

# GREAT CONTEMPORARIES

by

Winston S. Churchill



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## CHARLES STEWART PARNELL

IT IS difficult, if not in some ways impossible, for the present generation to realize the impressive and formidable part played by Mr Parnell in the later decades of the reign of Queen Victoria. Modern youth now sees Home-Rule Ireland a sullen, impoverished group of agricultural counties leading a life of their own, detached from the march of Britain and the British Empire, incapable of separate appearance in any but the small and discordant roles upon the world stage. But in the days of which we write, Ireland and the Irish affairs dominated the centre of British affairs, while Britain herself was universally envied and accepted as the leader in an advancing and hopeful civilization. For two generations after Catholic Emancipation had cast its healing influence upon the politics of the United Kingdom, the Irish parliamentary party lay quiescent in the lap of Westminster and sought but rarely to influence events. Those were the days when Mr Isaac Butt, with his mild academic dreams of constitutional Home Rule, by good will all round led the Irish members with a much admired, but little repaid, decorum. 'Gentlemen first, Irishmen second' was said to have been in those days a motto for Irish representatives.

In the 'seventies, however, a new figure appeared upon the Irish benches whose character, manner and method seemed to contradict all the ordinary traits of Irishmen. Here was a man, stern, grave, reserved, no orator, no ideologue, no spinner of words and phrases, but a being who seemed to exercise unconsciously an indefinable sense of power in repose, of command awaiting the hour. When the House of Commons became aware of Parnell's growing influence with the Irish Party, nearly all of whom were Catholics, it was noted with surprise that the new or future leader of Ireland was a Protestant and a delegate to the Irish Church Synod. It was also said, 'He is the most English Irishman ever yet seen'. Indeed, during the 'seventies it was upon English politics that Parnell chiefly laid his hand at Westminster. He became the ally and to some extent the spearpoint of English Radicalism, then rising sharp and keen into prominence. To him perhaps more than anyone else the British army owes the

abolition of the cruel and senseless flogging then considered inseparable from effective military discipline. In every movement of reform, now achieved and long surpassed, Parnell brought the Irish parliamentary party to the aid of the most advanced challenging forces in British public life. Yet he was himself a man of Conservative instincts, especially where property was concerned. Indeed, the paradoxes of his earnest and sincere life were astonishing: a Protestant leading Catholics; a landlord inspiring a 'No Rent' campaign; a man of law and order exciting revolt; a humanitarian and anti-terrorist controlling and yet arousing the hopes of Invincibles and Terrorists.

In Ireland National leaders have often presented themselves as men of fate and instruments of destiny. The distressful country fastened its soul almost superstitiously upon the career of every chieftain as he advanced. Men like O'Connell and Parnell appeared, not in the manner of English political leaders, but rather like the prophets who guided Israel.

An air of mystery and legend had hung about Parnell from his Cambridge days. He was the reverse of a demagogue and agitator. He studied mathematics and metallurgy. He was the heir to a landed estate. He was a Sheriff and a keen cricketer. His permanent ambition was to find the gold veins in the Wicklow mountains, and through all his political triumphs and agonies he could turn for peace and diversion to the laboratory with its scales, retorts and test-tubes. His Irish nationalism, which persisted and grew upon this unusual background, has been traced to his mother and her admiration for the idealistic Fenians. Assassination he abhorred. He was too practical to harbour Fenian dreams of insurrection against the might of Britain. As his authority grew, Fenians and Invincibles stayed the bloody hand for fear of a Parnell resignation.

What an authority it was! Nothing like it has ever been seen in Ireland in recorded times. Many years ago when I was a boy, convalescing at Brighton after a serious accident, I there saw day by day Mrs O'Connor, wife of the famous 'Tay Pay', afterwards father of the House of Commons. From her I heard many tales and received many vivid pictures of Parnell and his rise and fall. The Irish members who followed him unquestionably hardly dared to address him. A cold nod in the lobby or a few curt directions given in an undertone along the Benches – stern, clear guidance in the secret conclaves – these were the only contacts of the Irish political party with their leader. 'Can't you go and see him, and find out what he thinks about it?' was the inquiry of an English politician in the 'eighties to an Irish member. 'Would I dare to intrude upon Mither Parnell?' was the answer. As will be seen, there were reasons on both sides for this caution.

