CHAPTER XVII

1852

FALL OF LORD JOHN RUSSELL'S GOVERNMENT—LORD DERBY'S AND LORD ABERDEEN'S ADMINISTRATIONS

I MUST now, with regret, return to politics. The year 1852 was a highly critical one among Parliamentary parties, and yet a year singularly destitute of the nobler interests which ought to belong to them. Whether Lord John Russell had been wise or not in his choice of a subject on which to quarrel with Palmerston, he undoubtedly acted with dignity and courage in dismissing a Minister so powerful, when he knew that his own position was so weak. Palmerston lost no time in wreaking his vengeance. On a question about the militia he moved a vote adverse to the proposition of the Government, and as the Tories were now eager to come into office, they supported Palmerston, and at last the Whig Government fell, never to rise again. 'I have had my tit for tat with John Russell,' was Palmerston's own description of his conduct, in writing to his brother at Naples.

When the Queen sent for Lord Derby, as the leader of the largest of the parties that composed the majority, he had no choice but to accept the duty. But as no union had as yet been effected with any other section in the House, he had to make a Cabinet of raw recruits, of men hardly any one of whom had been in high office before, and who now found themselves suddenly made Privy Councillors, and put in charge of the highest offices of State. I remember seeing Sir J. Graham give his grave head a portentous shake when he spoke of the novel precedent of a whole cargo of the rank and file being carried down to Windsor to be made members of the Privy Council, before they could receive the seals of office. It was a signal proof of the explanation I have given of Disraeli's rise. So far as the Conservative party was concerned, all the old and experienced counsellors of the State were off the Board at which he was to sit supreme. There was literally not a creature to control him, except Lord Derby himself; and a Prime Minister in the Lords cannot control a cunning and audacious leader in the House of Commons. Besides which, Lord Derby, though a splendid speaker, was not very well fitted to enforce the authority of his opinions on others, or to keep his Cabinet in subordination. He was too rollicking, too apt to treat everything as a joke; the result was a Government obviously provisional. It commanded no sure majority in the House, and until it was seen what a Protectionist Government was going to do about Protection, nobody of the Free Trade sections of the House would support them, or do anything but watch and wait. For myself, I never had the smallest doubt that Protection would be thrown overboard by the astute practitioner, who, it was quite evident, had used it only for his own purposes and to keep his party in hand. Accordingly, Disraeli, in language of extraordinary effrontery, soon made this apparent, and the poor dupes whom he had so long rallied under pompous and ambiguous phrases were left discomfited and crestfallen.

The moment it became certain that all danger of a return to Protection was a thing of the past, there remained nothing but personal feelings and the associations of long antagonism to prevent all the Free Trade sections from uniting to form a new and a strong Government. The whole year was spent in attempts, by endless interviews and correspondence, to realize this aspiration, which, indeed, was the strong and just desire of the people. But personal and party feelings, intensified by hereditary traditions, ran so high that, till the close of the year, little or no progress was made. There were two or three dominant facts in the situation. The first was that the leadership of Lord John Russell had become invincibly distasteful to everybody except a small personal and family clique. The second was that Lord John Russell could not be got to see this, and was naturally unwilling to withdraw his claim to a place to which he thought himself entitled by great, and, indeed, immortal, services to the Liberal party. But Catholic Emancipation and the Abolition of Sacramental Tests, and the Reform of Parliament, too, had all lost their flavour to the public, and nothing was remembered but the long and inefficient Whig Governments of Lord Melbourne and of Lord John himself. All men were impatient at the very idea of a renewal of that sort of thing. On the other hand, the Peelite party was full of brilliant individual ability, and their services to fiscal reform during their short tenure of office had made a deep impression on the public mind. Yet there was no one of them entitled as a matter of course to step into the shoes of their great leader. Palmerston was out of the question : he had just made himself too offensive to more sections than one

It was in these circumstances that men began to cast about for one of the resources of our constitution which has been often tried. There are at least three kinds of Prime Minister in our country. First, there are a few men of such commanding genius that the first place comes to them as by right of birth. Of this class the younger Pitt is an illustrious example. Next there are men who have begun at the bottom of the official tree, have climbed up all its branches, have served in a great variety of offices, and distinguished themselves in all. These are the 'all-round men,' who naturally and inevitably reach the top. Of these Peel was an excellent example. But there is another class of Prime Minister, consisting of men who have lived a long life just outside the headiest currents of political contention, but with a native strength and probity of character which has received universal recognition, and has secured universal respect and honour. These are the men round whom rival politicians will sometimes cluster when they will refuse to serve under each other. During the course of 1852 there were two men of this class, towards whom many eyes were directed with a wandering hope. One was Henry Petty, Marquis of Lansdowne, who had once been Chancellor of the Exchequer in far-off days, who had always been connected with the Whig party, but for many years had taken no very active part in political contention, and under whom, with his dignified position and character, any man might serve with confidence and honour. Even Lord John Russell, it was supposed, might well consent to do so. The other of the two men who occupied a somewhat similar position was the Earl of Aberdeen; his name, however, was not much brought forward until, at the very close of the year, it was found to be the only one possible round which the jarring elements could be made to crystallize.

In the autumn of 1852 everything was still in a condition of complete uncertainty, and consultations were continual through various 'go-betweens.' A leading one of these was Lord John Russell's elder brother, Francis, Duke of Bedford, through whom intimations could be safely made that might have been otherwise resented. Among the Peelites there were some vague symptoms of possible change. Gladstone was supposed to gravitate towards Lord Derby; Sir James Graham towards Lord John, who was known to be inventing a trump-card by which to captivate the constituencies and regain his power. This was a new Reform Bill, for the Whig mind was then destitute of any fresh idea, and tinkering the machinery of Parliament was the only shot in their locker. Nobody, so far as I could find out, was then in favour of this plan of campaign against Lord Derby. But some were less disinclined than others, and there was a general impression that, if launched by a man in Lord John's position, it might be difficult to resist it.

