CHAPTER VII

LORD DAINTREE had reached an age which justified his retiring from any active part in the management of the empire's diplomacy; but he had not ceased to be intellectually alive. The years he spent in trying to understand the intentions and estimate the characters of monarchs and statesmen left him still intensely interested in human nature. He gave up of his own accord the opportunities which he enjoyed of plumbing the minds of the great of the earth. He found himself, somewhat to his own surprise, curious to investigate the intellect and character of the men with whom he came in contact in Connacht. It did not matter much to the world in general what Mr. Manders and Dean Ponsonby thought, or on what principles they acted. No great issues depended on forming a right estimate of such men, but the forming of the estimate was just as interesting in itself as if Mr. Manders had been a Prime Minister and the Dean a Cardinal. Lord Daintree, relieved of the responsibilities of his old position, played the game of understanding the men who surrounded him with zest and unabated curiosity.

The arrival of Stephen Butler at Dhulough gave him pleasure. There were few things which Lord Daintree did not hear sooner or later, and few men of any position of whose record and reputation he did not know something. Rumours about Stephen Butler's university career had reached him, and he anticipated a good deal of pleasure in getting to understand the mental attitude of a young man, a gentleman and a landlord, who championed, or allowed it to be supposed that he championed, the cause of the Fenians.

On Monday afternoon, taking advantage of the brilliant sunshine which followed the storm, he drove over to Dhulough. His first impression of Stephen Butler was that the young man was a gentleman. Lord Daintree was favourably disposed towards him from the outset. Here was a man belonging plainly to a certain class, one on whom an English public school and university had set their mark, who would speak as Lord Daintree's friends spoke, behave as they behaved, who would touch the affairs of life with clean hands.

"You and I," said the old gentleman, "ought to be friends. We're neighbours, and our families have been neighbours for a couple of hundred years. Of course there was a quarrel, but that was seventy years ago or more. My father and your grandfather——but you know the story."

"No. I know very little of my family history. You must tell it me. But you must have a biscuit and a glass of wine after your drive. I'll ring. My servants are rather a scratch lot, but I brought a man over with me from London who can get us what we want. Now for my grandfather."

"Well, you know, my peerage is one of the admirable results of the Union of England and Ireland. You know the story of the Union?"

"I've read Jonah Barrington."

"Ah! I haven't. But no doubt it's all there. My father was one of the much-abused people who sold his country. As a matter of fact, it was a very good job he did, as things have turned out. He got a peerage, and the country was saved from making itself publicly ridiculous by trying to set up as an independent state. That's what it would have come to in the end, you know. But your grandfather was what you call a patriot. Of course the feeling wasn't out of date in those days. Lots of quite intelligent men were patriots. He wouldn't have a peerage or a cheque or a bishopric for his nephew by marriage or anything else. He quarrelled with my father. I don't know exactly which of them was the aggressor in the first instance, but in the end they shot at each other with pistols—a really insane proceeding. Very luckily neither of them got killed. At least, it was very lucky for me, because I wasn't born at the time, and if my father had been killed I might have been—but there's no use speculating about contingencies, is there?"

Stephen Butler smiled. "Not a bit," he said. "Ah, here's my man. They told me that this sherry was pretty good. I'm not much of a judge myself."

"Few men are," said Lord Daintree, "though most men insist on smacking their lips when they've seen the seal on the bottle. The fact is that if a man wants to enjoy his wine he ought never to touch spirits. Keep clear of brandy, and you may develop a palate in time. It's an art, tasting wine, just like writing poetry or painting pictures. But I must get on with the story. I rather think old Stephen Butler must have let my father down easy—spared his life, or something of that sort. Otherwise I can't account for the way I was brought up to hate the very name of Butler. As a boy I used to think the Butlers of Dhulough were first cousins to Old Nick. I never spoke to your father in my life. Of course I left Ireland when I was very young, and have hardly been in the country since. It's a wretched country for a young man, unless he's the sort of barbarian who lives for the sake of shooting and fishing. I suppose you are only here on a flying visit?"

He paused, and watched Stephen's face. Would there be a flare of patriotic repudiation of this belittlement of Ireland? or would the young man yield deference to his visitor's reputation, smother his own feelings, and respond with another sneer at Ireland? In either case Lord Daintree would be amused, and would be a step nearer to understanding Stephen Butler. The answer he actually got puzzled him a little. It was spoken quite quietly and simply, as if it were a mere commonplace.

"I mean to stay in Ireland. I want to know my people and see what can be done for them and the property."