When Mr Gladstone's government of 1880 took their seats triumphantly upon the Treasury Bench and looked around them, they saw upon the western horizon the dark thunder-clouds of Irish storm, an agrarian campaign backed by outrage, a national movement enforced by dynamite, an Irish parliamentary party using the weapon of Obstruction. All these processes developed simultaneously; at their head Parnell! In those days the Irish question, which now seems incredibly small, soon absorbed nine-tenths of the political field and was destined for forty years to remain the principal theme of British and Imperial politics. It divided Great Britain; it excited the United States; the nations of Europe followed the controversy with rapt attention. Foreign politics, social politics, defence and Parliamentary procedure – all were continuously involved. Above all, it became the main process by which parties gained or lost the majorities indispensable to their power.

Without Parnell Mr Gladstone would never have attempted Home Rule. The conviction was borne in upon the Grand Old Man in his hey-day that here was a leader who could govern Ireland, and that no one else could do it. Here was a man who could inaugurate the new system in a manner which would not be insupportable to the old. Parnell with his dogged tenacity and fascination over his followers became the keystone of the Home Rule arch which Gladstone tried to erect and beneath whose ruins he and his adherents fell. Parnell was the last great leader who could hold all the Irish. As a Protestant he was probably the only one who might eventually have conciliated Ulster. Lord Cowper once said that he had neither the virtues nor the vices of an Irishman. He was a great moderate who held back the powers of revolution as an unflung weapon in his hand. If he accepted Boycotting, it was only as a half-way house between incendiarism and constitutionalism. One of his followers, Frank O'Donnell, used to say Parnell talked daggers but used none. In the first phase in 1881 Mr Gladstone arrested Parnell and threw him into Kilmainham gaol. But the forces at work within the Liberal Party were such as to compel the Prime Minister of Great Britain to parley with his political prisoner. After much difficulty an agreement was reached. Parnell was liberated with redoubled prestige.

But the fight grew more bitter. It wrecked the old liberties of the House of Commons. Obstruction was practised as a Parliamentary art, and the ancient freedom of debate was destroyed by the closure – 'Clôture' Lord Randolph Churchill always used to call it, to brand it with its foreign origin – and ever-tightening rules of order. Parnell said that he based his tactics on those of General Grant, namely, slogging away by frontal attack. He met English hatred with obstruction, and

coercion with a bitterness which destroyed the old amenities of Parliamentary debate. In Ireland, neither the Church nor the Revolutionaries liked him, but both had to submit to his policy. He was a Garibaldi who compelled at once the allegiance of the Pope and of the *Carbonari* in the national cause. When taunted with stimulating outrage and even murder, he thought it sufficient to reply, 'I am answerable to Irish opinion, and Irish opinion alone.'

This is not the place to recount the history of those times. The barest summary will suffice. The Liberal Government incorporated all that remained of the once great Whig Party now borne forward to its extinction upon the crest of energetic democracy. The Whigs were as violently offended by agrarian warfare and the violation of Parliamentary tradition as their Tory opponents. Mr Gladstone, the champion of freedom and national movements in every foreign country, the friend of Cavour and Mazzini, the advocate of Greek and Bulgarian independence, now found himself forced by duress to employ against Ireland many of the processes of repression he had denounced so mercilessly (and, we will add, so cheaply) in King Bomba and the Sultan of Turkey. His own Chief Secretary for Ireland was murdered in the Phoenix Park. Explosions shook the House of Commons. The Habeas Corpus was suspended over the greater part of Ireland. Defence of evictions, riots and occasional fusillades darkened the columns of Liberal newspapers hitherto so forward in blaming foreign tyrants. All this was horribly against the grain with Mr Gladstone and detestable to the new electorate he had called into being. Always at the back of his mind he nursed the hope of some great conciliation, some act of faith and forgiveness which should place the relations of the sister islands upon an easy, sure and happy foundation. While he denounced Parnell and the Irish Nationalists as 'marching through rapine to the disintegration of the Empire', in his heart there rose the solemn thought which he afterwards in 1886 embodied in his most memorable peroration. 'Ireland stands at the bar and waits. She asks for a blessed act of oblivion, and in that act of oblivion our interests are even greater than hers.'

