

CHAPTER XXXVII

1867-69

DISESTABLISHMENT OF THE IRISH CHURCH

Two changes of great moment in the world of British politics occurred before the General Election in November, 1868. Mr. Disraeli succeeded Lord Derby as head of the Government in February of that year, and, Lord Russell having in December, 1867, announced his intention of retiring from public life, Mr. Gladstone became leader of the Liberal party.

It was now generally understood in Liberal circles that Mr. Gladstone's first move would be in the direction of the Disestablishment of the Irish Church. In his letters to the Duke, Mr. Gladstone had repeatedly urged the consideration of that question, and the matter was also frequently discussed between them.

To Mr. Gladstone, on October 12th, 1867, the Duke wrote :

' Events seem to be moving quickly in favour of total secularization, though, I confess, I think this a violent course. Yet, if the Irish people do not care to keep tithes for something in the nature of what they regard as " pious uses," I feel no objection to secularization.'

On the 10th of March, 1868, a motion was brought forward in the House of Commons, by an Irish mem-

ber, on the social disorganization of Ireland, where there had been a widespread and dangerous Fenian movement. The situation was, indeed, serious enough to justify some strenuous attempt towards the removal of the causes of discontent, and Mr. Gladstone took advantage of this opportunity to introduce his proposals with regard to the Irish Church. He was supported by the Liberal party, which, being in a majority, carried these motions against the Government. The eventual result of this Liberal victory was the dissolution of the Government the following autumn.

In the meantime Mr. Gladstone followed up his series of resolutions by a Suspensory Bill, providing that no new vested interests should be created. This Bill passed the House of Commons, but was thrown out by the House of Lords. On June 29th, 1868, the Duke made a speech on behalf of the measure, from which the following passage is quoted :

‘ I sincerely believe that a great deal of the disaffection of the Irish people is purely traditional. There is a wonderful continuity in the life of nations—terrible where the antecedents have been bad ; happy, even blessed, where the antecedents have been good. And herein consists the folly (I do not use the word in a disrespectful sense) of connecting the cause of the Irish Church with the cause of the Established Church in England. Of the Church of England it may be said that she has been the symbol of national life at great periods of our history, and that she has been, and I trust still is, the standard-bearer of the Protestant feelings and opinions of the people. But can it be said of the Irish Church that she ever has been the symbol of national life to the Irish people ? Can it be said that she represents the religious feelings of the people ? No ; the contrary is the fact. And if

the disaffection of the Irish people is a purely traditional disaffection, at least you must admit that the Established Church is a traditional remembrance of the miseries and oppressions of their former history. In this respect I cannot for a moment doubt that it will, to a very great extent, pacify and conciliate the thinking and moderate people of Ireland that this great anomaly and injustice, as we think it, should be removed from among them.'

Towards the end of July the Duke, with his family, left Argyll Lodge for Machariorch, Campbeltown. While there he suffered from the first attack of gout which he had ever experienced. A month later the Duke and Duchess proceeded to Inveraray, and from there he wrote to Mr. Gladstone (September 5th) :

'Of the six weeks we have had in Scotland I have been spending about four in bed or on a sofa. But I am nearly sound again. . . .

'Lord and Lady Russell came the day before yesterday. He was tired by the journey, and I see he is feeble. I can also see from Lady Russell's manner that she is anxious. But he is cheerful and full of anecdote and conversation.

'When do you open your lips again? This interregnum is a most disagreeable time.'

To Mr. Gladstone (September 12th).

'Do I gather rightly from your letter that you have been ill ?

'Lord Russell picked up very much after the first day here—he had been tired by an eleven hours' journey—but he is physically feeble and very deaf. Lady Russell told me it was a great trial to him. . . .

'I had a good deal of talk with him. He shows some little irritation about the Suspensory Bill, but

assumes that it might be continued from year to year, and keep the Church in a state of suspended animation between life and death.

‘I told him I entirely agreed with him in thinking that this would be most mischievous, and that I knew you held the same opinion: that the Suspensory Bill was a mere temporary expedient—

‘1. To convince the Irish people that we intended action and not mere talk.

‘2. To place all parties in a position compelling them to come to terms.

‘He fully admitted the force of these reasons, but he returns always to the same position.

‘He has, of course, the same desire which all the old Whigs have to keep the Irish Church bound to the “Royal Supremacy.” But he has no clear idea how it is to be done, and, so far as I can see, no such idea is attainable or desirable.

‘Lady Russell spoke as if she, at least, had been thinking of a winter abroad for him. But she said that the interest of politics was too absorbing to him, that she could not get him to think of it, especially at this time. He was most agreeable and charming in conversation, and his memory is as strong as ever.

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‘I am off on Monday to stay a week on Iona, where I have established a little inn. I wish to see it in its morning and evening aspects. The outline of the “everlasting hills” and the colours of the sea are wonderfully beautiful there.’

