

Evening Memories

(By WILLIAM O'BRIEN.)

CHAPTER IV.—THE PARNELL OF THE EIGHTIES. I.—THE MAN.

Parnell has always been described as "an elusive personality" both by those who had not the wit to understand him and by those who did not deserve to be admitted to his confidence. The truth is, that the fault lay with themselves and not with him. He was at the core simplicity itself. "I have never been a Parnellite," he once smilingly remarked, and it was true of his contempt both for self-introspection and for the squalors of political faction-fighting.

He was not Irish, was the comforting thought of Englishmen whom he beat on their own ground of icy coolness and passionless plainness of speech. "I have always envied the member for Cork," Gladstone once owned in the House of Commons with a rueful countenance, "his gift for saying precisely what he wants to say—neither a word more, nor a word less." It was so little Irish!

English members who in the early Obstruction conflicts saw him ordered to discontinue his speech and withdraw while the House was considering his suspension, and when he was invited back into a House still boiling with excitement heard him resume his speech at the very sentence at which he left off with the words: "As I was remarking, Mr. Speaker, when I was interrupted"—could make nothing of an Irish leader with less than themselves of the Keltic excitability or quarrelsomeness, or (so they pleased to put it) rant. There was some consolation, such as it was, in the taunt that Parnell was not a pure-bred Gael; no, but still less was there a trait of Anglo-Saxonism in his face, his temper, his mentality, or anything that was his. The outward masque he derived from his American ancestry with his impassiveness, his invulnerability of chilled steel, his keenness for the practical side of things, and his undoubted if deeply submerged sense of humor; Parnell had no more natural temptation to claim kinship with England than his grandfather Stewart—the old Ironsides of the American War—had to weep for the fate of the English frigates whom his good cutlass and his grappling irons were chasing from the seas. No American had any difficulty in understanding Parnell. "I have come to see the man who has made John Bull listen," Wendell Phillips, the celebrated orator, one night said in the Faneuil Hall in Boston. We may be sure that in the qualities which enabled this quiet gentleman to break the Parliament of England instead of the Parliament of England breaking him, Wendell Phillips saw more family resemblance with the idealism of Abe Lincoln, the lath-splitter of the backwoods and the glory of the Western Hemisphere, than with a pragmatism of the Anglo-Saxon breed.

But with all that, and beyond all that, Parnell was as Irish as the voices of the rivers of Moore's "Meeting of the Waters" as they sang their way through the woods of his own demesne at Avondale. It took two centuries of Penal legislation to prevent the Parnells from becoming more Irish than the Irish themselves—if even then the Gaelic magic did not prevail. There is no anti-Irishman of the name on record. His mother entertained a hatred of England heated to the point of fanaticism. Her house in Merrion Square was a favorite resort of the Irish-American officers who swarmed over to captain the Fenian Insurrection. The place was under the constant supervision of the police. I have heard Parnell say that the first (and I suspect the last) time he ever found himself singing was when he joined the heady chorus of Michael Scanlan's "Out and make way for the Fenian men!" as it was roared by the bronzed soldiers of the Civil War in his mother's dining-room. It was there, too, he first saw his predecessor in the Irish leadership, Isaac Butt, large part of whose fees for the defence of the Fenian men, it may safely be guessed, came from Mrs. Parnell's pocket. England would be wise to note the fact that it was this contact with the much-reviled Fenian filibusters which settled the destinies of the old Protestant Tory man of genius and the young Protestant squire from Cambridge as apostles of Irish Nationality.

Those who picture Parnell to themselves as a man without imagination deceive themselves by forgetting that

his imagination lived chiefly in those worlds of Science which in the Victorian days were, even in the dreams of the Ruskins and the Brownings, the high heaven of Poetry. The man whose lonely evenings at Aughavanagh were passed in working out problems of the measurement of the mountains and the stars—of whom Mr. Morley tells us that, while the House of Commons was panting to hear him on the Pigott forgeries, he left the House to superintend some chemical assay of his alluvial gold deposits at Avondale—was not the kind of person to put his thoughts in mellow metres. It is none the less true that it was not for nothing that a gentle poet was—shall we say before, or next to himself?—the most shining ornament of his house. For the mere tools or tricks of Poetry he cared no more than a blind man for pictures. On the rare occasions when he quoted verses, it was as though he were making a joke, and he had them generally topsy-turvy. Once when he ventured upon Moore's hackneyed vision of Ireland:

"Great, glorious, and free,
First flower of the earth and first gem of the sea,"

he blundered at the close into a stammered

"First flower of the earth,
and first—ah!—jewel of—ah!—the ocean."

"Gem," Parnell, not "jewel," whispered one of his colleagues. "Don't you think 'jewel' is a better word?" he replied with entire complacency. But Poetry is not a thing of tinsel or of jingling words. His choice for his shooting-lodge of the bare barrack built high in the mountain wastes to put down the Wicklow Insurrection—the fondness with which he would point out the stone on which Holt and his brother insurgents sharpened their pikeheads—the romantic gusto with which he would relate how nearly his grandfather, Sir John Parnell—the last Irish Chancellor of the Exchequer, came to be hanged for an adventurous plot to rush Dublin Castle by the raid of a disaffected regiment of Wicklow Horse (a project which, he always maintained, would have revolutionised the fortunes of the Insurrection of '98)—his fit of silent solemnity one night while we stood in the glen of the rivers, listening to their mystic whispers as they died away in the immensities of the surrounding mountain ravines—all gave hints of poetic imaginings more authentic than a good many ballad-makers can manage to fit into their rhymes.

At least, he was a haughty and a dictatorial man? On the evidence of what witness who ever truly knew him? Not of any of his modest household at Avondale; they would have thought it too good luck to give their lives for him. Not of any of the thousands of village captains who saw him in habit as he lived in the midst of idolising mass meetings and at the excruciating "banquets" with which they generally wound up. In the most primitive country inn, regaled with cookery for which there was often little to plead except the good intentions of the cook, in an atmosphere of boisterous rustic enjoyment, he was not merely the courteous guest smiling away discomforts: he was as simple, as happy, and as much at home as his most unsophisticated neighbor at the table. He was not haughty even with the great. He moved among statesmen and nobles with an utter lack of self-consciousness which put them instantly at their ease, and an absolute incapacity to feel otherwise than at ease himself—placid, attentive, respectful to high or low. That he was not a sociable or a marrying man was perhaps a decree of Destiny, which applied as well to his beautiful sister, Fanny, the poet, and to Anna, who might have been a scarcely less potent world-power than himself. The shadow of madness—too often, alas! one of the *atrae curae* of human genius—hung heavily over one side of the house, if not over both. Also, Parnell's business in London was one of revolution and was not to be done—was, indeed, to be sorely undone—at dinner tables and in ballrooms. It is worthy of remark that the *triste idyll* (the only one of a lonely life) which was to wreck him and to wreck much besides, had its origin in his declining a woman's invitation to her husband's dinner-table. He evaded the summons, and the lady had a lady's revenge. If she had known, the genial Prince of Wales' persistent efforts to wile the Irish Leader to a discreet dinner-party were no less resolutely evaded. But once en-

E. S. Robson

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