It was in the midst of these doubts and difficulties that Lord Aberdeen became more and more a centre of correspondence and consultation, because all sections confided in his incorruptible integrity and simplicity of character, in the moderation of his opinions, and in the complete absence in him of any personal ambition. He, on the other hand, was anxious to help by finding out from all his friends what was the tendency of their views. Among others he invited me to visit him in his country place, Haddo in Aberdeenshire, and as I was naturally desirous to know his views, my wife and I gladly accepted his invitation, taking Haddo on our way south from Dunrobin in October, 1852. There is no way so good of getting to know a man intimately as to be with him in his own house. The home of Lord Aberdeen seemed the home also of all the domestic virtues, and of an intense earnestness and simplicity of character which was specially his own. One thing rather surprised me: in speaking of Lord John's disposition to start another reform movement, I found that Lord Aberdeen, although well known as a Tory in foreign politics, was so 'Liberal' as to be almost a Radical in home politics—that is to say, he had seen so much blood and treasure poured out to reach the Continental Settlement of 1815 that he dreaded any departure from it; but as regarded home politics, he was ready to entertain very large proposals of departure from the settlement of 1832. This was the only subject on which I could not quite agree with him. I thought that the £10 franchise had worked and was working well, taking in, as it did, all the middle and the lower middle classes, together with such members of the wage-earning classes as had raised themselves a little by industry and thrift. But I told Lord Aberdeen that a redistribution of seats was a branch of reform in which a good deal might be done with distinct advantage, since the Reform Bill of 1832 had left far too many boroughs with two seats, and the seats gained by a new schedule of disfranchisement might be advantageously disposed of among larger constituencies. I found that Lord Aberdeen had no prepossession on the matter, partly from the habit of official men not to look at any subject closely till the time for action upon it is within sight, and partly from a curious confidence in the fundamental loyalty of the British people to the constitutional system under which they live. I therefore saw that, so far as Lord Aberdeen was himself concerned, there was no obstacle to his acting with Lord John Russell in any combination. But more than this was clear—namely, that, so far as concerned any political question at that time even in sight, there was nothing to prevent a combination between the Peelites as a group and the old Whigs, except the discredit into which the Whigs had fallen, and, of course, the remains of an old and long antagonism. So completely did the Peelite position correspond to that of the old Whig party, that it was recognised by Lord John Russell himself, in a saying ascribed to him at the time, when someone had suggested that the word Whig should be given up as nothing but an impediment in the way of union. Lord John's reply was both humorous and true. He said that he could not do it, even if he would; and the necessity was not apparent, seeing that Whig was a word which expressed in one syllable all that seven syllables were needed to express, in the Peelite title of 'Liberal Conservatives.'

Disraeli, of course, at that time had obvious inducements to prevent any union of parties if he could. A union between the Peelites and the Whigs would have constituted a powerful opposition. On the other hand, a union between any of the Peelites and Lord Derby would have destroyed his own solitary reign in a Cabinet of mediocrities. It was, therefore, perfectly understood that he did not favour either of the alternatives, and that he did his best to render both impossible. By keeping up the farce of Protectionist language till the last possible moment, he effectually barred out all the Peelites from any combination with Lord Derby, and when the Cabinet of novices was once formed, it was too late to make any attempt in that direction.

I left Haddo with a confirmed and enhanced estimate of the high qualities of Lord Aberdeen's character and mind, of the sagacity and moderation of his opinions, of his just and tolerant views of other men, of his singular simplicity, sincerity, and absolute truthfulness. On the one subject on which he and I had held such different opinions, Church politics, we never touched, and we had no need to do so, since there was then no Church question in agitation. We both, though from different points of view, supported the Established Church, and it gave me pleasure to see that he went to the parish church on Sunday, unlike too many of the land-owners in Scotland, who stood systematically aloof from the Church of the people.

The new Cabinet of Lord Derby had for the first time to confront the new Parliament early in November, 1852, and on the 18th of that month the funeral of the Duke of Wellington took place. That great man had died in the middle of September, but his body had been kept above ground until Parliament should decide how he was to be buried. Tennyson's immortal ode has embalmed for ever in superb poetry the mingled feelings of sorrow and of gratitude, the universal feelings of the people.

There is nothing so pathetic as the ordinary funeral of a soldier—the riderless horse, the simple gun-carriage, the coffin with the old accountrements, the idle sword, the mournful music, and the measured step of former comrades, constitute the most touching of human obsequies. But all this was well-nigh lost in the great procession for the Duke of Wellington. The coffin was concealed in a hideous funeral-car, conceived in the worst possible taste—enormous in bulk without being imposing. When we had seen it pass, from the garden of Stafford House, we went by an arranged route to reach St. Paul's in time to join the peers and peeresses, to whom places had been assigned. Mourning does not lend itself to pageant, and an enormous crowd of people dressed in black, ranged in tiers of seats, supported by scaffolding, did not add to the solemnity of Wren's magnificent interior. But there was one part of the ceremony which redeemed all others, and that was when the coffin, placed on trestles in the middle of the pavement, and surrounded by the Duke's old companions-in-arms, was seen to be very slowly sinking, moved by some unseen mechanism, through an aperture in the floor into the crypt beneath. The sinking was so slow, so noiseless, that it only gradually became perceptible. The circle of fine old veterans who surrounded it, all in full uniform, kept their hands steadily on the coffin as it descended. Conspicuous among them were Lord Hardinge, Lord Londonderry, and Lord Anglesey. Slowly the coffin sank, so low that they all had to stoop to keep in touch with it. But this they did with an affectionate devotion which it was most moving to see. Very few seemed to be stiff with age, but one of them, Lord Londonderry, was so evidently lame that I could not help fearing he might fall down upon the coffin as he strained his arms downwards to follow his beloved commander. I recollect nothing more, but that scene is indelibly impressed upon my memory as one never to be forgotten. Thirty-seven years had then passed since Wellington had closed his glorious campaigns on the field of Waterloo, and it did seem wonderful to see there so many of those who fought under him then, and, in earlier days, in the Peninsula, still living, and standing, as upright as ever, round that bier. Lord Anglesey, in particular, a tall and very handsome man, looked magnificent, and all were visibly bearing themselves under strong and suppressed emotion.