In this sort of mood the Liberal Government battered its way through the election of 1885 and still emerged the victor, though now dependent upon the Irish vote. Chamberlain, Morley, Dilke and other Radicals, the men of the new time, all looked towards a settlement. The Grand Old Man, shocked by many of their doctrines, shared their hopes, and brought to them the far stronger surge of his own inspiration. It must also be added that his power to head a Government after the 1885 election depended upon an arrangement with Parnell. But the Tories, or some of them, were also bidding in

the market. Lord Carnarvon, Irish Viceroy in Lord Salisbury's Government, met Parnell in an empty house in London. Lord Randolph Churchill, Leader of the Tory Democracy which had swept the great cities in 1885 and confronted Whigs and Radicals with the then undreamed-of spectacle of enormous crowds of enthusiastic Tory workingmen, was in close and deep relation with the Irish leaders. Joseph Chamberlain, aggressive exponent of the new Radicalism, was full of plans for a deal with the Irish. Among these, Parnell probably preferred the Tory suitors. His own Conservative instincts, his sense of realism, the anger excited against Liberal coercion, led him a long way towards the Tories. After all, they could deliver the goods. Perhaps they alone could do so, for the House of Lords in those days was a barrier which none but Tories could pass. During Lord Salisbury's brief minority Government of the summer of 1885 when the Irish party in the main supported the Conservatives, both Mr Chamberlain and Mr Gladstone addressed themselves, through an intimate channel, to Parnell.

The love of Charles Stewart Parnell and Kitty O'Shea holds its place among the romances of political history. Since 1880 Parnell had loved Kitty, or, as he called her, 'Queenie'. This lady was an attractive adventuress, bored with her husband – no wonder! – and aching for a sip in the secret brew of politics. The sister of an English Field-Marshal, she was not very deeply vowed to the cause of Ireland. She heard of Parnell as a rising portent when he was living in solitary lodgings in London. She invited him to dinner for a wager. She sent her card to him at the House of Commons. When he appeared she dropped a red rose. He picked it up; its shrivelled petals were buried with him in his coffin.

If ever there was a monogamist it was Parnell. Early in life he had been jilted. He had only taken to politics as an anodyne. Kitty became all-important and absorbing to him. She was at once mistress and nurse, queen and companion, and the lonely man fighting the might of Britain, afflicted by ill-health, drew his life from her smile and presence. By a strange telepathy he could tell whenever she entered the Ladies' Gallery in the House. In her strange book she describes the life they lived together, first at Eltham and then at Brighton. It was a mixture of secrecy and recklessness. From a very early stage the complaisance of the husband was indispensable. Collision with Captain O'Shea passed swiftly into collusion. O'Shea accepted the position. He even profited by it, though not in the base way sometimes represented. He too was under the spell of the great man. By Parnell's support O'Shea was returned as an Irish Nationalist for Galway, although all the other leading Home Rulers thought

him but a poor champion of the Irish cause. When murmurs broke out in the election at the advancement of this lukewarm, unsuitable candidate, Parnell silenced them with an imperious gesture. 'I have a Parliament for Ireland in my hand. Forbear to dispute my will.'

Thus we see Parnell and Kitty living as man and wife year after year in love none the less true because illicit; while the Captain following the Irish leader enjoyed the opportunities of being a go-between with Chamberlain, with Dilke, and with other prominent men in the great world of London. But always in his heart lurked the spirit of revenge. Often he writhed and cursed, and then subsided. As long as the supreme political interest held, he endured. We have the incident in O'Shea's triangular household of Parnell finding him in Kitty's bedroom, a conjuncture forbidden by their unwritten law. Instead of kicking out O'Shea, Parnell slung Kitty onto his shoulder and carried her off to another room. It was said of Parnell that he was himself a volcano under an ice-cap. He certainly lived upon the brink of a geyser which might at any moment erupt in scalding water. The public knew nothing of all this secret drama, but as early as the Kilmainham Treaty it became a matter of knowledge to the Cabinet. Parnell hastened from the gaol to visit her, and received their dead child in his arms. Sir William Harcourt as Home Secretary informed the Cabinet that the Kilmainham Treaty had been engineered by the husband of Parnell's mistress. Kitty played a vital part in Parnell's action. She prevented him from abandoning politics after the Phoenix Park murders. She was always the intermediary between him and Mr Gladstone. O'Shea has been as bitterly blamed by his countrymen as anyone in Irish history. There is no doubt that he was thrilled to see his wife adjusting enormous State issues between Parnell and the Prime Minister. His own relations with Chamberlain, of whom he was a frequent attendant, made a compulsive appeal to his sense of self-importance and even to his pride. The story was neither so simple nor so contemptible as it has been painted.

