

CHAPTER XLIII

1881-86

THE FRANCHISE BILL—THE SOUDAN—LIBERALISM AND RADICALISM

THE Duke, being now free from the responsibility of Office, was in a more independent position, and his release from a situation of growing difficulty was very welcome to him. In a letter to Lord Granville, two years later, he wrote :

‘ I value nothing so much now as my political independence, when I see daily more and more the disposition of “ Liberals ” to follow and not to lead, and to be silent when they ought to speak out.’

As regards the Duke's attitude towards his late colleagues, he was not antagonistic to the Foreign Policy of the Government, although he disapproved of the Irish Land Act. During the rest of the Gladstone Administration he continued to be on good terms with his former leader, and their correspondence, except on the question of the Land Act, was as cordial as ever. He acted with his party in general, but he no longer hesitated to criticise when he disagreed. During the dispute with the House of Lords over the Franchise Act of 1884 and the undisclosed Redistribution Bill, he acted as an intermediary and peacemaker between Lord Salisbury and Mr. Gladstone, and his efforts contributed to bring about a compromise,



MANTUAN MEDAL.

[To face p. 384, vol. ii.]

and thus to avert a movement against the House of Lords.

To Mr. Gladstone (July 11th, 1884).

‘Excuse an ebullition of conscience on reading your Downing Street speech. You reproach Salisbury severely for describing the position of Redistributionists (after the passing of a Franchise Bill) as that of men “fighting with a rope round their necks.” You represent this as an insult to the new voters, and generally as an unfair description of the position. Yet, as it seems to me, you proceed to make an explanation which is tantamount exactly to the same thing. You say that you cannot pass any Redistribution Bill unless the Opposition is placed under the pressure of some motive; and you further explain that motive to be this—that, unless they take your Redistribution Bill, “they may go without.”

‘This seems to me to be simply a frank confession of the truth of Salisbury’s description of the position everyone will be in as regards Redistribution.

‘I am not denying the wisdom of the tactics, as such. But it does not seem to me to be fair to blame Salisbury for describing the position in words which mean nothing more than you yourself indicate it to be.

‘You argue that the friends of the Franchise Bill would be in exactly a like position if they consented to tie the two measures indissolubly together.

‘If this be true, then the question reduces itself simply to this: one or other of the two parties must consent to fight with a rope round his neck. Which is it to be?

‘Rather a melancholy result of party Government is the readjustment of matters fundamental in the working of the Constitution. My only ground of hope is that, from what I know of your opinions, I have good reason to expect from you a scheme of Redistribution which shall be within the lines of tradition and of

Constitution, and in this expectation I wish to vote and speak.

‘But the whole position is one in which reasonable methods of procedure are sacrificed to the need, real or supposed, of dexterous tactics, in the management of opposing factions. This may be the fact, but it is not a pleasant one.’

In the course of the debates on the Franchise Bill in the House of Lords, the Duke spoke in support of the Government measure.

To Mr. Gladstone (July 25th, 1884).

‘I have had many indications, both in conversation and in letters, of the great anxiety of moderate men on both sides to see some escape from the present state of things.

‘My speech, setting forth the principles you had indicated, and the significance thereof, has had far more effect than I at all expected, while, on the other hand, my expression of belief in the reality of the assent given to the new franchise by the Conservatives has greatly conciliated them.

‘Among others, I have to-day a letter from Lord Wharncliffe, who was chairman, I think, of Salisbury’s meeting at Sheffield, in which he says: “Gladstone has only to satisfy us as to the character of the Redistribution Bills and all bother is over.”

‘Looking to all the admissions you have made, and all the offers you have sanctioned, acknowledging the justice and expediency of a close succession between the two measures, and of both being dealt with by the old constituencies and not by the new, I do think that you should now prepare to “condescend” upon particulars in the autumn.

‘If this great measure of Reform in its two parts is, as you seem to wish it to be, the last great measure of your political career, it is surely a very great object

to get it passed with something approaching to general assent.

‘I have replied to Lord Wharncliffe that I firmly believe you to be the only man with authority enough to effect a reasonable settlement in this way.

‘The Franchise Bill is every day more and more accepted as settled. This you have gained, and what all men now want to be assured of is the other half.’