We did not remain in London long after the Duke's funeral. The great battle which was to decide the fate of the Derby Cabinet had to be fought in the House of Commons, where it was of course foreseen that Disraeli's first Budget would reveal his policy, and would inevitably afford opportunities of decisive opposition. I took no part in the preliminary skirmishes in the Lords about the precise terms in which Protection was to be given up. I wished to retain my own attitude of reserve in the political rearrangements which it was quite obvious must very soon ensue, and on the only occasion on which I opened my mouth at all in the Lords, on the 30th November, I asked Lord Derby to undertake some measure dealing with the then delicate subject of religious tests in the Universities of Scotland. This Lord Derby, in a very courteous reply, declined to pledge himself to do, but expressed opinions which in my rejoinder I said were likely to do good in Scotland. So far the footing on which I placed myself was consistent with the attitude of neutrality and suspense which was natural to the circumstances of the moment. It was not less consistent with that attitude that, on leaving London in the first days of December, 1852, I left my proxy in the hands of Lord Aberdeen.

We then returned to Rosneath, paying two family visits on our way—one to Trentham, and one to my sister-in-law, Lady Blantyre, at Erskine on the Clyde. Disraeli's financial statement was made on December 3rd. It was audacious and aggressive in the highest degree, and included some changes, especially one on the incidence of the income-tax and of the house-duty, which involved the greatest questions it was possible to raise. I at once wrote to Lord Aberdeen expressing the strongest objections to parts of the scheme, but also expressing a hope that some other parts of it—as, for example, the extended area of direct taxation—would receive careful consideration at a time when indirect taxation was being so greatly reduced. Gladstone's reply to Disraeli's speech and statement at the end of the debate was one of the most powerful ever delivered in Parliament in my time. It was usual in such cases to allow a Minister to have the last word, and to close the debate. But when on the fourth night of the debate (December 16th, 1852) Disraeli ended with the celebrated passage, 'Yes, I know what I have to face: I have to face a coalition,' etc., Gladstone started to his feet, and, facing the howls and shouts of another coalition, which tried to drown his voice, delivered a passionate rebuke for the licence of Disraeli's attack, and then proceeded to an admirable analysis of the whole scheme, an analysis which left it shattered on the ground. The division condemned the Government by a majority of nineteen, and next day Lord Derby resigned.

Thereupon the Queen showed her sense of the necessity of a reorganization of parties by sending, not for some one man, but for two men—for Lord Lansdowne as representing the Whigs, and for Lord Aberdeen as representing the Liberal Conservatives. Lord Lansdowne was unwell, and the Queen then sent for Lord Aberdeen alone, into whose hands she committed the task of forming a united Government of such materials as he could command.

It was a great satisfaction to me at that time, as it has been ever since, to remember that, from my departure from Haddo late in October to the time at which we are now arrived, I had no connection with or knowledge of the personal correspondence which was carried on, by the leading members of both parties, with Lord Aberdeen, on their respective relations to each other, and on the bases on which they might probably consent to act together. None of them corresponded with me. My position was peculiar. Although Peelite in general sympathies, I was too young to be actually one of the Peelite group. That group consisted of men all of whom had been colleagues under Sir Robert Peel, and the leading members of the party had all been members of his Cabinet. I had never been in office at all, and none of these men were less than half a generation older than myself. With the Whigs, on the other hand, although some of their leaders were my intimate friends and connections, I could hardly correspond at this time, because they knew that I had already been approached by Lord John Russell, and had refused to join him on the express ground that I saw a reconstruction of parties to be inevitable, and that I did not wish to anticipate the combinations which might arise.

My position, therefore, was one of complete detachment and independence, except that on all questions then likely to emerge I had come to place almost entire confidence in the wisdom, moderation, and sagacity of Lord Aberdeen. When I saw the announcement that he had been sent for by the Queen, and had accepted the task of forming an Administration, I thought it possible, perhaps probable, that he would make to me some such offer as Lord John Russell had previously made, but although I had not then any adequate conception of the immense difficulties he had to enencounter, I knew that a whole crowd of men from both sections would consider themselves aggrieved if they were not included, whilst the inclusion of them all was a physical impossibility. I had never intimated to Lord Aberdeen the smallest desire for office, nor had I ever fully realized the probability that he could be the head of a new united Government. Then there were many subordinate offices fitted for my age which I felt I could not accept. From some I was excluded by being a peer, from others by my health, which was never very strong. A few only, therefore, remained which were suitable to my circumstances, and I felt that for these there would be older candidates with more pressing claims. When, therefore, a week had passed since Lord Aberdeen had begun his work, and no communication had come from him, I thought it not improbable that he had found it impossible to include me. It was, consequently, an agreeable surprise when, on the morning of the 25th December, 1852, I received at Rosneath the following letter:

'MY DEAR DUKE,

'You will have been informed of the occupation in which I have been for some days, and still am, engaged.

'In composing the new Administration, I am very desirous of having your assistance, and I trust that you may not be unwilling to join us.

'As it is now probable that my present work will be brought to a successful termination, I would propose to you to take the office of Lord Privy Seal, with a seat in the Cabinet. This would not impose any serious amount of official labour upon you, and would leave you free for the exercise of your ability in the House of Lords, of which we shall stand much in need.

'The House will be adjourned to-day to Monday next, when I trust my list will be complete, and my explanatory statement will be made.

'Believe me, my dear Duke,
'Ever truly yours,
'ABERDEEN.'

