

CHAPTER XXXI

1857-58

LORD PALMERSTON'S ADMINISTRATION

THE unfinished 'Autobiography' of the Duke of Argyll ends towards the close of the year 1857. He was then a member of Lord Palmerston's Administration, in which he held the office of Postmaster-General.

Lord Palmerston had become Prime Minister in February, 1855, before the end of the Crimean War, which was terminated by the Treaty of Paris, March 4th, 1856. In his Government, Lord Clarendon was Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and Sir George Grey was Home Secretary. Lord John Russell was appointed Secretary for the Colonies when Lord Palmerston's Administration was formed, but he resigned that office a few months later.

The suppression of the Indian Mutiny, which had broken out early in 1857, was practically completed by the relief of Lucknow in the month of November, and the work of restoring the country to order was only a matter of time. In consequence of the Mutiny, the question of the reconstruction of the Government of India, which had been before Parliament a few years earlier, now became urgent, and a proposal that India should in future be placed under the direct control of the Crown was under consideration.

The subject of Reform in Parliamentary Representation was one which the Duke considered to be of paramount importance at this period, and, as he mentioned in his 'Autobiography,' he had already urged on Lord Palmerston the advisability of bringing the matter before Parliament at an early date. Lord Palmerston, however, appeared to be inclined to postpone the consideration of Home Reform, and to desire to turn political attention to the question of the proposed change in the government of India. On this subject, in reply to a letter from the Duke, Lord Granville wrote, October 18th, 1857 :

' I think with you that Pam's great object in moot-
ing the Indian question is to damp the reform of home
institutions.'

And in a postscript to a letter which the Duke received from him a few weeks later, Lord Granville added (November 7th, 1857) :

' I have seen Pam's plan of Reform. . . . It will
certainly not destroy the British Constitution.'

The Duke was a steady advocate of moderate and circumspect Reform, desiring always to forestall more reckless agitators by means of some limited extension of the franchise. Again and again he urged his anxiety to have the matter at least provisionally settled ; but it was in vain that he, with other members of the Cabinet, impressed on the Prime Minister the necessity of having a Bill drafted, so that he might be able, if questioned in the House, to state that a measure was ready to be introduced when opportunity should offer. To Sir George Grey the Duke wrote as follows (November 24th, 1857) :

‘ I think we shall meet a more formidable opposition than some of us seem to suppose, if we use India to shirk the question of Reform. I have a very strong impression that any measure which leaves all the existing constituencies untouched (that is to say, which involves no disfranchisement, and consequently no enfranchisement of new places) will be fatal to the union of the Liberal party and of the Government.’

Lord Palmerston seemed so disinclined to treat the question seriously, and thus remove it for a generation from the political arena, that some of his colleagues, and chiefly the Duke of Argyll, made repeated efforts to convince him of the expediency of a well-considered measure. On the 26th November the Duke had a long interview with his chief, when Palmerston set himself sedulously to persuade his loyal supporter that those members of the Cabinet who were in favour of, and had pledged themselves to, Reform, might be under no apprehension that there was any intention of evading the question. He assured the Duke that he was not using the India Bill as an excuse for introducing a less adequate redistribution and extension of the franchise than he would otherwise have laid before the Cabinet; and he conveyed the impression that, contrary to a very general expectation and surmise, he was prepared for a substantial measure in this direction. The Duke, in a memorandum to Sir George Grey on the following morning, described this interview as follows :

‘ Palmerston expressed at first a very decided objection : first, to the £10 for counties ; and, second, to *any* lowering of the borough franchise. But, to my surprise, I found him by no means equally decided against *some* disfranchisement, though he evidently did not himself contemplate proposing it.

‘ I then suggested to him that it would be a great thing

if any plan could be devised which would enable him to yield the £10 in counties without involving the dangerous consequences to the county constituencies which he feared. He said he saw no such plan, upon which I told him what had occurred to me about the enfranchisement of the principal towns singly, and also in groups, thus removing them from the county constituencies, and preventing the swamping effect of large town populations. We discussed for some time the main objections, and I urged all I could in favour of my proposal. He seemed to admit that the matter was well worthy of consideration, and he has asked me to go to his own house to-morrow at eleven to show him the map of constituencies, etc. He told me at first, without reserve, that he contemplated "the break-up of the Government" upon Reform as quite possible.

