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The Genius of Parnell

(By H. W. Massingham, in the 'Nation,' London.)

Mrs. Parnell's memoirs of her husband do not add to the stature of the man. As Mr. Barry O'Brien drew him so he was. His relations with the lady who became his wife show indeed that his mind and soul were divided between two passions. He loved his country without allowing the world to look behind the mask of calculation which he habitually wore; it is now made clear that he loved a woman without wearing for himself and for her any mask at all. The relationship was hidden from the world by a thin veil of code words, sham letters, and concealed arrangements. It had some humiliating incidents and some shameful ones. But it seemed to yield him unalloyed happiness up to and beyond the time when it drew him to his fall. Morality will condemn the tie itself and fine feeling revolt at this unflattering publication of its secrets; but it is fair to the dead man and the living woman to say that it partook of the character of a marriage. Parnell entered into a kind of open deception of his contemporaries, but he was no libertine. He was a solitary and morbid man of delicate health, and it is the suggestion of this book that but for Mrs. O'Shea's care of him he must have died in early life. He embarked on a strange domesticity, recorded on his side with a simple and commonplace tenderness. His love letters are the record of his almost complete inexpressiveness in matters of emotion. Not one man or woman in a thousand, reading them in ignorance of Parnell's name and career, would guess that they were other than the trivial record of a middle-class Englishman's devotion to his wife, companion, and housekeeper. This was the character he took over for himself without an intellectual doubt or an accusing pang of conscience. When the truth was revealed, he claimed the right to defy the 'hypocrites' of politicians who had long been aware of it, and to set at naught the judgment of a 'law-shipping' people, whom it in no way concerned. His mind took a still bolder flight, and he ranged himself unhesitatingly with the race of Titans who defy the laws of the Gods because they have chosen to be a law to themselves.

I have given (he said to his wife on the eve of the divorce), and will give Ireland what is in me to give. That I have vowed to her, but my private life shall never belong to any country, but to one woman. There will be a howl, but it will be the howling of hypocrites; not altogether, for some of these Irish fools are genuine in their belief that forms and creeds can govern life and men; perhaps they are right so far as they can experience life. But I am not as they, for they are among the world's children. I am a man, and I have told these children what they want, and they clamour for it. If they will let me, I will get it for them. But if they turn from me, my queen, it matters not at all in the end. What the ultimate government of Ireland will be is settled, and it will be so, and what my share in the work has been and is to be, also. I do wish you would stop fretting

about me. We know nothing of how or why, but only that we love one another, and that through all the ages is the one fact that cannot be forgotten nor put aside by us.

If these words are written as they were spoken, they reveal the excessive pride which, if it seemed to be Parnell's strength, was in the end his downfall. By that sin fell the angels; and when Parnell could bring himself to say that there are no men in politics, 'only weapons,' he spoke one of those half-truths which sap the spiritual ascendancy of leaders. His greater successes were reaped when, with all his extraordinary gifts of chieftainship, he chose, with the younger Napoleon, to be the comrade of his fellow-soldiers rather than their half-veiled Prophet, withdrawn within the jealous circle of a woman's devotion. Mrs. Parnell says with truth that no man either flattered or humiliated him, and that to the end he despised the crowds of eager British admirers who beset his shy and solitary path, and found his only joy in a public reception 'in the midst of a peasant crowd in Ireland.' This nobler sympathy he retained, and the wild experiences of his last year of life enhanced it. But it is open to a political critic to say that his later way of living drove him increasingly underground and away from his party, accentuated his indulgence, and gave a bright internal coloring to his natural exclusiveness.