To this letter I sent the following immediate reply:

'ROSNEATH,
'*December* 25th, 1852.

'MY DEAR LORD ABERDEEN,

'Any help I can possibly afford you in the important work you have undertaken is most heartily at your disposal, and would have been so, whether attached to you by office or not. But I hope I need hardly assure you that I feel sincerely gratified by the estimate you have been kind enough to express of the value you put upon my services. It will be a great pleasure to me to serve under a Minister whom I have always looked up to as a public man, and whom I have, more lately, had the happiness of regarding as a private friend.

'I think the composition of your Administration affords every hope of realizing that which is the ideal of all good government—the uniting of steady progress and a liberal policy with a firm and jealous attachment to all the old institutions and the traditionary principles of the English people.'

The particular office chosen by Lord Aberdeen for my acceptance was at first rather a surprise to me. I had been accustomed to consider it as an office usually held by elderly men whose active life was nearly over, or by men of great political influence, whose names alone were an appreciable strength to any Government. It had absolutely no administrative duties. It could afford, therefore, no administrative experience. On the other hand, it had great traditions. It had been held by Chatham, and by others of less, but still of great, distinction. It carried a seat in the Cabinet—that is to say, it carried a voice in all the deliberations and decisions of the Government on whatever questions came before it, whether legislative or executive. This was enough for me. In such an office a man may be idle if he is disposed to be so, but he may also be intensely occupied. Lord Aberdeen's letter indicated that he expected me to help him in debate, and to do this with any usefulness or credit would demand close attention to every subject on which we might be attacked by the most formidable speaker in Parliament—Lord Derby. I saw that such an office, among such men, and at such a peculiar conjunction of public affairs, would afford me ample exercise for such faculties as I possessed. It suited, too, my taste for miscellaneous work, whilst it left me the whole Parliamentary recess for a country life, and its quiet opportunities for scientific and literary pursuits. I had, therefore, every reason to be more than satisfied, since at the comparatively early age of little more than twenty-nine and a half years I had attained an equal place with much older men in the Councils of the State.

On my arrival in London, I found that I had conceived a very imperfect idea of the difficulties which Lord Aberdeen had met and overcome. Whether it was the sedative atmosphere of the quiet hills and waters of the Clyde; whether it was the twenty days I had spent there away from any private information of what was going on; or whether it was from my own very strong opinion that a new combination was a positive duty between two groups of men who had been long united on the one great question of the time—the defence of free trade in corn—and were not yet consciously divided on any other, certain it is that I was under the impression that Lord Aberdeen had accomplished the formation of his Cabinet with tolerable ease. But in saying something to this effect to him, I found myself encountered by an exclamation of astonishment and protest. He did not explain, and I did not ask for details. But by the kindness of my friend, now Lord Stanmore, then Arthur Gordon, Lord Aberdeen's youngest son, I have since seen the private correspondence, and I quite agree with what Gladstone said at the time, that probably no other man could have led the negotiations to a successful issue. Not only his own perfect candour towards all the sections, but his power of recommending some portion at least of that candour to others, the gentle rebukes he gave to harsh and unjust judgments, the way he frowned on excessive partisanship, his imperturbable spirit of equity and moderation, and the perfect personal confidence he inspired—all these indicated a man who lived in an atmosphere above them all. The great obstruction was undoubtedly Lord John Russell. One day he was magnanimous and helpful, the next day he was jealous and jibbing badly. Instigated and influenced by a clique of personal and domestic Whigs, he was sore and sensitive to a degree about the proportion of offices assigned to his own old party, and was perpetually changing his mind as to what he could and could not honourably agree to, the result being that, almost up to the last moment before a public announcement was due in the House of Commons, it was uncertain whether the whole arrangement would not have to be abandoned.

When I found that the men of his own following whom Lord Aberdeen was compelled to leave out of his Administration included Lord Canning, whilst I, who was a much more recent friend, had a high place assigned to me, I was so annoyed that I at once wrote to Lord Aberdeen to tell him that if he liked to give my office to Canning I should willingly replace it in his hands. Lord Aberdeen replied at once, thanking me for my offer, but saying that he could on no account accept it, adding that the place to be assigned to me had been settled from the first, and giving me to understand that this had been agreed to by both parties.

The Cabinet of Lord Aberdeen as finally settled consisted of thirteen members. Of these, six were Peelites, and seven were Whigs or Radicals. As regards mere numbers, this was not an unfair division; but as regards the proportion borne to Parliamentary parties, there was much to excuse the Whigs in the discontent they felt and did not conceal. They pointed out that the Whigs and Radicals represented 270 members of the House of Commons, whilst the Peelite party did not number above 30—not more than the Irish Brigade. But this way of counting overlooked all those peculiarities of the situation which made the Peelites the most representative men of the most enlightened school of Conservatism, and the only men of great political experience in a new condition of political affairs.

On the 29th December, 1852, Lord Aberdeen first called together his new colleagues at a Cabinet dinner in his own house. It was with immense pleasure and curiosity that I looked forward to this meeting. The place, the occasion, and the men were all of the highest interest to me. The place was the house which had been the habitation of my family in London for several generations. My uncle had sold it to Lord Aberdeen early in the century, but Lord Aberdeen had never changed its name, and it was known as Argyll House till his death. It was the house from which my brave and beautiful grandmother had defied the savage mobs whose cry was 'Wilkes and liberty!' It was the house from which my own father recollected seeing the flare and hearing the shouts of Lord George Gordon's riots, and the frightened cry of the servants, 'What shall we do with the child?' This, indeed, was an interest comparatively small and in a sense purely personal, but it was a part, however slight, of a whole set of circumstances which brought home to me the striking continuities of our political history. The identities of mere site and of continuing walls may often be, and are sometimes, universally recognised as being strong links with former generations. But they can never be so strong as living men, whose years date back to the time of famous contests and events which, from the greatness of subsequent changes, had always seemed to us to belong alone to history and to a distant past.