Parnell was so early interwoven with the O'Sheas that there was no time in the 'eighties in which he could have disentangled himself. Before Gladstone cast him into Kilmainham gaol he was deep in their toils and enchantments. Mrs O'Shea's book pretends that she continued to deceive O'Shea, but there is no doubt that from 1881 onwards he was fully apprised. The opening of letters by close friends in the party had made them aware of the intrigue, and both Healy and Biggar repeatedly warned Parnell that the O'Sheas would be his ruin. Parnell cared nothing for this. His was a love stronger than death, defiant of every social ordinance, scornfully superior not only to worldly ambitions, but even to the Cause entrusted to his hands.



Meanwhile national history unfolded. Mr Gladstone embraced Home Rule. He broke with the Whigs. By what he always regarded as a strange, inexplicable eddy he found himself confronted by 'Radical Joe'. Lord Randolph Churchill led the Tories of Birmingham to the support of the candidates they had fought a few months before. Lord Salisbury was returned to power. Chamberlain became a pillar of the Unionist administration. Gladstone had reunited himself with all the sentimental forces which made nineteenth-century Liberalism so great but so transient a factor in European history. For reasons which have no part in this tale Lord Randolph Churchill resigned from Lord Salisbury's Government. Tory Democracy was dumbfounded and discouraged. The Unionist Government plodded on dully and clumsily without much illumination, but with solid purpose. Gradually Mr Gladstone's strength revived. The process was stimulated by a surprising occurrence.

In 1887, *The Times* newspaper began to publish a series of articles under the heading of 'Parnellism and Crime'. Then, in order to substantiate the charges made by its correspondent, it reproduced, in what Morley calls 'all the fascination of facsimile', a letter in Parnell's handwriting which directly connected the Irish leader with the murder campaign. The story of this letter is without compare in the annals of the Press. In 1885 there lived in dishonourable poverty in Dublin a broken-down journalist named Richard Pigott. For years he had preyed upon a credulous public. He had raised subscriptions for the defence of the accused in Fenian trials and the relief of their wives and children, and then embezzled the moneys received. That source of income failing, he had turned to the writing of begging letters. But the wells of Christian charity yielded little to his pump. According to rumour, he was about this time supplementing their scanty flow by the sale of indecent books and photographs. And even that could not procure sufficient for his moderate needs. In this crisis of his fate there came to him a gentleman convinced that Parnell and his colleagues were parties to the crimes of the extremists. But he wanted proof, and he offered Pigott a guinea a day, hotel and travelling expenses, and a round price for documents, if he could supply the necessary evidence. Of course Pigott could supply it. And so the famous Parnell letter and a host of other incriminating documents came into being, and ultimately found their way into the offices of *The Times*.

The manager of *The Times*, unfortunately, did not investigate the origin of these letters. He paid, in all, over £2,500 for them. But he asked no questions. He believed that the letters were genuine because he wanted them to be genuine. And the Government took the same

view for precisely the same reason. They believed that here they had a weapon of the first importance, not only against Parnell but against Gladstone. Against Lord Randolph Churchill's earnest advice, embodied in a secret memorandum, they set up a Special Commission of three judges to investigate the connection of Parnell and his colleagues, and the movement of which they were the leaders, with agrarian political crime assassination.