To Mr. Gladstone (July 29th, 1884).

‘I have had a final letter from Salisbury, shy of making any proposals himself, which he says he could not do without consulting his House of Commons friends, but adding that, without some “P.C.” between parties, any Redistribution Bill will be hard to pass, “and passed it must be, by hook or by crook, within a very limited time, as you say.”

‘This sentence seems to me to admit and to dwell upon the virtual acceptance of the new franchise, as already putting all parties under the compulsion on which you reckoned as the only means of passing the new Bill.

‘It is true that the new voters are not actually admitted, but the universal sense that they cannot be kept out for any length of time seems to me to be a consciousness of imminence which will, and must, produce pretty much all the pressure on which you reckon.

‘Hartington’s confession that the new franchise with the old distribution “would not produce a fair representation of the people” is really a confession of the whole case; and if all parties are equally sensible of this, and if all of them, consequently, dread the one Bill passing into operation without the other, what more can be desired in the way of “rope”?’

To Mr. Gladstone (September 6th, 1884).

‘I have been in no communication with the Opposition of late. But, of course, I see that the storm of

oratory on both sides is tending, as it always does, to exaggeration and mutual injustice.

‘I have not yet had time to read your speeches very carefully, but I dispute altogether the fairness of several things you have said about the position of the House of Lords. Personally, I don’t care. Sometimes I have had almost a wish to end my days as a member of the House of Commons. But so long as the House of Lords exists I shall stand up against prejudice and misrepresentation of its character. It has its own merits, which are substantial; and the recent tendencies of the House of Commons are well calculated to set off those merits by contrast.

‘I have lately had suggestions from distinguished men in your House which show that they look to us to do what they would like to do in the Commons, and which they have not the courage to propose, or, at least, to stand by.

‘So long as I write to you on politics, I must write freely, as things occur to me. I do not think the contention of the Lords so monstrous as you represent it. The balance of argument is against their course on the whole. But this is my opinion mainly because of my expectation of your handling of Redistribution, and because of my dread of its falling into weaker hands.

‘Otherwise they have much to say for themselves, and your candour in explaining that you have wished all parties to be under the halter on that subject, in order that they may all more readily agree to your terms, places Parliament in a position which it may well resent. It presents Parliament as a body to be dealt with through its fear of consequences; to be driven by force of circumstances, and not by force of reason. Quite true of almost all bodies of men. But can any Minister insist on such tactics as self-evidently just and reasonable?

‘Meanwhile, I shall continue to do what I can to persuade to temperate courses.

‘I hope to send to you to-morrow, or next day, copy

of a paper* in which I have explained the policy I have pursued on my island estates towards the "crofting" population for thirty-five years. I hope you will find the facts not without interest, although you once did tell me that they had no bearing on questions on which, in my view, they do bear very closely.'

The negotiations between the leaders of the two parties on the subject of the Franchise and Redistribution Bills, in which the Duke had taken an important part, were eventually brought to a successful issue. The Franchise Bill passed towards the close of 1884, and the Redistribution Bill shortly afterwards.

Early in 1884, when the Mahdi had established his power in the Soudan, the Government sent out General Gordon to rescue the garrisons of Khartoum and some other outlying places, and to 'arrange for the evacuation and administration of the province.' On arrival, General Gordon found that it was necessary to ask for some troops in order to demonstrate that he had the support of the Government, and he further telegraphed: 'If Egypt is to be quiet, the Mahdi must be smashed.' The Government, however, remained inactive, and it was not until popular anxiety for the safety of General Gordon was strongly aroused that a force was despatched for his relief (January 26, 1885). But the delay had been fatal. Before the troops could reach Khartoum, it had fallen, and its brave defender had perished, to the bitterness of death having been added the bitterness of the thought that he had been abandoned by his country.