The first meeting of the Cabinet of Lord Aberdeen fulfilled all these conditions in an extraordinary degree. The oldest member of it was Lord Lansdowne. His own lifetime, begun in 1781, embraced the whole of the memorable Ministries of Mr. Pitt, from 1783 to his death in 1806. Lord Lansdowne's father was that Earl of Shelburne who was Prime Minister in 1782, who had placed young William Pitt in high office as his Chancellor of the Exchequer, and whose Ministry had been brought to an end by the notorious and discreditable coalition of Fox and North in 1782. Lord Lansdowne, then Lord Henry Petty, had at an early age begun a political career which was so full of promise that in 1806, in Lord Granville's Administration of 'All the Talents,' he was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer. In that Cabinet he sat as a colleague of Charles James Fox. If I had been told when, as a boy, I was devouring the speeches of Mr. Pitt that I should sit in a Cabinet with a colleague of Mr. Fox, I should have been indeed astonished. Yet from this came these hereditary claims on confidence which made Lord Lansdowne one of the indispensable elements in the union of parties in 1852. He represented the purest traditions of the Whig party, and though not now strong in health, he still spoke well and earnestly when he spoke at all. It was the natural consequence of a long life, spent under such conditions of great change, that he was as temperate and philosophical in his opinions as he was weighty and grave in the expression of them. It was a curious thing to see that fine old man, who had begun his official life in one coalition Government, now ending it in another, after the long interval of fifty-six years.

Lord Aberdeen himself was hardly less a striking symbol of times long gone by. His lifetime, too, had embraced the whole Ministries of Mr. Pitt, having begun in 1784—with this additional circumstance of great interest, that Mr. Pitt had been his guardian, and had so treated him as a son that he had been for years a regular member of Mr. Pitt's private household. Within seven years of Pitt's death he had been sent by Lord Castlereagh to the headquarters of the allied armies, as the confidential agent of the British Government, to encourage that active co-operation among the other Powers of Europe against the French usurper which it had been the life-struggle of the great Minister to promote.

It was no new thing with Lord Aberdeen to deal with coalitions. On a wider field, and with vaster interests at stake than any which depended on the strange guests he assembled round his table in 1852, he had, no less than forty-nine years before, been the heart and soul of that coalition among the Great Powers of Europe upon which the fate of Europe hung. He had found infirmity of purpose, jealousies between Governments, and antagonisms between Ministers. More than any other single man, except the Duke of Wellington, he had prevailed against them by the sheer force of his character and the wisdom of his counsels. He had become the intimate and trusted friend of the Emperor Francis of Austria, and was hardly less considered by the Emperor Alexander of Russia and by the King of Prussia. He had accompanied the united armies in the advance. He had seen the carnage of Leipsic, and was with the allies at the occupation of Paris. He had been one of the Plenipotentiaries who drew up the treaties of 1814. In later years he had held the Foreign Office under Wellington in 1828-29. He had held it again under Peel in 1841-1846. It was impossible that the life of any other man could take us back more continuously to a past so completely different from the present in all the conditions of political affairs, whether at home or abroad.

Then, if there was a gap in this continuity as regarded the years subsequent to the termination of the Revolutionary War—when the nation had ceased at last to be engrossed in foreign affairs, and had begun to think seriously of needed reforms at home—this gap was entirely filled up by another of the guests at Lord Aberdeen's dinner. This was Lord John Russell. He was eleven years younger than Lord Lansdowne, and eight years younger than Lord Aberdeen. He brought one into no living touch with Pitt and Fox. He was only a little more than of age at the Peace of 1815. On the other hand, he was identified with all the domestic changes and reforms which had altered the whole condition of Parliament and the people—with Roman Catholic Emancipation, with the Abolition of the Sacramental Test in municipal and other offices, with a full and adequate representative system in the House of Commons. To me it was a curious thing to think that, when my new colleague began life, not only had cities like Manchester and Birmingham no representatives in Parliament, but men otherwise able and sagacious were strongly opposed to the bestowal on them even of seats gained by the disfranchisement of boroughs convicted of corruption. The world in which we were to meet at Lord Aberdeen's table was a changed world indeed.

Besides Lord Lansdowne, Lord Aberdeen, and Lord John Russell, I knew I was to meet a fourth new colleague, who was as old as Lord Aberdeen, but who in recent years had become, if not more famous, at least more notorious. This was Palmerston, whose 'tit for tat with John Russell' had brought about the political crisis which had ended in our new attempt at a fusion and reconstruction. I was curious to see him in those new relations to his old friends and adversaries, in which he consented to forego his almost prescriptive claim to the Foreign Office, and to condescend to home affairs instead. His relations with the far past were less distinguished than those of his colleagues, although he was of the same age as Lord Aberdeen, and had been in official life at an earlier date. I thought then, and I think now, that the man who made the largest sacrifice of personal feeling to public duty in joining us in 1852 was Lord Palmerston. He had been almost continually in high office since 1809, under every variety of leadership, and it is a curious fact that he had been actually offered the Chancellorship of the Exchequer in 1807, in succession to Lord Lansdowne, by Mr. Perceval. He had been Secretary for War during the whole of Lord Liverpool's Government—that is to say, for seventeen years. It was no small distinction in the life of any man to have had a leading office in the administration of the British Army during those glorious years following 1809, when Arthur Wellesley in the Peninsula was teaching Europe that Napoleon's Generals were not invincible, and when he was carrying our arms in triumphant and immortal campaigns from the Tagus to Toulouse. Palmerston had been Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs under Lord Grey, Lord Melbourne, and Lord John Russell. It must have cost him a good deal to see that great office deliberately withheld from him, and given, at least for a time, to the Minister who had summarily dismissed him from it. I was curious to see his bearing under circumstances of union, and under the leadership of a statesman whose arguments against his own policy he had described in the House of Commons as 'antiquated imbecility.'