While he was at Inveraray Lord Russell planted a small tree, grown from an acorn which he had picked up and given to the Duke during a walk which they had had together at Pembroke Lodge. This tree still flourishes, and has now attained to a considerable size.

On October 18th the Duke was called to London,

owing to the serious illness of his mother-in-law, the Dowager Duchess of Sutherland, who died about a week later. Her death was a great loss to the Duke, as a devoted attachment existed between them. After the funeral had taken place at Trentham, the Duke returned to Scotland for some weeks. From Inveraray he wrote to Mr. Gladstone, while the General Election was proceeding (November 19th, 1868) :

‘ I feel inclined to say to you, as I heard Bright say to Auberon Herbert, “ Now, do be quiet,” for if you don’t you will kill yourself. I am wondering how much of you is left, on the modern doctrine of science about the equivalents of force. So much brain-work can only be done at the expenditure of so much of physical force as is expended in the nerves, etc. Two speeches a day, for three or four days in succession, each different from the other, and each discharging red-hot shot — where does the equivalent come from that is to restore you to what you were ? How much Gladstone has been worn away ?

‘ Our wedding is to be on the 23rd of December, and we hope you and Mrs. Gladstone will be at it. Only don’t say anything about it, as we must keep it as quiet as we can. We know what *she** would have wished, and, indeed, did say she wished.’

The marriage here alluded to was that of the Duke’s eldest daughter to Earl Percy, now Duke of Northumberland.

The General Election resulted in a large majority for the Liberal party. Mr. Disraeli resigned office before the meeting of Parliament, and Mr. Gladstone was summoned to Windsor on December 5th to receive Her Majesty’s commands to form a Government.

In the new Administration the Duke held the office

* The Dowager Duchess of Sutherland.

of Secretary of State for India; Lord Clarendon was Secretary for Foreign Affairs; Lord Granville, Secretary for the Colonies; and Mr. Cardwell, Secretary for War.

The main issue on which the General Election had been decided was the question of the Disestablishment of the Irish Church, Mr. Gladstone's policy on this subject having already been outlined by the resolutions proposed by him and carried against the Conservative Government.

When the Bill was actually introduced in the new Parliament (March 1st, 1869), the interest lay chiefly in the questions of compensation arising out of disendowment. The Bill passed the House of Commons, and, during the second reading in the House of Lords, on June 18th, the Duke advocated the measure in a long and eloquent speech. He said :

‘ We are bound to remember, and I trust we do remember, that in the discharge of what we believe to be a public duty to the Sovereign and the people, it has been our lot to propose to Parliament a measure which is opposed to the dearest associations and to the most cherished convictions of a large portion of the House. I think, also, we are bound to remember not only the greatness of the change which we propose, but, I admit, its apparent suddenness. I say its “apparent suddenness,” because to those who have been watching the causes which operate on the public opinion of the country, and ultimately determine the course of Parliament, the wonder is, not that this measure has come so suddenly, but rather that it has been so long delayed. But I admit that to those who have been walking in the by-paths, so to speak, of public life, and have not been watching the causes which determine the course of public feeling, this change must appear to have been brought about very

suddenly. And with regard to the greatness of the change, I agree that no measure which has been brought into this House in the present century may compare with this in the importance of the issues which it involves and the interests which it affects. Not the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts ; not the great measure of Catholic Emancipation ; not the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Reform of Parliament ; not any one of those questions involved issues so important, or cut so deeply into matters affecting such cherished associations and opinions of great portions of the people, as this measure for the disestablishment and disendowment of the Irish Church. I admit, also, that so short a time as three years ago it is extremely probable it could not have been proposed by any public man with any prospect of success. I think it is perfectly natural, therefore, that one in the position of my noble friend who moved the rejection of this measure, finding this great rapid stream of public opinion dashing past him, and sweeping away institutions which he had been accustomed to consider as most sacred and most secure, should open his eyes with infinite surprise and ask, as my noble friend did ask in his opening speech, "How has all this come about, and how has this measure so suddenly been brought forward?" But the more you examine this question, the more clearly you will see how absolutely final and irrevocable is the verdict given on this subject by all the great political parties in this country.'

Repudiating the assertion that the Bill originated in the individual will of Mr. Gladstone, the Duke continued :