The Duke's opinion regarding the critical position in which General Gordon was placed, owing to the

* 'Crofts and Farms in the Hebrides, being an Account of the Management of an Island Estate' (D. Douglas, 1883).

vacillation of the Government, is expressed in the following letter to Lord Granville (April 25th, 1884) :

‘ MY DEAR GRANVILLE,

‘ I cannot think that all this verbal fencing of Gladstone about Gordon and Khartoum can be wise. Of course, in the case of complicated military operations, it is dangerous to give notice even of intentions. But this is not a case of that kind. There are certainly only two, probably there is only one way of relieving Gordon by any military operation, and neither of those can possibly be impeded by any knowledge on the part of the Arabs. On the other hand, where moral effect is aimed at, and where it is really all in all, these persistent efforts at circumlocution are simply mischievous. They irritate people at home beyond all endurance, and they dishearten people in Egypt equally. I think I can see what is going on—our chief is retreating with his back to the wall, as he used to do with Palm’s Fortifications. He disputes every inch of the ground. His suggestions of delay are of inexhaustible fertility. His power of belief in what he wishes is inexpugnable, but you are dealing with dangerous elements in all this. My belief is that a few firm and determined words would do a world of good both in Egypt and in England. I don’t want any reply. I write merely to tell you what I think.’

On the same subject the Duke wrote (February 25th, 1885) to Lord Selborne :

‘ I cannot go up to vote for the Government. I am glad to be away, because, if I voted at all, it would be against the policy and conduct of the Government about the Soudan.

‘ On the 10th of May last year Gladstone came to dine with me, and as Mrs. G. said he did so *to rest*, I avoided politics.

‘ But at the *eleventh hour* (literally) he suddenly asked me what I thought of the Egyptian papers.

‘In the conversation which ensued he expressed himself determinedly and almost bitterly *against* any military measures for the relief of the Soudan garrisons, although he admitted the *personal claim* of Gordon.

‘I said to him: “When you speak on Monday, I hope you won’t say what you have now said to me.”

‘I have never been able to sympathize with or to do otherwise than condemn this feeling and policy.

‘I think it was our bounden duty, when we in fact imposed the policy of evacuating the Soudan on Egypt, to *see to it* that the garrisons were withdrawn.

‘And even restricting ourselves to the admitted personal claim of Gordon, I see no excuse, or, rather, no sufficient justification, for the long delay from April to August in determining to do what we are now doing—too late.

‘It was clear in April that Khartoum was so besieged that we could get no open communication with Gordon. We ought to have concluded he was in great danger, and if the preparations had been begun then, we might have been at least one month earlier, or more.

‘It is *now* the greatest mess that any nation was ever in.

‘I fully admit the great difficulties of the question you had to deal with. Every alternative was beset with great objections. But there is one *principle* by which I hold, and which would have guided you right, and that is our moral responsibility for the whole position *after* we took the position of dictating the policy of Egypt, and after we had been led (unavoidably, perhaps) to destroy her army.

‘In this principle I may be right or wrong; but, holding it to be sound, as I do, I feel it to be as impossible to vote with the Government on this question as I did on the Irish Land Bill.’

The Duke on one occasion had a long interview with General Gordon (then Colonel Gordon) without know-

ing that it was the great soldier to whom he was speaking. Colonel Gordon had called at Argyll Lodge to consult the Duke upon a subject unconnected with his official work. It was only after he had left that the Duke discovered that his visitor was the Colonel Gordon whose name was already renowned for his great services to his country, and he always regretted that he had not been aware of the identity of Colonel Gordon at the time of his visit. The following account of his impression at this interview is given in the Duke's own words :

‘ It was before the time of his greatest fame, but when in a very distant region he had done enough to indicate what manner of man he was. There was, however, nothing in his outward appearance to arrest attention. There was no aspect of command. There was no look of genius in his almost cold gray eye. There was no indication in his calm manner of the fires of God that were slumbering underneath, of the powerful yet gentle nature which was equally at home in the “confused noise” of battle, in the teaching of poor children, or in the comforting of a deathbed. Yet General Gordon was one who even then had saved an Empire, and had rescued by his own individual example and force of character a whole population from massacre and devastation. Not, perhaps, very tractable in council, sometimes almost incoherent in speculative opinion, he was beyond all question a born ruler and king of men—one who in early ages might have been the founder of a nation, the chosen leader of some chosen people on the way from inter-tribal wars and barbarism to peace and Government and law.’*

When Parliament met in the month of February, after the tragic death of General Gordon, a vote of

* ‘Scotland as It Was and as It Is,’ p 298.

censure was carried against the Government in the House of Lords by a majority of 121. A similar vote in the House of Commons was defeated; but although the Ministry continued in office, the prestige of the Government suffered from the discredit cast upon Mr. Gladstone's policy in the Soudan, and there was a general feeling of indignation throughout the country when the inevitable result of that policy became known.

