

## Spurgeon and Gladstone.

“**W**ERE not C. H. Spurgeon in his youth, and W. E. Gladstone in his old age, the two most wonderful phenomena of the nineteenth century. Both are gone; but I shall always count it a great privilege, as well as high honour, to have lived under the influence of these good and noble men.” That is an extract from an anonymous letter received by Mrs. Spurgeon soon after the death of her husband in 1892 (*Autobiography* ii, page 238). The claim which it makes for these great contemporaries is a strong one, and it would be difficult to demonstrate it to complete satisfaction. The nineteenth century was prolific in outstanding figures, and we are still too near it to form a trustworthy opinion as to the relative influence and distinction of the brilliant band whose careers adorned its annals. Thus some might be prepared to argue that William Booth was a more significant contributor to English piety than even Spurgeon. But such comparisons are as odious as they are futile. “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another in glory” (I Cor. xv. 41). It is better to content oneself by saying that the youthful Spurgeon and the aged Gladstone offered pictures of excellence so remarkable that it would not be easy to find many parallels for them in any century, let alone the nineteenth.

That can be easily substantiated by a brief reference to the facts on which it is based. Spurgeon began his ministry in London at the age of nineteen. He was already pastor of the Baptist Church at Waterbeach, near Cambridge, where his ministry had always attracted a good deal of attention. Having accepted a call to the New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, he began work in a somewhat inaccessible building seating twelve hundred people. When he first preached in it, the morning congregation totalled about two hundred. Within six months the building was full so that the famous Exeter Hall in the Strand had to be taken for one service. That too proved to be inadequate, and the bold step of holding services in the Surrey Gardens Music Hall was taken. That edifice held seven thousand, and it was at once filled and kept full. It has been stated that on some Sunday mornings Spurgeon preached to as many as ten thousand people. These figures seem almost incredible in the light of modern conditions, especially when we realise that they are associated with events which happened less than a century ago. When Spurgeon was about twenty-seven, still a young man, the Metropolitan Tabernacle was opened with accommodation for a total of between six and seven thousand. Such record would be difficult to surpass in the history of Christianity.

As for Gladstone in his old age it must suffice to say that he

was not only a national institution but an international institution. Morley's tribute may be quoted in support of that observation. "Truly was it said of Fenelon that half of him would be a great man, and would stand out more clearly as a great man than does the whole, because it would be simpler. So of Mr. Gladstone. We are dazzled by the endless versatility of his mind and interests as man of action, scholar, and controversial athlete; as legislator, administrator, leader of the people; as the strongest of his time in the main branches of executive force, strongest in persuasive force; supreme in the exacting details of national finance; master of the Parliamentary arts; yet always living in the noble visions of the moral and spiritual idealist" (*Life of Gladstone*, vol. 1, page 184). These words had reference to the statesman's impression on his contemporaries, and they will never need to be revised.

It would have been strange indeed if these two public men, both citizens of London, should not have made contact with each other. That was destined to come in the latter part of Mr. Gladstone's career, and it must have been peculiarly acceptable to Spurgeon, for he never ceased to cherish the deepest admiration and affection for one from whom he differed in so many respects. It may be suggested with all due respect that Gladstone was honoured by winning the allegiance of Spurgeon. The latter was a pulpit genius, and these are none too common, especially in view of the fact that his gifts of eloquence were linked with rare wisdom and shrewdness. Spurgeon was a judge of men, whose verdict cannot be lightly dismissed, and his affectionate reverence for Gladstone is a tribute to the national leader in which the latter took pride and pleasure as the following selections from their correspondence will show.

Strong Liberal and Gladstonian though he was, Spurgeon was no blind or uncritical follower of his political leader. A letter which he wrote to an old Cambridge friend, Mr. J. S. Watts, will serve to illustrate that (*Autobiography*, vol. 4, page 126). It was sent from his house in Nightingale Lane, Clapham, which he occupied before he removed to his famous residence in Beulah Hill, Upper Norwood.

Nightingale Lane, June 19, '80.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Like yourself I go in for religious equality, but I like things done legally, and not in Mr. Gladstone's occasional despotic way—by Royal Warrant, or by his own will. Alter the Act of Settlement if the nation chooses, but do not contravene it. Moreover, I should not allow a Mormonite to be Judge in the Divorce Court, nor a Quaker to be Commissioner of Oaths, nor an atheist to be Chaplain to the House of Commons; and for the same reason I would not have a Roman Catholic (Lord Ripon), sworn to allegiance to the Pope, to be Viceroy of India.

Mr. Gladstone said this himself when writing about the Vatican; but the way in which he eats his words, and puts on a new form as soon as he is in power, does not increase my esteem for him.