"Ah, the people! You can't do anything for them, you know. These Irish properties pay pretty well if they're properly managed. But you can't take up your property as a hobby the way some men do in England. That's quite impossible here. Your Irishman would put his pigs into a model cottage if you built him one, and take his wife and family back to the filthy hovel you left for the pigs. He prefers a hovel. That's his nature. And it's a good job for us he does. Nobody expects us to spend any money on our estates or try stupid experiments with crops or cattle."

The sherry was drunk, several glasses of it by Lord Daintree, and the conversation drifted on. There was talk about politics, about Whigs and Tories, and about the disestablishment of the Church.

"The parsons grumble a lot," said Lord Daintree, "but my own impression is that they have got out of it pretty well. We're the people that will have to pay up. I reckon that I can't get off under a hundred a year. My property seems to be scattered about through half the parishes in the county, and they all expect their pound of flesh from me. Now, you're all right. You're in a ring fence, and only one person has any sort of claim on you."

"So far as I can see, he might as well be my private chaplain. I went to church yesterday, and there were only two people there besides myself."

"Is it as bad as that? All the rest Papists? Well, you're all the better off. My father planted a lot of Protestants from the north down on his property early in the century. Most of their descendants are Papists now—married the women of the land and went after strange gods, as their ancestors would have said. But the confounded Protestant independence is in their blood. They are a stiff-necked, uncompromising lot—always making trouble about their rents. Now, the real Papist is easy to deal with. I'm told, by the way, that the priest in your village is a decent sort of old man. He's a gentleman, too, one of the Stauntons from down Limerick way—a good old family. You ought to know him. He'd be a great deal pleasanter man to have to dinner than your parson, from all I hear of him."

"I rather liked what I saw of the parson in church yesterday. I shouldn't say he was a gentleman, judging by his brogue and his appearance. But he seemed to be in earnest."

"Now I wonder what you mean by that? Manders says he's methodistical. I suppose that means that he wants to save your soul for you, an extremely boring thing, of course, but not otherwise objectionable. Is that what you mean by his being in earnest? Or do you think he has principles, the sort of fixed beliefs some men act on without regard to consequences? A man of that kind is actually dangerous. I should advise you to get rid of him as soon as you can."

Stephen Butler had not the least dread of people who act on principle. He had not Lord Daintree's knowledge of the world, nor a training in the diplomatic service. He was young, and therefore foolish. He supposed that many men acted on principle in the sort of way his Quaker friends did. He suspected that Lord Daintree did not mean half he said, but he was not unwilling to prolong a conversation. The old gentleman's cynicism interested him. It was something new.

"Can you get rid of a parson?" he asked. "I thought they enjoyed a kind of freehold."

"Oh, you can't give them notice to leave like a servant. But you can secure some sort of promotion for a man you don't like. Most of them will jump at a bigger salary, and the ones that won't, like what they call a 'wider sphere of influence. But whatever you do about the parson, don't forget to cultivate Father Staunton. He's a gentleman and a pleasant fellow, I'm told. But apart from that, it's a very good thing to be on friendly terms with the priest. The priests are the coming power in Ireland. Our day is pretty well over. My impression is that the Irish landlords have gone too far and too fast. There's trouble coming, and as a class we have no friends in the country. We'll collapse in the near future and go under. I dare say the present state of things may last out my time; but you'll see something very like a revolution if you live to be my age. You ought—all of you to whom the future matters—ought to seize your opportunity and make friends with the priests. That's your best chance."

"I understand," said Stephen, "that some of our gentry are going into this new movement for Home Rule or Home Government, or whatever they call it."

"It's too late for that. It's possible that in your father's time the Irish gentry might have headed a national movement. The sense of nationality is extraordinarily strong among the Irish. They are like the Hungarians and the Poles in that respect. If the gentry of the last generation had played to the gallery, the Irish gallery, they might have taken a new lease of their privileges and property, a lease that would have run for a century. But they can't do it now. They've bullied the people and plundered them far too long. I know what I'm talking about because I've done it myself. That is to say, I paid some one else to do the bullying, because that sort of thing bores me; but I've taken the plunder. There's a new spirit in the country now—a growing feeling of class hatred, and a very natural desire for security and a fair chance of living. This will be stronger for many a day to come than the feeling for nationality. These amiable Home Rule gentlemen are, no doubt, perfectly sincere in what they call their patriotism, but they are utterly mistaken about the times they live in. The next great popular agitation will be against their class and not against England. And Englishmen, though mostly thick-headed, have a very fine political instinct. They will buy off the people by sacrificing the landlords. It's the line of least resistance for them, and they'll take it."

"But it is very interesting to see the sense of nationality reviving among our gentry. You know my people were always nationalists in a way. My father, I believe, had a strong feeling in favour of the Young Ireland people, and my grandfather——"

"He voted against the Union. And there was a queer story that used to go the rounds about an oath he swore—something about living and dying a rebel."