On June 8th, 1885, the Government was defeated on Mr. Gladstone's Budget Bill, and a Conservative Ministry was formed under Lord Salisbury.

To Mr. Gladstone (July 13th, 1885).

“The sphere of political opinion” is, as you say, apart from “that of fact and history,” and I lose no time in assuring you that in the sphere of fact you write to me under a complete misunderstanding of what I said on Friday night.

‘You quote me as having said that “you had derived your opinions on Free Trade from Sir R. Peel.”

‘I said nothing of the kind, and I am not reported in the *Times* as having said so. I am reported as having said that you “had learned the principles of fiscal legislation, which you have carried to so great a development, in the Cabinet of Sir Robert Peel.”

‘This is a very different thing, though even this may not be verbally accurate. I did not mean that you had learnt them from Sir Robert Peel personally. I simply meant that you had learnt them when you were a member of Sir Robert Peel's Administration. That this was my meaning is rendered clear from the context, where I said that when Peel's fiscal reforms began, his Government knew little of the subject, which is, and has always been, your own testimony.

‘ I am the last man to have said anything in forgetfulness of the originality of your financial genius, or of the motive force which has always lain in it.

‘ You have, indeed, mistaken the whole point of my reference, which had nothing to do with any distinction between Sir Robert Peel and yourself. My point is equally well served by attributing the whole work to you, because you entered upon that work and carried it on in a Conservative Administration.

‘ You know as well as I do, and a great deal better, that the leaders of the Liberal party at that time did not take up Free Trade as a party policy till they were forced to do so by party necessities.

‘ Sir Robert Peel’s Administration was formed on the basis of resisting the proposals of Lord John Russell. My sympathies were entirely with you at that time, and they followed you in that gradual surrender to the Free Trade doctrines of Mr. Cobden, which surrender made that Conservative Government illustrious.

‘ My sole object was to enforce the doctrine that in the “sphere of history and of fact” we cannot afford to disparage unduly any one of the great parties in the State. They have all contributed something to the progress of the nation, and I have always maintained that the changes initiated by Sir Robert Peel’s Administration were in the highest degree honourable to him and to you, because they were not dictated by mere party interests.

‘ No one was more opposed than I was to the late Opposition when it was last in power. But, as you have yourself said, “it is now the Queen’s Government,” and I only follow you “in looking to its future, and not to its past,” and in thinking it is a common “duty to support and assist it in doing right, and not to anticipate that it will do wrong.”

‘ I hope there are many other subjects as well as “facts and history” on which we shall always be as able as ever to speak quite freely to each other.’

To Mr. Gladstone (September 28th, 1885).

‘ I have been intending to write to you for ages, but I could not do so when we were both yachting. I was yachting, as it so happened, very much in your company, as I had on board a copy of your “Gleanings,” and I spent much of my time in reading articles and papers which I read thirty or forty years ago. I did so with immense pleasure, not only for the sake of “auld lang syne,” but for their own sake. Some of them are delightful, especially, in my opinion, those which deal with persons, biographies, and examples of human life.

‘ On the other hand, you will understand that a few others set up all my back, and these the oldest and earliest of the series. However, my main desire to write has been with reference to public affairs, in an aspect a little above any of the momentary questions of the day.

‘ You recollect your controversy with Lowe in the magazines about the county franchise. I never took much interest in it, because the assimilation of the franchise seemed to me as inevitable as the sunrise or the sunset. But I was struck with the absolute confidence you always expressed that all fears of danger from the new constituencies were chimerical and absurd, and that the institutions of the country would only be strengthened all round. I never felt the same confidence, but I did feel that we must all just make the best of it. . . .

‘ So matters rested with me till I got into correspondence with you last winter about the dispute with the House of Lords. In one of those letters you expressed very solemnly and very distinctly a feeling of prophetic uneasiness. . . . I was much struck and impressed by it, because, although you said you would be “out of it,” you predicted a rough time for those who live through the next twenty-five years. Again, in your very last note to me, at the end of this session,

you expressed the same presentiment, only adding "perhaps not from the causes which you contemplate." Now, although I am not sure what this meant, I can suppose that the dangers you see ahead are rather from above than from below the level of the new democracy.