I belong to the party which knows no party. To cheapen beer, to confirm the opium curse, to keep in office the shedders of blood, and to put Papists to the front are things I never expected from Mr. Gladstone; but "cursed be the man that trusteth in man." Yet I am a Gladstonian despite all this.

The best comment is surely that saying in the Book of Proverbs: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (27: 6).

It is true that there can be no profound love and respect without the possibility of enjoying a harmless joke at the expense of the object. Spurgeon overflowed with racy humour, and he relished greatly the following *jeu-d'esprit*. On one of his visits to Mentone, a certain lady who resembled him in her admiration for Mr. Gladstone, asked him to guess a word which would solve this riddle: (1) What Mr. Gladstone likes; (2) What he does not like; (3) What he would like to do; and (4) Where his enemies would like to put him. Spurgeon was unable to think of an appropriate word, and he was greatly pleased with the answers to the four questions which ran thus: (1) Reform; (2) A Tory; (3) To reform a Tory; (4) In a reformatory. He often used to repeat that witticism, and always with renewed enjoyment. In the same strain reference might be made to a snatch from Spurgeon's table talk which was always with grace, seasoned with salt. He once remarked that he had received a letter from a gentleman who had made a special study of the symbolic significance of Biblical numerals. He stated that he had succeeded in equating the number 666, the designations of the Beast in Rev. xiii. 18 (six hundred, three score and six) with the letters in the names of Mr. Gladstone and Napoleon III, but he had failed to achieve the same result with Mr. Spurgeon's name. He had written to enquire as to the reason. "Why," Spurgeon observed, "I suppose it must be because I am not a beast, and that, therefore, 666 is not the number of my name" (Ibid 3, page 359). It was no easy task to score off Spurgeon. Out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword.

Spurgeon differed wholeheartedly from Gladstone on the question of Home Rule for Ireland. Thus we find him writing in this strain from Mentone shortly after Parnell's fall. "That Irish stew! The last dose was well peppered, and served up hot! Perhaps now they are separated they will get together, they seem to have been greatly divided while they were united (Gladstone and Parnell). Poor G.O.M.! How he must feel the insults of those for whom he has forfeited everything! Yet he seems to hold on to their scheme, though he knows that it is not only dangerous, but

unattainable. I am glad I am neither of Gladstone nor of Parnell. He that wades not up to the ankles will not go in up to the loins." Spurgeon was ever a man of rare common-sense, or uncommon-sense as Coleridge called it. The last sentence is the proof.

Many of his friends were Home Rulers, and enthusiastic supporters of that policy. One of them, Rev. T. W. Medhurst, of Portsmouth, was reported in the local Press as having spoken very unkindly of Spurgeon in the course of a speech on this burning question. He wrote to Spurgeon on the subject and received this characteristic reply, full of truth and grace (Ibid iv, page 126).

DEAR FRIEND,

I did not think your language, as reported, to be disrespectful, nor even dreamed that you would be unkind. Speak as strongly as ever you like and I shall not be aggrieved. You are as free as I am, and I am free and mean to be. If others think the bill to be wise and good, I hope that they will do their best to carry it. I believe it to be a fatal stab to our common country, and I am bound to oppose it. I am as good a Liberal as any man living, and my loving admiration of Mr. Gladstone is the same as ever, hearty and deep; but this bill I conceive to be a very serious error. I claim to be under no man's dictation, and to dictate to no man. Do not fear to speak through any shrinking on my account. Both sides ought to be heard. I shall love you none the less, but all the more, for being plain-spoken.

Yours very heartily,

S. H. SPURGEON.

As far as Gladstone was concerned, there is ample evidence that he entertained the kindest feelings towards Spurgeon. "The two prime ministers," as they were called, exchanged quite a number of letters. Mr. Gladstone invited Spurgeon to stay with him at Hawarden Castle. Unfortunately it could not be accepted, and the same must be said of repeated invitations to breakfast at Downing Street. On one occasion Spurgeon requested an interview from the Premier, and he was informed that ten minutes could be spared for him. Spurgeon arrived promptly, and made ready to go with equal precision, but Mr. Gladstone pressed him to remain, remarking that he would wish that all his visitors were as anxious to keep to time. During this conversation Spurgeon suggested to Gladstone that all servants of the State, whether in the Church, the Army, the Navy, or the Civil Service should be excluded from Parliament by law on the analogy of family life in which household servants are not invited to participate in conclaves concerned with the welfare of their employers. Spurgeon often referred to this plan which he believed to be productive of great benefit for the nation. He was

sure that, if it were championed by some leader of public opinion like Mr. Gladstone, the nation would welcome it.