'I strongly urged upon him the policy of at least trying to settle this question, if possible, when he had the power so much in his own hands, and when he could give to changes which are ultimately inevitable a safe and constitutional direction. I told him that I thought his power and influence quite adequate to carry any measure which would afford a tolerable ground of union to the Liberal party, whereas his power would not be adequate to arrest Reform if an obviously inadequate measure were proposed.

'I was very much pleased by the way in which he seemed really open to argument on all the main points; and if we are tolerably agreed among ourselves, I think he will be led to propose a fairly substantial measure. He fully admitted that it might be desirable to add new members to some existing constituencies, and to enfranchise some new towns; he fully admitted also that there was no fund from which to derive new seats, except by disenfranchisement. He asked me what ground there was for the assertion that 300 electors had been contemplated in 1832 as the minimum. I could not answer this, but I pointed out that, if we are

to take numbers at all, we could hardly draw the line at a lower figure.

‘ I am now most anxious to be able to show that the £10 in counties will not materially affect the balance of political power, if we give separate members to the larger towns now represented. We then leave only the small country places to affect the county constituencies, and the inhabitants of such towns are all connected with the agricultural classes around them.’

After the meeting of Parliament, the Duke renewed the discussion with Lord Palmerston, only to find that he had made much less progress with the Premier than he had imagined. Lord Palmerston was still inclined to treat the matter in an indefinite way, and in a letter to Sir George Grey the Duke expresses his concern that his leader should show so little appreciation of the critical position of the party.

To Sir George Grey (January 15th, 1858).

‘ Before we broke up last evening I suggested to Palmerston that it might be well to have our other bill—namely, Reform—put in the form of a draft as soon as possible. He replied : “ Oh, there will be time enough for that ; we cannot introduce it before Easter ! ” I said I thought it extremely probable that we should not be able to introduce it at all if the India Bill made heavy progress, but that it *was* important to be able to say that it was ready.

‘ I greatly fear that he may not have the importance of this sufficiently before him. I think that we shall feel rather uncomfortable under the accusation of insincerity about Reform, unless we can say with truth that the measure is ready and prepared to be introduced whenever the state of public business gives any hope of possible success. Pray, if you can, let this necessity be put fully before Palmerston.’

To Sir George Grey (January 26th, 1858).

'I think you are to see Palmerston to-day at a Committee. I wish you could find an opportunity of suggesting to him the necessity of putting the Reform Bill in draft. It can easily be done ; and now that the India Bill is virtually settled, it ought to be done if we mean to meet Parliament in a position to defy insinuations and accusations which must and will be made. . . .

'I have refrained from raising the question in Cabinet because this would have an antagonistic appearance which I should gladly avoid, and which, indeed, would not be justified by Palmerston's disposition hitherto evinced to deal quite fairly with the matter. But he is shy of the subject, and procrastinates, and we must come to an understanding upon it. I have already mentioned it. Your doing so would have good effect.'

Parliament had been summoned on December 3rd, 1857, to deal with questions arising from the commercial crisis to which reference is made in the 'Autobiography.' The Queen's Speech, besides directing attention to the question of finance, dealt with the subject of the Bill for the transference of the government of India from the East India Company to the Crown, and also promised a Bill on the subject of Electoral Reform.

All questions connected with India had an especial interest for the Duke. He had devoted close attention to the subject for several years, and had been charged with the duty of answering for the Indian Department in the House of Lords, as the President of the Board of Control (Sir Charles Wood) was a member of the House of Commons.