The personal histories of those four distinguished men—Lord Aberdeen, Lord Lansdowne, Lord John Russell, and Lord Palmerston—did not exhaust the sources of interest with which I looked forward to our first collective meeting. There was another member of the new Cabinet in whom I felt considerable curiosity. He stood nearer to my own time, and I had myself seen him and heard him in a very different position. This was Sir James Graham, a large landed proprietor on the borders, a tall, handsome man, a little bald, but looking otherwise hardly past the prime of life. He was a coalition in himself. He had been a keen Whig and a prominent member of Earl Grey's Reform Cabinet. But he had seceded with Lord Stanley on the question of appropriating part of the revenues of suppressed Irish bishoprics to secular purposes. He had then, also with Lord Stanley, joined the Opposition, led by Sir Robert Peel, and I had seen him speaking in the House of Commons as Home Secretary in the Peel Cabinet of 1841. He was, indeed, one of the pillars of that Government. Although a man of large and powerful frame, he had rather a weak voice. He had no animation in his delivery, no action with his arms. He stood like a column, generally resting his weight on one leg, with the other foot against the table. But he spoke with a weight and gravity which made his speaking highly effective. I have heard Lord

Aberdeen refer to it as 'Graham's sledge-hammer.' Since the fall of Peel's Government, he had belonged to that wing of the Peelite party which looked rather towards a reunion with his old friends the Whigs than to any other basis of reconstruction. But he had absolute personal confidence in Lord Aberdeen, and had agreed to take the Admiralty in our new alliance.

None of the other members of the Cabinet, although all of them men of ability, and some on the way to greater eminence, rose above the second rank in political importance, as matters then stood. Our Lord Chancellor was Lord Cranworth, a most amiable man, well known as Baron Rolfe, and more fitted to shine on the Bench than in the Council-chamber. Lord Granville, of whom I have already spoken, was President of the Council. Both of these men, from temperament and intellectual character, were quite sure to be conciliatory elements in our combination. The Duke of Newcastle was a strong Peelite, and disliked the Whigs, but he was prudent and very reserved. He took the Colonial Office, which, unfortunately, was combined with the Ministry of War—too much for anyone to manage if a great war should arise. Newcastle was an industrious and conscientious worker, but he had no brilliancy and little initiative. The Secretaryship of War, a completely separate office, long held by Lord Palmerston, was given to Sidney Herbert, another distinguished member of the Peelite group, of whom I must say a few words, chiefly because of the great expectations which were cherished by some as to the future that might probably await him. He was handsome, refined, and graceful, all in a high degree; he had a winning smile, a most courteous manner, and great quickness of intellect and perception. He was a good speaker, and possibly his early death may have cut off from play much higher qualities; but my own conviction is that he never would have been a leader of men. The attitude of the statue in which he is commemorated at the front of the War Office in Pall Mall expresses all I mean. It is an attitude that wants power and strength. But he, too, was sure to be a conciliatory element.

Sir Charles Wood had the Board of Control, a post for which he was admirably fitted, as he was a man of much quickness and ability, although as Chancellor of the Exchequer his finance had been one of the very weakest elements in the declining reputation of the Whigs.

A man wholly new to office—Sir William Molesworth—got the appointment of Works, with a seat in the Cabinet. This appointment was a sop to the Radicals. I am not sure, however, that it had much effect in this direction. Molesworth was a large landed proprietor, with a fine place in Cornwall. He was in favour of the ballot. But he belonged to the school of Philosophical or Benthamite Radicals. His chief distinction in Parliament was his advocacy of colonial self-government. He had delivered elaborate speeches in the House of Commons on this subject. It was not one, however, with which the Radical party took any great concern, and Molesworth was rather an individual than a typical politician of any kind. I must confess that he was the only ingredient in the new Cabinet which was in anticipation disagreeable to me. It was not his colonial policy that I cared about, nor even his advocacy of the ballot. But I disliked the Benthamite school altogether, and Molesworth was understood to be without any religious belief whatever. I ought to add that, on personal acquaintance, I was more reconciled than I had at all expected to be. Molesworth I found to be socially a rather dull, but an honest and straightforward man, with nothing aggressive or offensive in his expressed opinions—very much of what is called a good fellow in his way.

Last but not least in this enumeration of the sources of interest which made me look forward so much to the first meeting of the Aberdeen Cabinet came Gladstone, of whom in the future I shall have so much to say that it is needless to say more here than that, as to him, the confident expectations of a distinguished future were well-nigh universal.

Gladstone's leanings during the Derby Ministry were just opposite to those of Graham. He looked rather to a reorganization of the Conservatives under Derby than to any union with the Whigs, and in his speech on Disraeli's Budget there was a passage towards the close which expressed this lingering hope so clearly that it gave considerable offence to the Whigs. But he could not refuse to join the combination formed under his old friend and chief, Lord Aberdeen, and we certainly could not well have got on without him. The historic past was well represented in the Cabinet. The present and the future would have been wanting without Gladstone.

Such being the personal composition of the new Cabinet, it remains to say a few words on the disposal of its greater offices among the formerly opposing parties. As a necessity arising out of the curious situation which had arisen, the Prime Minister was a Peelite; so was the Colonial Minister and the Secretary for War; so was the Chancellor of the Exchequer; so was the First Lord of the Admiralty—five offices of the first rank in every Government. On the other hand, the Foreign Office went to the Whigs; so did the Woolsack; so did the Home Office; so did the Board of Control; so did the Presidency of the Council—five other offices of high rank and importance—whilst Lord Lansdowne, another typical Whig, was in the Cabinet without any office at all. Molesworth, of course, was at least affiliated to the Whigs, whilst I was similarly related to the Peelites. Taken together, it was a body of men who, in personal experience, spanned the whole political history of the country, from the days of Pitt and Fox up to that date. Within the limits of our own constitutional contests, it embraced every school of politics which had been of any distinction for more than half a century. Yet the most curious thing was that, apart from indefinite tendencies of thought and feeling, there remained absolutely nothing to divide these men, so far as any living political questions were concerned. The battle for a more adequate representation of the people—resisted for fifty years by the House of Commons, and only for one year by the House of Lords—had been fought and won. So had the battle for religious liberty as it affected Dissenters and Roman Catholics; so had the battle for free trade in corn. On this, the last and latest subject of contention, we were all agreed. No fresh one had as yet arisen, and we found ourselves together, not so much as the result of any deliberate policy, as because there was no longer any justification for our remaining separate. It was like the sudden bend taken by a great river at some point where many affluents have met, and where the waters gather and rest awhile before they take a new direction and run through a new country.

