

the House of Commons, long known as Dr. Plunket's stall, was by courtesy allowed to him. He died in 1778, before he had made any provision for his widow and family beyond the education he had bestowed on his children; but so liberal a subscription was raised, that their circumstances and prospects were little, if at all, affected by his death. William, born in June 1764, was then fourteen and continued to attend a day-school, kept by the Rev. Lewis Kerr, till 1779 when he was entered a student of Trinity College. The character he had acquired at this time was that of a clever, hardheaded boy, very attentive to his books, and very negligent of his person. After carrying off the class prize twice against formidable competitors, he obtained a scholarship on very high marks, and about the same time joined the Historical Society, which largely influenced his career, as well by the friendships he formed in it, as by the course of reading and the peculiar training it induced.

Despite of the grave objections urged against debating societies in universities, as tending to distract attention from the regular studies of the place, their utility for students intended for public life is no less obvious than their attractiveness. Composition, oral or written, and what has been happily termed the art of thinking on one's legs, can only be acquired or matured by practice.

There have been heaven-born orators, as there have been heaven-born statesmen and generals; but the names of a large majority of the best speakers in the British Parliament during the present century will be found on the rolls of the Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Dublin, and London debating clubs; and as regards Dublin, success in the Historical Society commonly led to success in every walk of life which was left open to Irish ambition. It was in the height of its glory when Plunket became a member, and he had to struggle for such honours and prizes as were to be won in it against Bashe, Burrows, Magee, Wolfe Tone, Thomas Addis Emmett, and many other young men of promise. Before the lapse of his second year, he was twice elected president, and had obtained the society's medals for oratory, history, and composition.

This brilliant and exciting episode was succeeded by one which brought his possession of a rarer and still more valuable class of qualities to the test. It is comparatively easy to read and compose with a view to immediate results in the shape of prizes and applause: it is a very different thing to acquire and digest a mass of dry and repulsive knowledge which may not bear fruit for many a slow revolving year, perhaps never bear fruit at all. We learn that, having finished his Dublin law-terms, Plunket was entered on the books of Lincoln's Inn in 1784; and for a year and a half he lived in London and its suburbs, chumming with Peter Burrows and some other Irish students in very humble lodgings.

He returned to Dublin in May 1786, and was called to the Bar in Hilary Term 1787. The comparison which his residence in London had partially enabled him to draw between the English and the Irish Bar, was not favourable to his countrymen, so far at least as regular and sober habits were concerned. Writing to an old friend, he says:

I have not been able to read a word since I came home, and, indeed, it is almost impossible for any man who shares in the disposition that prevails amongst the legal men here to do so. The taste for idleness and debauchery which pervades the whole profession would, in my opinion, alone be sufficient to account for the difference between the legal information of the two countries.

His Historical Society reputation stood him in good stead from the commencement. It got him briefs, and prepared as he was by his London studies, he made the best of his opportunities. His professional progress was rapid, but no forensic display of his of any interest has been preserved, and we must hurry on to the period when he entered the last Irish Parliament as member for the borough of Charlemont, on the nomination of the patriot Earl, the celebrated commander of Volunteers. Indeed, to come at once to adequate specimens of his manner and

power upon adequate occasions, we must pass over some intervening skirmishes, and dash into the thick of the Union debates, in which two figures tower pre-eminent, like two of Homer's heroes confronted in the field—Lord Castlereagh and himself.

That noble lord, then in his parliamentary and political novitiate, carried with him little or none of the weight and authority which he afterwards acquired: and he was at no time distinguished for command of language or rhetorical skill. But he had indomitable strength of will, haughty self-reliance, a lofty sense of honour, personal courage amounting to absolute fearlessness, and never-failing readiness to encounter responsibilities of all sorts, which made him the aptest and most formidable organ and instrument of the policy which the English government were resolved on carrying out at all hazards. There was, moreover, much to be said for that policy, if the connection with England was to be deemed paramount, and Irish feelings were to be laid out of the account.

The most cursory glance at the party annals of the two countries will show that if, from 1782 to 1800, the Irish Parliament had been left to itself, without any attempt to harmonise its action by corruption, Ireland must speedily have become as independent of England as Hanover. Would she, whenever an English Cabinet was upset by a coalition, an Indian Bill, or a Regency-question, have complacently accepted a new viceroy, as the court of Paris or Vienna accepts a new ambassador, and have simultaneously adopted the principles and policy of the new government? Clearly not, and therefore ample means were placed at the disposal of the lordly occupant of the Castle for the time being to secure a majority in both Houses. There were heads of powerful families, popularly called managers, who, in consideration of places, pensions, titles, and gratuities, voted, and made their dependants vote, regularly on the side of ministers, whether Whig or Tory, as was the uniform practice of the English bishops within living memory. There were, also, waiters on providence who might be retained in an emergency; and thus a crisis was staved off, although at an annually increasing cost of money and principle.