If ever a man's career illustrated the difference between his talent and genius, it was Parnell's. By his side, the ablest of his contemporaries—at moments, even Gladstone, whom Parnell considered to be greatly his superior in statecraft—looked merely talented. His value, to use a cant term of economics, was largely unimproved value. He read nothing but a little practical science, not even history. He had an unequalled power of interesting the House of Commons, and yet he never troubled to acquire the superficial polish of the speaker's art. Indeed, he hardly spoke often enough to be tolerably good at his business; relying on the native power of his character, and on the deference which weakness or doubt pays to strength and firmness of mind. In this self-sufficiency, Parnell was encouraged by the fact that, if we take the purely Irish view of politics, he was usually right. He was right in his resolve to reverse Butt's tactics, and, ceasing to woo England, to awaken, harass, and confuse her. He was right in his choice of instruments, and his use of them; his reliance on the Clan-na-Gael, and on Fenianism—and on Davitt, Egan, Ford, their several leaders—coupled with his resolve to subordinate them to the service of an independent Irish Parliamentary party. He was right in his grand strategy of massing the Irish race, at home and abroad, against the British Empire and its cherished Parliamentary system. He was right in his refusal to permit an alliance between Liberalism and Nationalism. Even in his hour of failure and desperate tactics he hit upon the blot on the second form of Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, the reduction of Irish membership of the Imperial Parliament, coupled

with an incomplete grant of powers to the Irish Assembly. Above all, he was right in maintaining a single appeal to Irish opinion, and treating England's mixed moral and political judgment on the incidents of the Land War as if at best it were the judgment of one wrong-doer on another. This attitude involved him in moral difficulties, of which he was not conscious. But time has sanctioned his refusal to defend himself from Foster's grand attack, even while it condemns the indifference with which he read the forged letters in the Times, 'meditatively' buttering and eating his toast the while, and proposed to pass them by on the ground that 'the English Times was a paper of no particular importance,' and that he never noticed anything which appeared in the journals. It would be untrue to say that he was callous about crime. The Phoenix Park murders broke him down, and almost secured his willing retirement

from the Irish leadership. But he was a man of one purpose; and to his direct, somewhat insensitive, intelligence what forward that purpose seemed good and what retarded it bad. His politics were thus those of instinct; like a magnificent animal, he was finally fitted to his task, and was scornful, and half-human, to whomsoever and whatsoever stood in the way of its accomplishment.

But the true moral of Parnell's career, as of that of every man of genius in affairs, was that its strength lay in the power of will, turned with immense concentration on a single and attainable object. There was will but there was also passion, concealed under a cold exteriority, but visible to all careful students of the man. Parnell was, indeed, Nietzsche's best modern instance; he was in form and type a Superman. Obeying the imperative call of his mind, and obeying nothing else, he swooped down on the centre-point of the Anglo-Irish quarrel. Other Irishmen had felt the humiliation of Ireland before, and given it emotional but no true political expression. Parnell was the first great modern Irishman to strike remorselessly at England's weak point in her dealings with Ireland. This was the Parliamentary position. England had decreed the Union, and the Union bound her to maintain over a hundred Irish members in Parliament. Once win over the bulk of these representatives to the cause of political independence, and the battle was won. England must either compromise, or stamp out rebellion in blood. Parnell knew that, thanks both to the sanity and the fears of Liberalism, she would take the first course not the second. His strategy pushed her rapidly to the end he desired. His land campaign forced on the eviction of the landlord garrison. That capital event achieved, Home Rule became inevitable. Making his final choice of tactics, Parnell again turned wisely to the genius of Gladstone, the only British statesman whom he feared. That his association with Mrs. O'Shea enabled him to im-

press his views regularly on the Liberal leader was an advantage to which his private affections did not, it may be presumed, altogether blind him. Reasonable men will hardly blame Gladstone for accepting the means of communication thus tendered without demanding 'to know' all the motives which might have underlain it. As the effective head of the State, he had no right to reject it. The genesis of Home Rule lay in the so-called 'Kilmainham Treaty.' The Irish and the British leader struck a prudent arrangement, and from that moment their dealings were on the lines of mutual accommodation for the good of the two countries they served. It was a disaster—which Gladstone bewailed to Mr. O'Brien in a deeply felt tribute to his dead rival—when these two men separated forever. But essentially their work was done. Irish wit and British good sense had met together, and struck a treaty of which the next few years will see the consummation. Parnell's letters to Mrs. O'Shea veil the dominating force which was his secret,

and are pathetic because they are a prophecy of the inevitable end. They show that he felt deeply and suffered much, and they will quicken few men's hands to throw a stone at him.

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