' Well, I don't care just now to question the main direction of the danger ; probably there are, as usual in storms, two oppositely electrified thunder-clouds.

' But what I do wish to say to you is this : that you have not yet sounded in public any note of warning or alarm.

' I think it cannot be doubted that many of the doctrines now popular are subversive of society as it has hitherto been organized in all civilized countries, and I look in vain for any sound reasoning in favour of those new doctrines. I have never heard you say one word pointing in their direction. . . .

' Your own "manifesto" breathes a dignity of tone and a moderation of sentiment which are worthy of you, and this may affect the atmosphere of the discussions to come. But I do think it is time that, when you speak in greater detail, you should give to the future of our political path something to influence and guide it away from at least gross error.

' Your long fight with "Beaconsfieldism" has, I think, thrown you into antagonism with many political conceptions and sympathies which once had a strong hold upon you. Yet they have certainly no less a share of value and of truth than they ever had, and perhaps they are more needed in face of the present chaos of opinion.

' It is very unlucky that the new franchise comes into operation contemporaneously with a universal depression in all industries. . . .

' It has cost me something to write this letter, because I have been afraid you might think it assuming. But I rely on our long friendship, and on my desire that since you have been forced by circum-

stances to go into harness when I know you hoped to be out of it, your voice shall be quoted in after-times as having given a permanent and wise direction to "wandering thought."

To Mr. Gladstone (October 24th, 1885).

'Pray do not think that the wee bit of politics in my last letter was intended to convey what you have construed out of it—namely, that I wished you to retire now, and refuse the lead. I do not feel the least entitled to give any advice on that subject, and, moreover, I am far too sensible of the gravity of the position all round to be able to make up my own mind conclusively one way or the other as to what is most desirable. But one thing I can say sincerely, which is this: that if you really mean to steer, even though you cannot handle the ropes, you may do an immensity of public service, but on one condition—that you make your own mind and will a real force in determining opinion, in leading it in right directions.

'What I pointed out in my last was simply the fact that, while the moderate Liberals have been swearing by your programme, your Radical allies have not been treating it with even decent respect, wherever it fails to please them.

'What I foresee as a danger is that they will use your name and influence to secure the reversion of leadership, and the future of opinion, in their own favour.

'There are subjects on which silence is not enough to prevent this.

'In theological questions I observe one prominent teaching of yours—namely, that each generation cannot go back on the "fundamentals" for itself; that the past gains of mankind and of the Church must be accepted, and not re-discussed and re-proved over and over again. Don't you think the same sound Conservative doctrine is applicable in politics?

‘ Yet the fundamentals of personal liberty, and of property, and of legislative authority are now all thrown into the crucible of discussion, and the worst heresies are taught by the men whom you are to lead.

“ Let us postpone this ” is the word of command now. I don’t think this is possible, nor, if it were possible, do I think it enough. Men’s minds are being led to consider certain proposals as “ open questions ” which ought to be as much “ closed ” as the Decalogue.’

To Mr. Gladstone (December 9th, 1885).

‘ I cannot lose a post without asking you, What on earth has the aristocracy been doing that you should write such a scream of woe over them ? Has there been any sudden desertion by peers from the Liberal party ? I have heard of none. . . . I have not heard of any event to account for your attack.

‘ I am where I was. I agree almost wholly with the creed which I believe to be the creed of men like Goschen and Hartington.

‘ I have known you now intimately for some thirty-two years. During all that time, never but once have I heard you say one word of an intolerant kind on subjects of religion, even as regards those with whom you differed most. Yet now, on politics, you write in private and you speak in public as if all who differ from your party must be either rogues or fools ! “ It was not always thus.” I have been just reading over my old political letters. I see that in 1856-1858 you seemed to all of us who were then in a (so-called) Liberal Government on the point of rejoining the Conservatives, and at that time it was believed by us that if Herbert and Graham would have gone with you, you would have done so.

‘ Well, why not ? You disapproved of our policy, you disliked isolation. I could not have blamed you. But nothing of this kind is happening now with any peers, so far as I know.