Such friendly relations with a leading Dissenter represent a great change in Mr. Gladstone's attitude. He was ever a loyal and enthusiastic member of the Church of England, and in his early days his devotion seems to have outrun discretion. There is evidence of his in his first book, *The Church Considered in its Relations with the State*. It was published in 1838, the year after Queen Victoria's accession, and had such a vogue that it went through three editions. Macaulay immortalised it in his essay where he described Gladstone as the "rising hope of the stern and unbending Tories." For our present purpose it is only necessary to say that there is some foundation for Macaulay's caricature of its arguments in the famous sentence, "Why not roast Dissenters in front of slow fires?" In justice to Gladstone let it be said that anything which he may have written, capable of being so construed even in jest, was inspired only by the passionate conviction that the maintenance of pure and undefiled religion was the supreme business of the State. In his next book, *Church Principles Considered in their Results*, published in 1840, he modifies considerably the more extreme positions which he had defended in the earlier work. Twenty years after there are signs of a new appreciation of nonconformity. "Always the devoted friend of Dr. Pusey and his school, he was gradually welcomed as ally and political leader by men like Dale and Allon, the independents, and Spurgeon, the baptist (sic), on the broad ground that it was possible for all good men to hold, amid their differences about Church government, the more vital sympathies and charities of their common profession (Morley 2, page 135). These cordial relations grew from more to more. Thus we find him lecturing from the platform of the City Temple on "Preaching" at the invitation of Dr. Joseph Parker during 1877. Dr. Parker described this effort as "an anthem in prose." This cordial friendship with Spurgeon was thus one of the results of this altered attitude to Dissent.

Gladstone only heard Spurgeon preach once. He attended the evening service at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on January 8th, 1882, accompanied by his oldest son, Mr. W. H. Gladstone. A very interesting series of letters led up to that incident. Mr. Gladstone had long wished to hear Spurgeon preach, and he refers to it in this note (Ibid iv, page 183).

10 Downing Street,  
Whitehall,  
24 August, 1881.

MY DEAR SIR,

I thank you very much for your kind note and for your good words. My years make it a great object of desire to be

relieved from my present work; but I must be patient yet a little while, and must hope that I may not be utterly spoiled by the undeserved kindness heaped on me from so many quarters, and by commendations entirely beyond my deserts.

I hope the autumn will afford me an opportunity of profiting by your kind offer to meet my wishes respecting the service at the Tabernacle.

I remain, my dear sir,

Faithfully yours,

W. E. GLADSTONE.

Rev. C. H. Spurgeon.

In passing, it may be remarked that Spurgeon disliked the title "Reverend." He never used it himself. In that connection one recalls that "The Times Literary Supplement" devoted a review which occupied an entire column to the last weekly sermon by Spurgeon which was published several years ago, the conclusion of a unique series to which Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, who was then Prime Minister, referred in his address at the centenary celebrations in the Albert Hall in 1932. The review, which was very appreciative, was entitled "Mr. C. H. Spurgeon's Sermons."

A few days before Mr. Gladstone attended the Tabernacle service he wrote to Mr. Spurgeon as follows (Ibid iv, page 183):

Hawarden Castle,  
Chester,  
January 3, '82.

MY DEAR SIR,

Some time ago you were good enough to promise me a safe seat at one of your services; and if it consist with your convenience to do me this favour on Sunday evening next, when I expect to be in London, I shall hope to present myself at the exact time and place which you may kindly name. Should you desire to postpone your compliance with my request I shall hope for another opportunity of preferring it three or four Sundays hence.

I remain,

My dear sir,

Faithfully yours,

W. E. GLADSTONE.

That letter by itself would prove that there was some foundation for Disraeli's famous gibe at his great rival to the effect that he was "intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity."

It elicited a reply from Spurgeon which will give some indication of his intellectual greatness. It is quoted with Morley's

comment exactly as it is printed in the *Life*. The exact day is not mentioned, the date being given as January, 1882.

“ I feel like a boy who is to preach with his father to listen to him. I shall try not to know that you are there at all, but just preach to my poor people the simple word which has held them by their thousands these twenty-eight years. You do not know how those of us regard you, who feel it a joy to live when a premier believes in righteousness. We believe in no man's infallibility, but *it is restful to be sure of one man's integrity.* ”

“ That admirable sentence marks the secret ” (Morley ii, page 531).

As has already been stated, Mr. Gladstone attended the evening service in the Tabernacle on January 8th. Spurgeon preached from Mark v. 30, 31. (And Jesus, immediately knowing in Himself that virtue had gone out of Him turned Him about in the press, and said, Who touched My clothes? And His disciples said unto Him, Thou seest the multitude thronging Thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?) Gladstone visited him in his vestry both before and after the service. There was some unfavourable comment in the Press on this event, and Spurgeon wrote to Gladstone on the subject, enclosing a book of views of Westwood, his Norwood home, with its magnificent prospect of Surrey scenery. Gladstone replied in these terms (*Ibid* iv, page 183):

Hawarden Castle,  
Chester,  
January 16, '82.