It was, in effect, a State trial, but a State trial without a jury. For over a year the judges toiled and laboured. Many of the secrets of terrorism and of counter-espionage were laid bare. Strange figures like Le Caron, in the deep-hidden employ of the British Government, told their tale of conspiracies in England, Ireland and America. The whole political world followed the case with fascination. Nothing like it had been seen since the impeachment of Sacheverell. The brilliant Irish advocate who was afterwards Lord Russell of Killowen, Lord Chief Justice of England, was principal counsel for his compatriots. He was aided by a young Radical lawyer, by name Herbert Henry Asquith. The climax was not reached until February, 1889, when Pigott was put in the box and broke down in fatal cross-examination. His exposure by Russell was complete and remorseless. He was asked to write down the words 'likelihood' and 'hesitancy' which he had misspelt in the forged letter. He repeated his misspellings. He wrote 'hesitency' as it had appeared in the accusing document. Letters which he had written, begging for money, were read out and greeted with mocking laughter from all parts of the Court. There was another day of damning exposure. The fact of forgery was established. Then, on the third day, when Pigott's name was called, he did not answer. He had fled from justice. Detectives tracked him to an hotel in Madrid, and he blew out his brains to escape the punishment of his crime.

The effect of these proceedings on the British electorate was profound. A general election could not long be delayed, and the prospect of a sweeping Liberal victory seemed certain. Parnell was widely regarded throughout Britain as a deeply wronged man who had at length been vindicated. He had been cleared of a horrible charge brought against him by political malice. The prospects of a Home Rule victory were never so bright. Making allowance for the differences between countries, the charge against Parnell was invested with all the significance attached in France to the Dreyfus case. All the political forces were stirred by vehement passion. Then came the counterstroke. Someone detonated O'Shea. The husband who for ten years had been inert suddenly roused himself to strike a deadly blow. He opened proceedings for divorce against his wife, naming Parnell

as co-respondent. Some day an historical examination will reveal what is at present disputed, namely whether Chamberlain stirred O'Shea to this action. It must be remembered that many people sincerely believed that the life of the British Empire depended upon the defeat of Home Rule.

Both Parnell and Mrs O'Shea were at first unperturbed by the proceedings. Parnell was sure he could hold Ireland, and even Irish Conservatism. To Kitty divorce promised the end of a false and odious situation and of long apprehension, and she saw a sure and quick way to becoming Mrs Parnell. If Parnell had defended the suit, he could, in the opinion of his renowned solicitor Sir George Lewis, have certainly won by proving the long collusion. But Kitty and he could never then be united before the whole world in wedlock. It must be admitted that Parnell inclined to this course. But Mrs O'Shea's counsel, Frank Lockwood, a man of exceptional brilliancy, persuaded him to let the case go forward without resistance. In after years Lockwood said, 'Parnell was cruelly wronged all round. There is a great reaction in his favour. I am not altogether without remorse myself.'

The furious political world of the early 'nineties learned with delight or consternation that Parnell was adjudged a guilty co-respondent. The details of the case, published verbatim in every newspaper, fed the prudish curiosity of the public. According to one story Parnell had made his exit on one occasion from her room down the fire-escape, and this tale aroused un pitying laughter. But the reaction which followed was different from what Parnell had foreseen. Mr Gladstone did not appear at the first blush so shocked as might have been expected from so saintly a figure. It was only when he realized the violent revolt of English Nonconformity against a 'convicted adulterer' that he saw how grievous was the injury to his political interests and how inevitable his severance from Parnell had become. He repudiated Parnell, and Ireland was forced to choose between the greatest of English Parliamentarians, the statesman who had made every sacrifice for the Irish cause, who alone could carry the victory in the larger island, and the proud chieftain under whom the Irish people might have marched to a free and true partnership in the British Empire. The choice was bitter, but the forces inexorable. A meeting of the Irish Party was called on a requisition signed by thirty-one members. Parnell, re-elected leader only the day before, was in the chair, looking, as one of those present put it, 'as if it were we who had gone astray, and he were sitting there to judge us'. An appeal was made to him to retire temporarily, leaving the management of the party in the hands of a committee to be nominated by

himself: then, after the excitement had died down, he could resume the leadership. Parnell said nothing. But equally strong appeals were made by other members that he should not retire. In the end, the meeting adjourned.