'That is to attribute effects to the will of my right honourable friend which neither his nor any other individual's will was competent to produce. We have also been told to-night that the present House of Commons was elected merely to bring Mr. Gladstone

into power, and that it was under the influence of his genius and of admiration for his character that the elections were held. Now, what I wish to point out is that Mr. Gladstone's influence was, at least, not predominant in the late Parliament, in which this proposition was first brought forward. I desire to direct your attention to the circumstances under which this measure was proposed. The House of Commons became, after the death of Lord Palmerston, thoroughly disorganized and demoralized. We are at liberty to speak of the late House of Commons with as much freedom as of a Parliament in the time of Charles II., and I say that it was a Parliament which had no faith in any principle, no enthusiasm in any cause, and no fidelity to any leader. It was under these circumstances, when the vessel of the State had no way upon her, that suddenly a cry arose that this Irish question, which had been so long asleep, was again alive. It was then said that something must be done for Ireland—the old Irish difficulty was again before our public men, and it became clear that Parliament must make up its mind as to what should be done for the benefit of the Irish people. What was the answer to that cry? I am not going to quote the words of Lord Mayo or of any man, for I may say that the answer was in the air: it was in the very atmosphere of our political life. There were two alternatives in reference to the Irish Church—indiscriminate endowment, and disestablishment with disendowment. What was the effect of that announcement? The immediate effect was that out of absolute chaos there came order, and an assembly which had been thoroughly disorganized became well drilled and fitted for effective political action. It was like the action of a powerful magnet passed over a mass of what seems mere dust and rubbish, but which nevertheless contains elements capable of attraction. The raising of that standard of disestablishment at once collected under it all the elements of liberal opinion in the

House of Commons. I ask the noble Duke, who attributes to so small causes these so grave effects, what is the explanation of that phenomenon? Was it the personal influence of Mr. Gladstone in the late House of Commons? No. It was the powerful action of causes which lie deeply seated in the history of the country. . . . My noble friend (Earl Russell) said, on a memorable occasion, that "the aristocracy of this country were strong in the memory of immortal services." My Lords, I trust we are strong in better things. We cannot live on the memory of the dead. We must show that we are able to appreciate the great currents of public feeling which have formed the great parties of this country, and determined the course of political action. We must show that we are as able as the other House to appreciate the teaching of events. And if ever there has been a course of events which seemed more than another of a providential character, and to lead to one foregone conclusion, it is that series of events which, with apparent suddenness, but with long previous preparation, has brought this great measure to the table of your Lordships' House. Noble Lords opposite may say with truth that not all movements are movements of progress, and that there may be such things as movements in the wrong direction. I admit that. I believe in the decay and in the fall of States. It is the duty of the Liberal party in this country, and in every other, to question themselves and others carefully from time to time whether the movements in which they take part, and before which they are sometimes driven, are movements in a right or in a wrong direction. But, measured by all the criteria which distinguish strength from weakness, justice from injustice, political energy and life from political decay, I avow my conviction that the movement in which we are now engaged is a movement in the right direction. It is a movement due to enlightened reason, and, better still, to awakened conscience. We desire

to wipe out the foulest stain upon the name and fame of England—our policy to the Irish people. We wish to signify our adherence to the great principle that religious truth is not to be supported at the cost of political injustice. We desire to bring into the domain of politics the great Christian law of doing to others as we would be done by. These are the great principles upon which this measure is founded, and I say that these are not the indications of political decrepitude or decay. This House has been repeatedly advised to assent to the second reading of this measure, mainly because it is pressed on us by the convictions of the people. But I have a higher ambition for your Lordships' House; I desire to see this House share in the great honours of their time, and my firm conviction is that in the course of a few years the passing of this measure will be looked upon as one of the greatest triumphs of constitutional government, and as a step forward, and that a long one, in the most difficult of all works—the wise and the just government of mankind.'

The second reading of the Bill in the House of Lords was carried by a majority of thirty-three; but it was amended in Committee, and, although the House of Commons made some minor concessions, the provisions of the measure were substantially the same when it was sent back to the House of Lords.

On the second occasion it was thrown out by a majority of seventy-eight, but eventually a compromise was effected between the leaders of the two parties, and the Bill became law on July 26th, 1869.

During the Easter recess the Duke had spent some days in the Isle of Wight, where he visited the Poet Laureate at Farringford. While there he had some discussion with Mr. Tennyson on the Irish Church

question, which he mentions in writing to Mr. Gladstone (March 31st, 1869) :

‘ You will be glad to hear that the report you heard about Tennyson’s opinions was quite false. We told him of it yesterday, when he repudiated any disapproval of your Irish policy, and said he always considered the Irish Church as a great “ injustice.” ’

‘ He read to us the new poem of the “ Sangreal ”—very fine. He is writing another, a preface to the Arthurian cycle, which will then be completed.’

The Duke spent the autumn months at Inveraray, during which time he made an expedition to the island of Iona, accompanied by the Dean of Westminster and Lady Augusta Stanley. At the end of October he returned to London to attend to the work of the India Office. He was recalled to Inveraray early in December by the sudden and dangerous illness of the Duchess, who had left town the previous week. On his arrival he wrote to Mr. Gladstone :

‘ I find my dear wife recovering, but recovering from an attack of that terrible malady which has just carried off her sister, Lady Blantyre.’

For a time the Duke contemplated the resignation of his Office, as he doubted the possibility of life in London for the Duchess in the future; but he was urged by his colleagues to reconsider the matter, and as, after some weeks of great anxiety, the Duchess recovered a fair measure of health and strength, this step was rendered unnecessary.