On February 8th, 1858, a vote of thanks was proposed in both Houses of Parliament to the civil and military officers in India for the zeal and ability which

they had shown in the suppression of the Mutiny. To the Duke fell the task of meeting the attacks of Lord Derby and of Lord Ellenborough on the Government for its alleged delay in despatching troops to India, and of defending his friend Lord Canning from the insinuations made against him in consequence of his policy. The Duke maintained that the Governor-General had not shown any signs of weakness in his administration, but that he had, on the contrary, given evidence of the most statesmanlike foresight. The following extract is taken from the Duke's speech in the House of Lords, February 8th, 1858 :

' I have taken some pains to examine almost all the charges brought against Lord Canning, whether in Parliament or in the Press, and I venture to affirm that there is not one of those charges of the least importance which cannot be clearly refuted from papers which are already in the possession of the House. Every one of them has emanated from the Calcutta press, whose enmity has been incurred by Lord Canning in consequence of those restrictive measures which at an early period of the Mutiny he considered it his duty to adopt.'

Comparing Lord Canning's conduct with that of Sir John Lawrence in the Punjab and of Mr. Frere in Scinde, the Duke said :

' I am willing, my Lords, to enter upon that comparison, and I especially desire to direct the attention of the House to one point in that comparison which is of cardinal importance—I mean the proportion which the native bore to the European troops in the different provinces of India. In the lower provinces, being those more immediately under the command of the Governor-General and under the influence of his personal conduct, there were at the time of the outbreak

about 29,000 native troops, against whom, in case of disaffection, Lord Canning had to rely on only 2,362 European soldiers. Yet those are the provinces in which alone the Mutiny never assumed those dangerous proportions to which it rapidly swelled in others. It is not enough to say that in the then aspect of affairs Lord Canning acted for the best. It is not less true to say that all our knowledge of subsequent events does but confirm the wisdom and prudence of his moderate and forbearing policy. It was that forbearance and the confidence which, by means of it, he inspired into the native troops, that they would not be harshly dealt with or prejudged to be traitors without sufficient cause—it was this alone which prevented an early outbreak in Bengal, and saved those provinces from the fearful convulsion which took place elsewhere. The “energetic measures” which were not taken by Lord Canning, and which were so constantly urged on him by the Calcutta public, were, unfortunately, taken at Meerut by men of inferior judgment, and instantly the Mutiny swelled to the magnitude of a rebellion. In the North-Western Provinces the proportion between native and European troops was equally unfavourable (about 45,000 to 3,537), and there, assuredly, equal caution and gentleness should have been used. But now let us look to another quarter—to the provinces ruled by Sir John Lawrence. The Mutiny there broke out through no act of his, but in consequence of the events at Meerut and the capture of Delhi. But when it did break out, or threatened to do so, Sir John was in a very different position from Lord Canning in respect to European support. In the provinces of the Punjab and the Sutlej he had 12,424 European soldiers against only 42,000 native troops, showing an enormous difference from the proportion with which Lord Canning had to deal. Sir John Lawrence had also a warlike and well-affected native population, whom his own wise measures had rendered heartily loyal to our rule. I hope it will not be thought for a moment by any member of this

House that I am seeking to detract in the smallest degree from the eminent merits of Sir John Lawrence. But since his conduct has been placed in invidious contrast with that of Lord Canning, I think it right to direct attention to the essential difference between the circumstances in which they were placed.'

In the same speech the Duke fulfilled his expressed resolution to pay a warm tribute to Lord Dalhousie :

'I cannot omit this opportunity of expressing the deep regret, which I am sure must be shared in by every member of this House, on account of the absence, and, above all, on account of the cause of the absence, of my noble friend Lord Dalhousie, who must take the keenest and most painful interest in these events, and who would have been so able to assist and inform the House in the debates to which they are giving rise. It was inevitable, perhaps, that this great convulsion, occurring so soon after the close of his administration, should subject him to many accusations from those who judge more from impressions than from reasoning or from careful investigation of facts. But I feel assured that when the smoke of this contest shall have been cleared away, the great reputation of Lord Dalhousie will reappear in the eyes of his countrymen, who ought not even now, during this very contest, to forget that if one thing more than another has contributed to the salvation of India, it has been the Government which Lord Dalhousie organized in the Punjab, and the admirable selection he made of the men by whom that Government has been conducted. To them, and to the other illustrious men who are to be included in our vote to-night, the House and the country may well be grateful, not merely for the individual gallantry they have displayed, but far more for the proof they have given that those qualities by which we gained India have not decayed—above all, that the power and art of converting to our own military use the people whom

our arms have recently subdued is not lost to our military and civil servants in the East.*