Parnell now fought for time. He believed that Ireland was behind him, and that if he could only delay decision long enough, he must win. But when the party meeting resumed, his opponents were taking a stronger line. Mr T. M. Healy was leading the rebels. 'I say to Mr Parnell his power has gone,' he declared. 'He derived that power from the people. We are the representatives of the people.' Parnell was stung to reply; 'Mr Healy has been trained in this warfare,' he said. 'Who trained him? Who gave him his first opportunity and chance? Who got him his seat in Parliament? That Mr Healy should be here today to destroy me is due to myself.' Day after day the debate went on, Parnell fighting more and more desperately to avoid a vote on the real issue, still clinging to the belief that the people of Ireland would support him against the insurgent M.P.s. But he knew that the tide was turning against him. His eyes blazed ever more fiercely in his pallid face; it was only by an intense effort that he still held himself in check. On every side tempers were taut, at the breaking-point. On the fifth day Healy quoted a speech of Parnell's, six months before, in which he had referred to an alliance with the Liberals, 'an alliance which I venture to believe will last'. 'What broke it off?' demanded Healy. 'Gladstone's letter,' said Parnell. 'No,' retorted Healy. 'It perished in the stench of the Divorce Court.'

The end came on the seventh day of the meeting, 6 December, 1890. There were disorderly scenes. John Redmond, who had stuck to Parnell through thick and thin, used the phrase, 'the master of the Party'. 'Who is to be the mistress of the Party?' cried the bitterest tongue in Ireland. Parnell rose, his eyes terrible. For a moment it seemed that he was going to strike Healy, and some of the rebels even hoped that he would. But, 'I appeal to my friend the chairman,' said one of them. 'Better appeal to your own friends,' said Parnell, 'better appeal to that cowardly scoundrel there, that in an assembly of Irishmen dares to insult a woman.' There was more barren argument, more recriminations. Finally, Justin M'Carthy rose. 'I see no further use carrying on a discussion which must be barren of all but reproach, ill-temper, controversy and indignity,' he said, 'and I therefore suggest that all who think with me at this grave crisis should withdraw with me from this room.' Forty-five members filed out silently, twenty-seven remained behind. And Ireland, Parnell was soon to discover, was with the majority.

The Catholic Church swung decidedly against him. In vain he

asserted his vanished authority. In vain he fought with frantic energy at savage Irish by-elections. Another year of grim struggle at hopeless odds sapped a constitution always frail. Then, in Morley's moving words, 'the veiled shadow stole upon the scene', and Charles Stewart Parnell struggled for the last time across the Irish Channel to die at Brighton on 6 October 1891, in the arms of the woman he loved so well.

It is forty-five years since that final scene. But Parnell's figure looms no smaller now, seen through the gathering mists of history, than it did to his contemporaries. They saw the politician; and they saw him, of necessity, through the spectacles of faction and party prejudice. We see the man, one of the strangest, most baffling personalities that ever trod the world's stage. He never forgot. He never forgave. He never faltered. He dedicated himself to a single goal, the goal of Ireland a nation, and he pursued it unswervingly until a rose thrown across his path opened a new world, the world of love. And, as he had previously sacrificed all for Ireland, so, when the moment of choice came, he sacrificed all, even Ireland, for love. A lesser man might have given more sparingly and kept more. Most of the Irish politicians who deserted him went unwillingly. Had he accepted a temporary retirement, he might have returned, in a year or so, to all his former power. He was young enough, he was only in his forty-sixth year when he died, worn out by the struggle he might so easily have avoided. But though he could command, he could not conciliate. And so, in place of the applause that might have been his as first Prime Minister of Ireland, we have the paler but perhaps wider fame of the undying legend. In place of the successful politician, we have the man of fire and ice, of fierce passions held in strong control, but finally breaking out with overwhelming force, to destroy and immortalize him. 'It will be a nine days' wonder,' he said to a colleague, in telling of his decision not to defend the divorce action. 'Nine centuries, sir,' was the reply.

Such is the tale which comprised all the elements of a Greek tragedy. Sophocles or Euripides could have found in it a theme sufficient to their sombre taste. Modern British opinion rebels at its conclusions. Contemporary foreign opinion frankly could not understand the political annihilation of Parnell. It was ascribed to British hypocrisy. But the result was clear and fatally disastrous. The loves of Parnell and Kitty O'Shea condemned Ireland to a melancholy fate, and the British Empire to a woeful curtailment of its harmony and strength.