The interest of our meeting at Lord Aberdeen's house was equal to my expectation. All of us had been at least personally acquainted with each other, and many of us were friends of long standing. Any exhibition of old jealousies or antagonisms was out of the question, whilst the resources out of which good conversation comes were present in abundance.

We had a most lively and agreeable party. But what interested me most was to observe and feel the sense of comradeship which was manifestly present in at least its incipient stage. In every Cabinet the leading spirits do a good deal by private and personal understandings, and in the present case these were numerous and important. One of these, absolutely necessary at the time, was that Lord John Russell was not to embarrass us in our first session by starting the question of further changes in the constitution of the House of Commons. There was no call for it in the country. It was looked upon with dislike by almost all of us, as a personal measure of Lord John, and none of us—not even Lord John himself—had any definite plan upon the subject. Besides which, fiscal and financial reforms stood before it, and some of them were critical and difficult, requiring immediate attention. One of these, on which many others depended, was the condition of the income-tax, which Sir Robert Peel had revived as a great instrument of finance in reforming the tariff, but which, unless renewed, was to expire at the end of the next financial year.

In every Government resting on a popular basis, new questions are liable to arise suddenly, and to be fanned into a flame if they are taken up by the press. An agitation had been rising for some time in favour of what was called at the time a 'differentiation of the income-tax,' which meant that a lower rate of tax should be levied on all incomes which were called 'precarious,' and a higher rate on all incomes which were called 'permanent.' All professional and all commercial incomes were to be favoured. All incomes from funded or landed property were to pay the highest rate. No notice was taken of amount. The hinge turned entirely on source. Thus widows and orphans and small annuitants of all kinds, whose incomes came from the public funds or from mortgages, were to pay the high rate of tax, while millionaire brewers, manufacturers, and merchants were to be favoured at their expense. The inequalities and injustices this system would inflict seemed to many far greater than any that could be charged against the equal rate on all incomes. But the agitation had been active. It had been inflamed by the patronage of the *Times*, and whilst its plausibility at first sight was apparent, the objections could only be appreciated by those who paid close attention to the facts, and could reason on the principles involved. Disraeli was in the position of a man who had to cover his retreat from all his Protectionist doctrines by appealing to every cry that could possibly be popular. He had, therefore, announced in his Budget his adhesion to the principle of differentiating incomes according to their source. But Gladstone had pounced upon the fact that Disraeli, in his speech, had shown that he had not even seen the gross anomalies and injustices which must be involved unless they could be overcome, and that he had no conception of any plan for the accomplishment of this result. Nevertheless, Disraeli's unprincipled conduct on this subject obviously increased immensely the difficulties of his successor.

Before our dinner came to an end, therefore, Gladstone called the attention of his new colleagues to the great importance and the great difficulty of the problem to be solved, and expressed his wish that he might secure the help of a Committee of the Cabinet, as it was one so bristling with details that the Cabinet as a whole would find it difficult to deal with unless well thrashed out beforehand. Of course, his desire was at once assented to.

It so happened that I had attended to this question a good deal, and had come to a very adverse conclusion against the agitation. Sitting, as I did at the dinner, between Lord Aberdeen and Gladstone, I had expressed my opinion to them. Gladstone was somewhat surprised that I had considered it at all. Lord Aberdeen did not profess to have gone into it carefully, but he told me his general impression that, unless we could make some concession on this subject, 'we might as well pack up our portmanteaux at once.' Such was his opinion of the hold which the idea had obtained over the public mind. Gladstone was left to suggest his own Committee, and he named Graham, Wood, Lansdowne, and myself. I was thus unexpectedly set to one of the most important bits of work which had to be done at the very outset of our course.

I do not remember that the Committee ever met collectively, but each of us was to give in to Gladstone some minute on paper, stating our conclusions and the reasons for them. I set to work at once, that very evening beginning my paper, when I returned to Stafford House; and it was now that I first felt in all its fulness the immense advantage of early habits of composition, and of marshalling the facts and arguments applicable to a complicated and difficult case. Within about three or four days I had sent in to Gladstone my paper, stating strongly the objections I felt to the proposal of charging different rates of tax on incomes differing only in what was called the source. Gladstone sent me a pleasant acknowledgment of the value of my paper and of surprise at my promptitude in preparing it. I am not vain enough to suppose that my paper had any effect on Gladstone's decision. It would have been difficult indeed to add even one grain to the mountain of objections which that acute and eager mind could always conjure up against a course which it strongly disliked and disapproved. But it may have helped to strengthen his resolve to take some course by which to avoid and evade the difficulty, for it is a signal illustration of the reserve and skill of his political tactics that, in his great speech on Disraeli's Budget, he had carefully guarded against any declaration on the abstract principle of differentiation, and had limited himself to indicating the new and unjust anomalies which Disraeli had not even attempted to prevent. What was the opinion of my colleagues on the Committee I don't think I ever heard, but none of them were men who were likely to meet with a stiff back any very strong popular delusion which it had become dangerous to defy.

