

## Evening Memories

(By WILLIAM O'BRIEN.)

### CHAPTER XXV.—THE PARNELL COMMISSION (1889-1890)

It was the Parnell Commission devised for the destruction of the Irish leader which re-enchanted his waning popularity. Never was the immanence of justice in human affairs better verified than in the completeness with which the ruin planned by his persecutors fell upon their own heads. Since smaller men were taken off by the conspiracy of Titus Oates and his suborners, no individual was ever threatened by a combination of power and perjury so formidable in its patrons, so infamous in its methods, and to all seeming so impossible to withstand. It was the culmination of a system of poisonous defamation under the title of "Parnellism and Crime" carried on for many months with all the resources of the most powerful newspaper in the world. Even an appetite jaded by unceasing doses of libel in every hateful form against the Irish leader was whipped up to an excitement past description when men read one morning in the *Times* the *facsimile* text of a letter in which Parnell avowed his complicity in the Phoenix Park murders, and apologised to a murderous confederate of his for the hard necessity which drove him nominally to condemn them.

Curiously enough the calmness with which Parnell received even this last outrage of his tormentors, confirmed the hopes or fears of a British public, which had never been free from the suspicion that the silence and dignity which baffled them in the great Irishman were in reality the evidences of guilt. The singular speech he delivered in the House of Commons on the night after the publication of the first *facsimile* letter, was received with blank faces of bewilderment on the Liberal benches. It contained a few sentences of quiet repudiation of the forgery, full enough of confidence, as they read now, but unemotional, and even casual as they then sounded, even in our own ears, in view of the appalling outrage of which he was the victim. But even from this show of contempt, rather than indignation, he passed at once to a detailed examination of the forged letter, word by word, and even letter by letter, which reduced his friends to a condition of pained silence, and all but caused the exultation of his foes to burst audibly forth. With the painstaking and loving interest with which he always followed up a mechanical or mathematical demonstration, he pointed out that a certain "t" was a clumsy imitation of his own, that the indentation in the heavy loop-line of the "I" was a peculiarity he had dropped since the year 1884, and must consequently have been copied from some letter of his before that date, and that the word "hesitancy" in the forged letter was one he had never used, and did not believe to be good English, and so on. His performance of that night constitutes one of the most amazing human documents in history. Greatly to his own surprise, for after sitting down, he whispered to me, with his carefully modulated smile on such occasions: "I think these fellows really imagine they have struck ile!" The truth, of course, was that with his usual practical directness his mind had passed from indignation at the forgery to detailed measures for its detection. But Anglo-Saxon wisdom was so non-plussed by Parnell's cool fortitude that in all probability the Government side of the House was not the only one on which he left more than a suspicion that the *Times* calumniators had indeed "struck ile," and that Parnell's movement, if not his life, was trembling in the ignominious balance.

The odds against him seemed to be beyond counting: an avowed confederacy, offensive and defensive, between the sober-sided Leader of the House, the blameless Mr. W. H. Smith, and "my old friend, Mr. John Walter of the *Times*"; the machinery of Dublin Castle, its choice Resident Magistrates, police officers and lawyers, its secret sleuth-hounds and informers, placed without reserve at the service of the Forgers; every dark spot in Ireland and in America searched for miscreants with some tale of crime to sell or to invent for vast rewards; "charges and allegations" not confined to the plain issue whether the *Times* letters were a splendid Imperial service or a hideous crime, but ranging over the whole field of indictment of a whole nation for every idle word or obscure village misdeed in the course of an agrarian revolutionary in the main nobly justified by

results; and for the judges of it all a tribunal wholly English, sitting in England and bitter haters of the Irish Cause, with the first law officer of the Crown, the Attorney-General (Sir Richard Webster) to invest the prosecution with the full weight of a governmental adoption of the forgeries. England's misreading of Irish feeling proved to be as preposterously astray as usual. Parnell's Parliamentary colleagues to a man, the Irish people and their whole world-spread race rose to the rescue of their leader with a passionate enthusiasm never before surpassed; a Defence Fund of more than £40,000 was raised as swiftly as the subscriptions could be taken in, and Parnell's impressive figure rose with the old majesty high above the legions of unscrupulous politicians, loathsome informers, and not less loathsome suborners, leagued for his destruction.

It seems unaccountable that neither to the conductors of the *Times*, nor to the Law Officers of the Government, who were staking their reputation upon the genuineness of the *facsimile* letters, nor yet to Parnell's own keen intuition did it occur to dispose of the entire structure of falsehood by the simple method which Archbishop Walsh was the first to happen upon some months later. The Archbishop examined the letters with the aid of a powerful microscope, and discovered that every letter of every word was separately formed, leaving a perceptible gap between the point at which each letter ended, and that at which the next began, showing manifestly that each had to be laboriously traced by the forger from genuine letters of Parnell on various subjects and on different occasions. That so clumsy an imposture should have imposed upon some of the shrewdest minds of England, and for many months thrown an Empire into a fever is a marvel even in the country which impeached the five Catholic lords for "a damnable and hellish plot" on the testimony of the infamous villain Oates. It is not, of course, to be believed that Mr. Walter and his editor and manager should have incurred their ruin by publishing the Forgeries with an actual consciousness of their origin, but their guilt is little, if at all, attenuated by the plea. They had become so hardened by the unpunished publication of the most horrid innuendoes and libels of every description on the representatives of Ireland, that they had probably become incapable any longer of estimating the value of the collaboration of a wretch like Pigott, whose reputation as a professional swindler and blackmailer was too notorious to impose upon anybody with the slightest acquaintance with the underworld of Irish life. The truth is they had given the key of their conscience to the wire-pullers of the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union, whose Secretary, and a certain Trinity College celebrity known in convivial circles as "Professor Red-headed Whisky," and sad to relate, another Trinity College professor of a very different character—the biographer of Shelley—had long superintended the *Times* supply of murderous munitions, and welcomed Pigott's wares without scrutiny as the crowning attraction of their stock.

(To be continued.)

### Obituary

#### MRS. ELLENA FITZGERALD, MATA MATA.

There passed away recently another link with the past, in the person of Mrs. Ellena Fitzgerald, wife of Mr. Edward Fitzgerald, of Mata Mata (writes a correspondent). The deceased had been visiting Wanganui when she contracted a severe cold which rapidly developed into pneumonia, and despite all that could be done for her at a private hospital in Mata Mata, she slowly sank and passed away, at the comparatively early age of sixty-three years. Much sympathy is extended to her husband, who is left lonely in his old age. The late Mrs. Fitzgerald had no children of her own but was more than a mother to the children of a younger sister who died at an early age, leaving six helpless little mites behind her; she carefully tended and watched over them until they were grown up and established in homes of their own. For this, and many other acts of charity and kindness, the deceased will long be remembered by those who now mourn their loss. The late Mrs. Fitzgerald was the eldest daughter of the late Michael Glassett, Alma, Oamaru, and is survived by two sisters and a brother—Mr. Michael John Glassett, of Australia, Mrs. Murdoch McKay, of Hastings, and Mrs. John Curran, of Wanganui.—R.J.P.