he had chosen to sacrifice his conscientious convictions to popularity, he might have gained a great amount of the latter by proposing a loan, and no more taxes than would be necessary for the interest of it. I do not yet know whether his defence of his abortive schemes has satisfied

the monetary critics. It was certainly very plausible, and will probably be sufficient for the uninformed and the half-informed, who cannot detect any fallacies which may lurk within it. He attacked some of his opponents with great severity, particularly Disraeli and Monteagle, but I doubt if this was prudent. He flung about his sarcasms upon smaller fry, and this certainly was not discreet. I think his speech has been of service to his financial character, and done a good deal toward the restoration of his credit.

May 12, 1854: . . . Edward Mills tells me Gladstone's recent speech has immensely raised him, and that he stands very high in the City, his defence of his measures very able, and produced a great effect; he said he lately met Walpole, who told him he had the highest admiration of Gladstone, and thought he had more power than ever Peel had even at his highest tide.

Gladstone continued to be "the great card of the pack."

It was at the moment of his triumph that Gladstone was assailed by a suspicion of scandal. A man in the street endeavoured to extort blackmail. Gladstone immediately handed him over to the police and faced the Court as a prosecutor:

May 15, 1853: . . . While I was at Newmarket came out the strange story of Gladstone and the attempt to extort money from him before the police magistrate. It created for the moment great surprise, curiosity, and interest, but has almost entirely passed away already, not having been taken up politically, and there being a general disposition to believe his story and to give him credit for having had no improper motive or purpose. Nevertheless, it is a very strange affair, and has not yet been satisfactorily explained. It is creditable in these days of political rancour and bitterness that no malignant attempt has been made to vilify him by his opponents or by the hostile part of the press. On the contrary, the editor of the *Morning Herald* wrote him a very handsome letter in his own name and in that of the proprietor, assuring him of their confidence in his purity and innocence, and that nothing would induce them to put anything offensive to him in the paper, and they had purposely inserted the police report in an obscure part of the paper. It is very fortunate for Gladstone that he was not

intimidated and tempted to give the man money, but had the courage to face the world's suspicions and meet the charge in so public a manner.

Seventy years later, the incident became a subject of controversy. It is to be noted, therefore, that Greville, the most ruthless reporter of human delinquencies, believed absolutely in Gladstone's integrity and nowhere, in any passage, published hitherto or suppressed, suggests anything but a profound respect for his character. With Derby, a second time Prime Minister, so we read, "Gladstone hardly ever goes near the House of Commons and never opens his lips."

When, however, he "reappeared," it was plain that "his oratorical powers have not rusted"—witness his speeches against the Divorce Bill:

April 3, 1856: . . . His religious opinions, in which he is zealous and sincere, enter so largely into his political conduct as to form a very serious obstacle to his success, for they are abhorrent to the majority of this Protestant country, and (I was rather surprised to hear him say) Graham thinks approach very nearly to Rome.

May 30, 1855: . . . Gladstone made a fine speech, gave great offense to all who are not for peace, and exposed himself to much unpopularity.

When the electors summoned Palmerston back to power, Gladstone became his Chancellor of the Exchequer. Just as his Budget was due, he had "an unlucky illness," and he was ordered "two months' rest." Instead, he took two days, after which he brought in his financial statement.

Bath, February 15, 1860: . . . He came forth, and *consensu omnium* achieved one of the greatest triumphs that the House of Commons ever witnessed. Everybody I have heard from admits that it was a magnificent display, not to be surpassed in ability of execution, and that he carried the House of Commons completely with him. I can well believe it, for when I read the report of it the next day (a report I take to have given the speech verbatim) it carried me along with it likewise. For the moment opposition and criticism were silenced, and nothing was heard but the sound of praise and admiration. In a day or

two, however, men began to disengage their minds from the bewitching influence of this great oratorical power, to examine calmly the different parts of the wonderful piece of machinery which Gladstone had constructed, and to detect and expose the weak points and objectionable provisions which it contained. I say *it*, for, as the Speaker writes to me, it must be taken as a whole or rejected as a whole, and he adds the first will be its fate.

Clarendon wrote Greville: .

Bath, February 15, 1860: . . . "He [Gladstone] has a fervent imagination, which furnishes facts and arguments in support of them; he is an audacious innovator, because he has an insatiable desire for popularity, and in his notions of government he is a far more sincere Republican than Bright, for his ungratified personal vanity makes him wish to subvert the institutions and the classes that stand in the way of his ambition. The two are converging from different points to the same end, and if Gladstone remains in office long enough and is not more opposed by his colleagues than he has been hitherto, we shall see him propose a graduated Income Tax."

February 26, 1860: On Friday night Gladstone had another great triumph. He made a splendid speech, and obtained a majority of 116, which puts an end to the contest. He is now *the* great man of the day, but these recent proceedings have strikingly displayed the disorganized condition of the Conservative party and their undisguised dislike of their leader.