"I never heard of that. What was it?"

"I don't know the rights of it. But I am sure any of the old people would give you a garbled version of it. There may be papers; I really don't know. Of course, if it amuses you, you can go into this new movement yourself. They'd be very glad to get you, I dare say. But it will be no use. The ground is crumbling under our feet, and we won't save ourselves by building a castle on it."

"How do you know so much about Ireland when you have never lived here?"

"Well, I suppose I know partly because I've never lived here. There's such a thing as getting too near what you want to see. It's better to stand a bit away. You don't see the small details, but you get a grip of the whole. Then of course I've been all my life watching men of different nations playing the game of politics. It's a nice game, and the pieces on the board have fine names—loyalty, liberty, patriotism, and so on. But every now and then a man comes along who's hungry, and he upsets all the pretty pieces and fine plans. Greater than all things is the belly of man. We talk grand words when we're full, but we simply clamour when we are empty and the fine words won't satisfy us. It is just beginning to occur to the people of this country, to the serfs out there in the muddy cabins, that they might get a full meal of bread and porter instead of a half-meal of buttermilk and potatoes. They will clamour, and you won't be able to quiet them by waving a green flag. You'll have to give up buying that excellent brown sherry."

"But I've not robbed my tenants. I don't believe my father did and I'm sure my trustees didn't."

"More fools they. You'll suffer just the same. The individual is not considered on these occasions. You and your people might just as well have made the most of your opportunities."

Lord Daintree talked on. The inexperienced investigator of human character thinks to gain information by asking questions and making the victim of his curiosity talk. Lord Daintree believed in talking himself and letting the other man listen. Besides, he enjoyed talking. He particularly enjoyed it when he had an intelligent listener, and Stephen Butler was evidently highly intelligent; much more so than either Mr. Manders or Dean Ponsonby. To Mr. Manders life was a very simple business, just a matter of obtaining as many good things as possible and sacrificing as few as possible without offending a curiously arbitrary deity called "the honour of a gentleman." This was the only idol which Mr. Manders worshipped. Stephen Butler had many others in his temple. Lord Daintree saw them, as time after time during his talk he succeeded in lifting a corner of the veil and peeping in. There they were, whole rows of them—faith, truth, liberty, patriotism, and the rest, with their names in gold letters on their pedestals and incense ready to burn before them. There was great pleasure for an iconoclast to be found in smearing their calm faces and beautiful limbs with grotesque colours. It was not safe to touch Mr. Manders' divinity. For Mr. Manders got angry and glared at a hint that the honour of a gentleman might be made to look ridiculous. It was highly delightful to watch Stephen Butler, guardian-priest of a whole Pantheon, shudder at blasphemy. Therefore Lord Daintree blasphemed, until it struck him suddenly that Stephen Butler was not shuddering. He talked on, considering this curious fact. For Stephen Butler ought to have shuddered. Lord Daintree was blasphemous enough. Why was there no shuddering?

Lord Daintree was a clever man, clever enough to have discovered that most worship of divinities is no more than a becoming pose adopted by the worshipper. But he was also a wise man, wise with the wisdom that comes of immense experience, and he knew that here and there in the world are men whose adoration of liberty, patriotism, and such ideas is not a pose, but a reality. These men do not get angry when you insult their gods. They do not shudder at blasphemies. They know that the objects of their worship are great, lofty, serene—too serene to be affected by the laughter of little men. They listen to the cynical epigrams of the clever, and without resentment or contempt think that the scoffers are posing. Believing themselves with an intensity of faith which comes near to being actual knowledge, they give every one else credit for believing too. It is almost always possible to outwit these simple men, to overreach them, to lead them into foolish action. Circumstances occasionally overwhelm them and bring their life-work down in crumbling fragments. It is never possible to shake their faith or drive them into angry defence of their creed.

Before his visit was over Lord Daintree came to believe that he had discovered such a man in Stephen Butler. He became exceedingly interested, more interested than ever, in the young man.

"It will be," he said, "most fascinating to watch him. Ireland to-day gives him what looks like an opportunity. Of course he'll join these Tory-Nationalist gentlemen, and get himself into a perfectly impossible position. But Ireland to-morrow—what will that Ireland make of him?"

CHAPTER VIII

NO reasonable man, that is to say no Englishman, can understand why the Irish are discontented with the position of their country. Has not Ireland got the same laws as England? Does not an Irishman pay the same taxes as an Englishman? Are not the Union Jacks which decorate Irish custom-houses on the King's birthday quite as voluminous as those which flutter in England? Do not the Irish share with their neighbour Saxons the inestimable privilege of taunting the sun because, however the earth may twist and turn, there is always some little strip of the British Empire gaping for rays of light and heat? What more can Irishmen want?