Lord Granville characterized this speech as the 'best speech I ever heard Argyll make, right in tone, substance, and length. He carried the House completely with him, and most satisfactorily disposed of the whole attack.' †

In connection with the proposed Government of India Bill, which was the subject of debate in the Cabinet during the autumn, the Duke had written to Sir George Grey (November 25th, 1857) :

'I feel somewhat anxious that we should be quite agreed as to the *reasons* for our Indian measure, as well as with respect to the outline of the measure itself. I do not think that the only defence of the present system has been merely that it "worked well," and therefore should be tolerated. It has been kept up, whether wisely or not, for the sake of some positive advantage which it was supposed to possess, and to avoid some dangers which a change was supposed to involve.

'The main advantage was that it withdrew, or tended to withdraw, the Indian Government from being the direct object of party attacks and party defence in Parliament. This was its main feature. I think that to a great extent it has actually had this effect, and that the effect is in itself good.

'Vernon Smith ‡ expressly says that the Indian Minister requires some support at his back, which he expects to find in a nominated council, *vice* an elected Court of Directors.

'In this respect, therefore, we cannot assail the

* Hansard, vol. cxlviii., p. 843.

† 'Life of Lord Granville,' by Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, vol. i., p. 290.

‡ President of the Board of Control.

present system as radically wrong, but only as needlessly complicated and as involving unnecessary delays.

' Neither do I think we can say with justice that the Indian Mutiny destroys the claim of "working well." I have seen no attempt to connect the Mutiny with the form of government, nor do I believe that any such attempt could be made with success.

' In those respects in which the Government has hitherto "worked well," it is continuing to work very much as it has ever worked. Even in the power shown by its officers to train and mould to our own use the native soldiery we have *never* had more brilliant success than during this very Mutiny.

' For any sake, do not let us chime in, or appear to do so, with those vague and illogical declamations against the Indian Government which have proceeded from Young India, and with which we shall be deluged *usque ad nauseam* this session.

' Nevertheless, I think that all the real advantages of the present system may be preserved under a more intelligible form of government, and that the use of the Queen's name will be a source of strength. The suppression of a great rebellion, and the necessity of reconstituting our armed force, give us at least a plausible occasion for introducing the change.

' But the very moderate reasons which can alone, I think, be urged with truth or justice for a change which will *appear* so great (and which will be urged forward as if it *were* very great) will add to the difficulty of meeting the charge that we are really doing it to escape from the question of Reform at home by an evasive measure.

' I confess I should be far better pleased to see Palmerston set himself to settle, as he alone could settle, this question, than ride off upon an Indian reform which it would be easy to defer until matters were more fully settled in India.

' You think it would be impossible to avoid express-

ing an opinion on the form of government. So it would be, if we admit the Mutiny to have resulted from the form of government. But it would be easy to say that the form of government ought not to be dealt with until the country is again thoroughly reduced and pacified.

'I suspect the "Company" will show more power of resistance than we expect, especially if they have such a plea to urge.'

The Government of India Bill was introduced by Lord Palmerston on February 12th, 1858. The principal provision of the measure was the establishment of a President and Council for the Government of India, and it further included a proposal to place in the hands of the Viceroy the appointment of the members of the Executive Council in India. A very elaborate Petition had been prepared on behalf of the East India Company, and was presented in the House of Lords by Lord Grey the day before the Bill was introduced. The duty of replying to Lord Grey was entrusted to the Duke of Argyll, and, in writing to Lord Granville on February 8th, 1858, he discussed the best method of defending the proposed measure :

'I do not feel quite sure which is best for us : that Grey should put off or not. I confess that the notes of V. Smith on the Petition increase my fear that his tone will be hostile, petulant, and recriminatory. He cannot help it. Then, I think Palmerston likely to take some not very safe ground. On the whole, therefore, I have been rather glad that we should have to open in the Lords first.