‘Has it come to this, that we cannot disagree with wholly new doctrines advocated by ill-liberals without being denounced by you? Does all the moral element in politics point in favour of these new doctrines?’

‘You once broke out to me in private against the bias of “property.” Has leadership no bias? The tactics of keeping men together for a time who are really driving at wholly different ends? And must all of us who have brains of our own keep an absolute silence when those whose views form opinion are forming it in a thoroughly wrong and false direction?’

‘I have written this in a hurry, without weighing every word, or indeed any word much. But must we deal in these assumptions of superior rectitude and wisdom at this moment? We have a greater crisis before us than any since the Revolution.’

‘I am determined not to move in any direction except towards keeping the peace with each other till we have disposed of the common enemy.’

To Mr. Gladstone (December 18th, 1885).

‘I must not delay longer answering your last political letter, because I see that you don’t in the least understand the attitude of mind which is my own, and which I believe to be the attitude of many, many others.’

‘I find in your letter three propositions. To No. 1 of these I give my “unfeigned assent and consent.” No. 2 I reject, like dear old Sir R. Inglis, when he took the P.C. oath, with a deep grunt of assent, “as a damnable doctrine.” Of No. 3 I can only say that it is at least open to reply.’

‘The three propositions are these:

‘First, that it is most important that the old “governing classes” and aristocracy should continue to be among the leaders in progress and reform. To this I say *Amen*.

‘Second, that these classes must accept whatever

may be accepted by the "Liberal party" as constituting Liberalism from time to time.

'I never can and never will accept this doctrine. I have seen too much how it comes about that this, that, or the other policy comes to be part of the programme for the time being.

'I repeat what I said last year—that, with the single exception of your own early financial reforms, which were due to pure intellectual conviction, every item of Liberal policy for many years has been taken up under the pressures and inducements of some party move. You know it was so with the Whigs about Protection in Peel's time. It has been so ever since; avowedly so in respect to the county franchise. Trevelyan proclaimed it openly when he first took it up.

'The ultramontane theory of the Catholic Church asserts a corporate consciousness which develops doctrine under Divine guidance, and all Catholics are to bow to its decrees as new dogmas become ripe for definition.

'As regards theology, you have repudiated this doctrine and denounced it.

'Yet, in politics, you seem to have adopted it, and your "Liberal party" comes into a place and authority analogous to that of the Catholic Church. Rosebery expressed it with beautiful simplicity when he said in some speech this year, "Whatever wave of public opinion we see advancing, for Heaven's sake let us be on the crest of it!"

'And this is called leadership! This brings me to proposition No. 3 which I see in your letter. It is this: that it is the withdrawal or secession or coolness of the old Liberals that deprives you of the means of resisting Radicalism. . . .

'To this let me apply my own experience, which is, that the coolness of old Liberals has followed after, and has not preceded, a manifest giving way to heresies and "deviations" of all kinds from the sound Liberal creed.

‘ I speak from a painful personal experience. I left you, after a great struggle, on one particular question. But for months before, from the moment our Government was fairly under way, I saw and felt that speeches outside were allowed to affect opinion, and practically to commit the Cabinet, in a direction which was not determined by you deliberately, or by the Government as a whole, but by the audacity and want of political honour of our new associates.

‘ Month by month I became more and more uncomfortable, feeling that there was no paramount direction, nothing but slip and slide—what Scotsmen call “slithering.”

‘ The outside world, knowing your great gifts and powers, assumes that you are dictator in your own Cabinet. And in one sense you are so—that is to say that when you choose to put your foot down others will give way.

‘ But your amiability to colleagues, your even extreme gentleness towards them, while it has always endeared you to them personally, has enabled men playing their own game and sitting loose to former codes of honour to take out of your hands to a great extent the formation of opinion. . . .

‘ I maintain, therefore, that it is not Liberal secession that can or does sincerely cripple you in resisting Radicalism. It is simply silence and sufferance on your own part, a too passive attitude, which does not do justice to the immense influence over opinion which you are capable of exerting. . . .

‘ The assumption that every man calling himself “ Liberal ” is a greatly superior being to every man calling himself “ Conservative ” is an assumption which I see to be at variance with fact and truth.’