DEAR MR. SPURGEON,

I was not at all surprised at what had happened, and had not the smallest disposition or cause to suspect you. My life is passed in a glass bee-hive; with this particularity, that I fear many see in it what is not there, by which I am unjustly a gainer.

I thank you very much for the interesting book of photographs which you have been so good as to send, with an inscription I am very far from deserving. I wish I had a better return to make than the enclosed, but these are the best I can lay my hands on.

When you were so good as to see me before and after your service I felt ashamed of speaking to you lest I should increase your fatigue, but before long I hope to find a better opportunity. In the meantime I remain,

With sincere respect,

Faithfully yours,

W. E. GLADSTONE.

Spurgeon's sympathy for Gladstone in the attacks to which he

was subjected, as well as in his labours more abundant, also appear in these two extracts from Morley (ii, page 272). Under date July 15th, 1869, Gladstone writes in his diary: "15—This day I received from a Roman Catholic bishop the assurance that he offered mass, and that many pray for me; and from Mr. Spurgeon (as often from others) an assurance of the prayers of the nonconformists. I think in these and other prayers lies the secret of the strength of body which has been given me in unusual measure during this very trying year." The other passage runs as follows: "Here is Mr. Spurgeon, the most popular and effective of the nonconforming preachers and workers of the time, writing:

"I feel ready to weep when you are treated with so much contumely by your opponent in your former struggle; and yet I rejoice that you were educating this nation to believe in conscience and truth . . . I wish I could brush away the gadflies, but I suppose by this time you have been stung so often that the system has become invulnerable . . . You are loved by hosts of us as intensely as you are hated by certain of this savage party" (ii, page 530).

Spurgeon's last illness evoked an exchange of letters which prove that these cordial relations increased rather than lessened with the passing years. Gladstone wrote to Mrs. Spurgeon, expressing his deep sympathy in these terms. The letter was sent from the house of Mr. Colman, Gladstone's friend, at Lowestoft.

Colton,  
Lowestoft,  
July 16, 1891.

MY DEAR MADAM,

In my own house, darkened at the present time, I have read with sad interest the daily accounts of Mr. Spurgeon's illness; and I cannot help conveying to you the earnest assurance of my sympathy with you and with him, and of my cordial admiration, not only of his splendid powers, but still more of his devoted and unflinching character. May I humbly commend you and him, in all contingencies, to the infinite stores of the Divine love and mercy, and subscribe myself,

My dear madam,

Faithfully yours,

W. E. GLADSTONE.

The bereavement to which this letter refers was the death of his oldest son, W. H. Gladstone, which had taken place suddenly on July 8th.

This letter reached Mrs. Spurgeon during one of the brief intervals between long periods of delirium which were such a distressing feature of his illness. It was read to Spurgeon, and he was greatly pleased. To Mrs. Spurgeon's reply, which may be quoted



in full as savouring so strongly and sweetly of the great preacher's spirit, he added a postscript. (Barnes and Ray, *Spurgeon, The People's Preacher*, page 307).

Westwood,  
Upper Norwood,  
July 18th, 1891.

DEAR MR. GLADSTONE,

Your words of sympathy have a special significance and tenderness, coming from one who has just passed through the deep waters which seem now to threaten me. I thank you warmly for your expression of regard for my beloved husband, and with all my heart I pray that the consolations of God may abound towards you even as they do to me. Although we cannot yet consider the patient out of danger, the doctors have to-day issued a somewhat more hopeful bulletin. I feel it an honour to say that I shall evermore be your grateful friend.

S. SPURGEON.

P.S.—Yours is a word of love such as those only write who have been into the King's country, and have seen much of His face. My heart's love to you.

C. H. S.

It is worthy of mention as illustrating the exalted character of the place which Spurgeon had obtained in the national life that, amongst those who made enquiries for him in his closing days, there were the Prince of Wales, who afterwards became Edward VII, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Chief Rabbi. The prince of Victorian preachers died at Mentone on January 31st, 1892, at the age of fifty-seven. Gladstone survived him until 1898, when he passed away on May 19th in his eighty-eighth year. The tribute paid by Dr. Thomas Guthrie, the famous Edinburgh preacher and philanthropist, to another distinguished Presbyterian, Dr. Thomas Chalmers, applies with equal force and felicity to both Spurgeon and Gladstone. Of Chalmers Dr. Guthrie wrote that he was like a forest giant, whose height and dimensions are only appreciated when it has been felled. Surely the same can be said of Spurgeon and Gladstone, these mighty trees planted by rivers of water, and bringing forth their fruit in their season. They were great men in every sense of the word, and pre-eminently, great men of God. It is pleasant to recall the fact that, though there was a great gulf fixed between them, it was not found to be impassable by any manner of means.

H. S. CURR.