'I have been looking very carefully into the best way of supporting our case on the mere question of time, and yet without any allusion to details. I am convinced that it can be done, and be done effectively too,

if one can execute what one intends. But there is always some risk of this. It is sometimes an advantage to be able to say that we cannot follow an opponent into details, when the ground for saying so is so obvious as in this case.

‘ If Grey opposes any measure on the ground of time, and yet deprecates inquiry, he dissents from the Petition, and opens himself to another reply. The same arguments which he will urge against inquiry are equally applicable against that agitation and discussion which delay will infallibly give rise to on questions of organic change.

‘ If the debate takes place in our House, I should like to consult with you beforehand exactly on the line which I should take ; I have sketched it out, and whatever line Grey takes about inquiry would make no difference ; nor do I think it necessary to indicate one word of the proposed measure beyond the general description already given of the adoption of the name of the Crown and the abolition of that of the “ Company.”

‘ *Per contra*, we must always consider the effect of an able speech from Derby—if, indeed, he knows really much about the subject, which I do not think he does.’

On the presentation to the House of Lords of the Petition, on the 11th February, the Duke spoke at length and with effect. The following passage is quoted from his speech :

‘ We may not, and we do not, think that the arguments of the Petition are very strong, far less that they are conclusive ; we may, and we do, think that many of them are of a purely traditional kind, which have come down from one generation to another, and which have been repeated from mouth to mouth long after they have ceased to be applicable to the circumstances of the time. We may think that some of those argu-

ments can be shown to be contradictory, while in respect to others, the best and truest, we hold ourselves at perfect liberty to accept them entirely and to assent to them most cordially, but holding, nevertheless, that they do not justify the conclusions in support of which they are advanced. But on one point in respect to that Petition we can agree with the noble Earl, that the tone and temper of the document is worthy of the great historical body from which it emanates; that it is temperate and dignified, and worthy of the subject to which it refers. I can only express my earnest and sincere hope that throughout the debates which take place in Parliament upon this question we shall be able on both sides to abstain from everything of a recriminatory character, and that we shall be willing to give each other credit for what we all profess—a desire to serve this great country and its Indian Empire, and to provide such a Government as may be most conducive to the happiness of the millions subject to our rule. And as all public men will, I am sure, admit the great obligation which they owe to the permanent civil servants, both of the Crown and of the East India Company, I trust I shall not be deemed guilty of any indelicacy towards the directorial body of the Company if I express my anxious hope that the two eminent, able, and distinguished men, who are understood to have been mainly instrumental in drawing up this Petition, may continue to give to any future Government which may be provided for India that valuable assistance which they have for so many years rendered to the Government of the East India Company.'

In a letter to the Duke a few days later, Sir Charles Wood wrote :

'In the first place, I must tell you how much I admire your speech on India. You have taken the true and only ground on which we can justify our measure, and I wish that you had introduced it.'

But the Duke considered that he had failed to make one point against Lord Grey, and he wrote in haste to Lord Granville, in order that the omission might be made good :

‘ I shall never forgive myself for one omission last night—among others. Grey abused the stockholders as a constituency, and regretted that they had not been abolished in 1853. But the stockholders *are* the Company. The directors are not the Company. Therefore, the very man who presented the Company’s Petition and deprecated the change, himself deplored that the Company had not been abolished long ago. What an ass I was not to hit him on this capital error in his speech !’