The curious Cabinet which Lord Aberdeen had succeeded in getting round him was not yet complete. The Foreign Office had been accepted by Lord John Russell only on the condition that he should be allowed to resign it at or before the meeting of Parliament, as he could not endure its labour along with the leadership of the House. It was agreed, further, that Lord Clarendon was to be his successor. This arrangement was accordingly carried into effect. A new ingredient was thus imported into our wonderful amalgam, not, however, incongruous with any other. Clarendon was an immense accession to the Cabinet. He was a man of great ability, of long experience in diplomacy, and, above all, of entire freedom from any party jealousies. He had conducted the government of Ireland in a difficult time with distinguished success. As Foreign Minister, he was a far safer man than the one he succeeded. Lord John Russell's impulsive temperament was apt to find vent in an impulsive pen. He was fond of sharp sayings and incisive sentences—excellent things in debate, but not without danger in dealing with haughty and powerful Sovereigns, or with peoples sensitive and excited. Clarendon's manners were as genial and tactful to his colleagues as his despatches were admirably expressed to convey the matured opinions and inclinations of the Cabinet as a whole. With great charm of manner he had also great penetration in understanding the feelings of other men, whilst his unfailing liveliness and humour made even the most tedious business comparatively pleasant. Personally, I never became nearly so intimate with him as with Lord John Russell, but I had a great regard for him. We corresponded occasionally, and I think we were always well agreed.

With this excellent addition, the Cabinet of Lord Aberdeen was finally completed. Writing, as I do now, in 1898, when I am the sole survivor of all my colleagues of forty-six years ago, I have a real pleasure in recording as a fact that the great effort Lord Aberdeen made, and which no other man could have attempted, to reconcile Whig and Conservative in the Administration was a complete and absolute success. They worked together in perfect harmony, and, so far as I know, with perfect loyalty, with the one exception to which I shall in its proper place refer. There were occasionally differences of opinion on matters of detail. There were absolutely none on matters of general principle or of Imperial policy. Above all, it was to be noted, as the final test of a genuine amalgamation, that, when differences of opinion or even of inclination did arise, they never showed the smallest tendency to run along the old lines of party division: they always cut across these lines at all angles with complete indifference. I have been a member of every Liberal Cabinet that succeeded it for twenty-nine years, and I never saw any of them which worked more smoothly or with less individual friction. This, moreover, is to be said, which is strangely forgotten: that the amalgamation was permanent and has been lasting. The Whig party was permanently leavened, renewed, and strengthened by the Liberal Conservatives. All the Cabinets which have succeeded have been built on the foundations laid by the tact, truthfulness, and dignity of Lord Aberdeen in December, 1852.

There are some events in politics, as there are occasionally in private life, which are so big in themselves and in their consequences that, in the rolls of memory, they seem to obliterate what went before, and to distort what followed after. The Aberdeen Cabinet is popularly associated with the great war with Russia, and almost with nothing else. It is forgotten that we were a year in office before that storm burst upon us, and that we started with brilliant success upon a programme of purely domestic policy. The coming termination of the income-tax necessitated a systematic review of our financial and fiscal system, and it was one declared object of the Government to consolidate and extend the principles of those reforms in that system which had been established by Sir Robert Peel. There was law reform which claimed attention; there was the difficult subject of national education; whilst the approaching termination of what was called the Charter of the East India Company, which had been periodically renewed only from time to time, was another subject which, though not much talked of, was nevertheless one of grave importance.

And not only was this programme for our present session—hardly optional—one essentially which assumed conditions of internal peace, but for the next session, too, we contemplated some measure of Parliamentary reform—one which, more perhaps than any other, was conditional on the vessel of the State not encountering the storms of war. The only member of the Government who was considered a dangerous man, and who in very recent years had gone near to embroiling us with France, was safely tethered within the peaceful pastures of the Home Office.

It interests me now to remember how implicitly we, who were soon to engage in one of the most serious wars of the century, all then believed that ours was to be a Ministry of peace. British Governments never do entertain projects involving war.

At the opening of our first session there was no Queen's Speech, because Parliament had not been prorogued, but only adjourned, but Lord Aberdeen made a short and manly speech in explanation of the policy of his administration. As to foreign affairs, he said that, if we were called upon in any way to interfere in the affairs of other nations, he trusted it would only be in the blessed part of peacemakers—endeavouring to prevent wars, and not to cause them. As to domestic affairs, he declared the special aim of his Government to be 'the maintenance and the prudent extension of Free Trade, and of the commercial and financial system established by the late Sir Robert Peel.' In this speech, too, he placed the defence of the composition of his Cabinet on the true grounds. Lord Derby's sharp and not very scrupulous tongue had implied a charge of conspiracy against the combination which had overthrown his own party. Tired of, and probably somewhat disgusted with, the personal and party feelings which with so much difficulty he had just succeeded in overcoming, Lord Aberdeen had no patience with such accusations from the late Protectionist leader. He told Lord Derby that the old names of Liberal and Conservative had ceased to have any definite meaning, and could no longer be allowed to impede the union of men between whom there were no substantial differences, and who could, when united, render important public services.

When I look back to the memory of that time, and when I read again contemporary documents, it seems as if there had been visible then only one cause of possible danger to the peace of Europe—other than that rottenness of the Turkish Empire in Europe which had been familiar to many generations, as charged at all times with dangerous contingencies—and that was the natural and inevitable mistrust and suspicion with which every Cabinet regarded the second empire just established in France. No human being could feel in Louis Napoleon any personal confidence, nor could any-one have reliance on his freedom from old Napoleonic aspirations, or from the lawless habits of regarding foreign relations which had revolutionized the world. Palmerston felt this distrust as strongly as any of us, and he immediately began at the Home Office to set on foot measures for national defence. Thus began that continuous movement, which has since assumed such large proportions, for more adequate defensive armaments. Men began to talk about the possibility of invasion, and to conjure up visions of the time when the great Napoleon was in his camp at Boulogne, and was raging against Villeneuve for not bringing up his fleet to embark his armament. Meantime there was nothing to be done but to keep a good look-out and to think of precautions.