At last Pitt resolved to grapple with the difficulty, and if possible make an end of it once for all—by purchasing in gross what he would otherwise have had to go on purchasing in detail; by capitalising, as it were, his means of corruption, and buying all the venal peers, borough-mongers, placemen and place-hunters, in a lump. Ample funds were granted by the British Parliament, and the execution of the scheme was entrusted to Lord Cornwallis and Lord Castlereagh. An extraordinary system of intimidation was also organised. Sir Jonah Barrington relates that a dinner was given by Lord Castlereagh at his house in Merrion Street, to eighty of his supporters, 'tried men belonging to fighting families,' at which it was resolved to take every opportunity of making the question a personal one. The resolution to this effect, moved by Sir John Blaquiere, was carried enthusiastically; and it was arranged that twenty or thirty of the party should dine together every day in one of the committee rooms, where they would be ready for an emergency.

At an opposition meeting, at Charlemont House, the day following, no reluctance was shown to take up the glove (or gloves) thus chivalrously thrown down; yet Sir Jonah complains that the supporters of the Union 'indisputably showed more personal spirit than their opponents during the session.' Just so, we have heard Lady Morgan complain, on the authority of Sir Richard Musgrave, that the royal troops showed more spirit, and were more popular in the disturbed districts than the rebels, by reason of their greater readiness to enforce belligerent rights against the fair sex. Be this as it may, we know of no specific signs of qualifying on the part of the anti-unionists,—with one exception, which is apocryphal. Charles Philips used to relate that Lord Castlereagh was in treaty with an anti-union member, who fell ill before the conclusion of the bargain, and

was at death's door for some days, during which he repented of his misdoings. On becoming convalescent his first act was to request an interview with his noble seducer, whom he informed that, so soon as he was strong enough, he should come down to the House and state all that passed between them. 'And if you do,' was the reply, 'I will give you the lie direct on the spot, and shoot you the next morning.' The member held his tongue.

Grattan's affair with Corry during these debates shows that he had no disinclination to act on the well-known maxim which he bequeathed to his sons, 'Always be ready with your pistol; and such of Plunket's language sounds as if uttered for the express purpose of provoking the Castle fire-enters. Thus, in the first Union debate, on Barrington's denouncing the mode in which the minister was endeavouring to secure a majority, he was called to order by Corry and Beresford, who threatened to have his words taken down. Plunket interferred:

'I have no idea that the freedom of debate shall be controlled by such frequent interruptions. I do not conceive that my honourable friend is out of order, and when my turn comes to speak, I shall repeat these charges in still stronger language, if possible, and indulge gentlemen at the other side of the House with an opportunity of taking down my words if they have any fancy to do so.'

He was as good as his word. Rising directly after Lord Castlereagh, he delivered an invective which has never been surpassed in haughty and concentrated bitterness:

"The example of the Prime Minister of England, imitable in its vices, may deceive the noble lord. The Minister of England has his faults. He abandoned in his latter years the principles of reform, by professing which he had attained the early confidence of the people of England, and in the whole of his political conduct he has shown himself haughty and intractable; but it must be admitted that he is endowed by nature with a towering and transcendent intellect, and that the vastness of his resources keeps pace with the magnificence and unboundedness of his projects. I thank God that it is much more easy for him to transfer his apostacy and his insolence than his comprehension and his sagacity; and I feel the safety of my country in the wretched feebleness of her enemy. I cannot fear that the constitution which has been founded by the wisdom of sages, and cemented by the blood of patriots and of heroes, is to be smitten to its centre by such a green and sapless twig as this."

He becomes, if possible, still more contemptuous as he proceeds:

"But, sir, we are told that we should discuss this question with calmness and composure. I am called on to surrender my birthright and my honour, and I am told I should be calm and should be composed. National pride! Independence of our country! These, we are told by the Minister, are only vulgar topics fitted for the meridian of the mob, but unworthy to be mentioned to such an enlightened assembly as this; they are trinkets and gew-gaws fit to catch the fancy of childish and unthinking people like you, sir, or like your predecessor in that chair, but utterly unworthy the consideration of this House, or of the matured understanding of the noble lord who condescends to instruct it! Gracious God! We see a Pery reascending from the tomb, and raising his awful voice to warn us against the surrender of our freedom, and we see that the proud and virtuous feelings which warmed the breast of that aged and venerable man are only calculated to excite the contempt of this young philosopher, who has been translated from the nursery to the cabinet to outrage the feelings and understanding of the country."

As Lord Castlereagh, born in 1769, was then thirty, and only five years younger than Plunket, we suppose that there was something singularly youthful and dandified in his appearance, or this mode of attack would never have been hazarded by so consummate a tactician. It was in the peroration to this speech that he uttered the vow with which he was so frequently twitted by O'Connell, when, instead of swearing his