The India Bill, however, which was regarded as likely to be a ‘trophy for the Premiership’ of Lord Palmerston, was not destined to pass into law under the guidance of a Liberal Ministry. The defeat of Lord Palmerston’s Government was brought about in a singular and most unexpected manner. During the Christmas recess, an Italian, named Orsini, made an attempt on the life of the French Emperor. There was no doubt that the plot had been hatched in England ; even the bombs used were made in Birmingham. Popular indignation was aroused in France, and the most absurd charges were made against England. The French army, regiment by regiment, sent letters of congratulation to the Emperor on his escape, some of which contained insinuations against England. These addresses were printed in the *Moniteur*, which, being the organ of the French Government, gave the impression that the publication of the attacks against England had received official sanction. Count Walewski, the French Foreign Minister, addressed a despatch to Count de Persigny,

the French Ambassador in London, which, although somewhat vaguely expressed, seemed to imply a certain responsibility on the part of the British Government in connection with the machinations against France of refugees from that country.

Lord Clarendon, who was at that time Foreign Secretary, did not think it necessary to send any official communication in reply; but he privately instructed the English Ambassador at Paris as to the opinion of the Cabinet regarding the affair. There was every desire to allay a natural irritation on the part of France, and to ignore language, even if official, which was no more than the expression of momentary passion; and, after consideration, the Cabinet agreed to introduce a Conspiracy Bill. The impression that this Bill was introduced at the demand of France gave some offence, as suggesting the idea of dictation from that country. The first reading was passed by a large majority. When, however, it came up for the second reading, on the amendment of Mr. Milner Gibson, censuring the Government for not having replied officially to Count Walewski's despatch before submitting the Bill to the House, the Government was overthrown (February 19, 1858).

Thus, the second Administration of which the Duke had been a member came to an end, and with it all the Liberal projects for reform at home and in India. The Prime Minister placed his resignation in the hands of the Queen, who immediately called upon Lord Derby to form an Administration.

On the subject of the resignation of the Government, Lord Aberdeen wrote to the Duke as follows :

‘The propriety of your resignation, I suppose, was unquestionable, but I had not taken it for granted. It is, however, certainly comical that a man who for so

many years had upbraided me for unworthy concessions to Foreign Powers should at last have been overthrown for an act of this kind. It is a lesson to be careful in making such accusations.'

A few months later the Duke received the following letter from Lord Palmerston :

'94, PICCADILLY,

'20th August, 1858.

'MY DEAR ARGYLL,

'I did not answer the very handsome letter which I received from you some time ago, because you were going to wander on the Continent, and the event to which it related was not likely to happen. I myself never thought that the majority in the House of Commons which so unceremoniously turned out our Government would be in a great hurry to put it in again; and I saw no prospect of stability for our Government, if immediately restored, because the same combinations which had overthrown us in February would probably have thwarted us in June, July, or August. I was therefore prepared, and am so still, to see the present Government stick in much longer than many people expect.

'With regard to yourself, however, all I can say is, that if at any future time the Queen should call upon me to construct a Government, I should consider that Government wanting in a most essential element if you did not consent to become a member of the Cabinet.

'My dear Argyll,

'Yours sincerely,

'PALMERSTON.'

When the new Ministry entered office on the 1st of March, Lord Clarendon had an opportunity of vindicating the policy of the late Government, which he did in an able speech. The Duke wrote the following day to Lord Aberdeen :

'I dare say some of our friends will find out new cause for censure in Clarendon's speech last night—new dangers to the cause of liberty. But it made a great effect on the House in the opposite sense. Derby sent Malmesbury across to express his astonishment that so good a case had not been brought forward in time, adding that if Clarendon had made that speech before, there would never have been any defeat.

'The truth is that Palmerston mismanaged the House. He did not argue at all.

'Derby's plan of waiting for legislation till he gets an answer would be ridiculous if it were not dangerous.

'Campbell now says our Bill is unexceptionable! I must say Gladstone's peroration in the Commons seems to me directly the reverse of the truth on this question. The reaction he speaks of in Europe is in a great measure due to these crimes; and if they can be checked, infinite good will be done to constitutional freedom—always supposing, of course, that the Bill is in itself just, and within the rules of our evidence. Who can deny that it is? It clearly and indisputably is, and his assertion that it is in the slightest degree retrogressive is mere misrepresentation of its provisions.

'I prefer a fall on this, where I think we were clearly right, to a fall on such things as the Privy Seal.*'

* On which Lord Palmerston's appointment was likely to be challenged.