PHINEAS REDUX

by

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VOLUME I

CHAPTER I

Temptation

The circumstances of the general election of 18 - will be well

remembered by all those who take an interest in the political matters

of the country. There had been a coming in and a going out of

Ministers previous to that, - somewhat rapid, very exciting, and,

upon the whole, useful as showing the real feeling of the country

upon sundry questions of public interest. Mr. Gresham had been Prime

Minister of England, as representative of the Liberal party in

politics. There had come to be a split among those who should have

been his followers on the terribly vexed question of the Ballot. Then

Mr. Daubeny for twelve months had sat upon the throne distributing

the good things of the Crown amidst Conservative birdlings, with

beaks wide open and craving maws, who certainly for some years

previous had not received their share of State honours or State

emoluments. And Mr. Daubeny was still so sitting, to the infinite

dismay of the Liberals, every man of whom felt that his party

was entitled by numerical strength to keep the management of the

Government within its own hands.

Let a man be of what side he may in politics, - unless he be much

more of a partisan than a patriot, - he will think it well that there

should be some equity of division in the bestowal of crumbs of

comfort. Can even any old Whig wish that every Lord Lieutenant of a

county should be an old Whig? Can it be good for the administration

of the law that none but Liberal lawyers should become

Attorney-Generals, and from thence Chief Justices or Lords of Appeal?

Should no Conservative Peer ever represent the majesty of England

in India, in Canada, or at St. Petersburgh? So arguing, moderate

Liberals had been glad to give Mr. Daubeny and his merry men a

chance. Mr. Daubeny and his merry men had not neglected the chance

given them. Fortune favoured them, and they made their hay while the

sun shone with an energy that had never been surpassed, improving

upon Fortune, till their natural enemies waxed impatient. There had

been as yet but one year of it, and the natural enemies, who had at

first expressed themselves as glad that the turn had come, might

have endured the period of spoliation with more equanimity. For to

them, the Liberals, this cutting up of the Whitehall cake by the

Conservatives was spoliation when the privilege of cutting was found

to have so much exceeded what had been expected. Were not they, the

Liberals, the real representatives of the people, and, therefore, did

not the cake in truth appertain to them? Had not they given up the

cake for a while, partly, indeed, through idleness and mismanagement,

and quarrelling among themselves; but mainly with a feeling that

a moderate slicing on the other side would, upon the whole, be

advantageous? But when the cake came to be mauled like that - oh,

heavens! So the men who had quarrelled agreed to quarrel no more,

and it was decided that there should be an end of mismanagement and

idleness, and that this horrid sight of the weak pretending to be

strong, or the weak receiving the reward of strength, should be

brought to an end. Then came a great fight, in the last agonies of

which the cake was sliced manfully. All the world knew how the fight

would go; but in the meantime lord-lieutenancies were arranged; very

ancient judges retired upon pensions; vice-royal Governors were sent

out in the last gasp of the failing battle; great places were filled

by tens, and little places by twenties; private secretaries were

established here and there; and the hay was still made even after the

sun had gone down.

In consequence of all this the circumstances of the election of 18 -

were peculiar. Mr. Daubeny had dissolved the House, not probably

with any idea that he could thus retrieve his fortunes, but feeling

that in doing so he was occupying the last normal position of a

properly-fought Constitutional battle. His enemies were resolved,

more firmly than they were resolved before, to knock him altogether

on the head at the general election which he had himself called

into existence. He had been disgracefully out-voted in the House of

Commons on various subjects. On the last occasion he had gone into

his lobby with a minority of 37, upon a motion brought forward by Mr.

Palliser, the late Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, respecting

decimal coinage. No politician, not even Mr. Palliser himself, had

expected that he would carry his Bill in the present session. It

was brought forward as a trial of strength; and for such a purpose

decimal coinage was as good a subject as any other. It was Mr.

Palliser's hobby, and he was gratified at having this further

opportunity of ventilating it. When in power, he had not succeeded

in carrying his measure, awed, and at last absolutely beaten, by the

infinite difficulty encountered in arranging its details. But his

mind was still set upon it, and it was allowed by the whole party

to be as good as anything else for the purpose then required. The

Conservative Government was beaten for the third or fourth time, and

Mr. Daubeny dissolved the House.

The whole world said that he might as well have resigned at once. It

was already the end of July, and there must be an autumn Session with

the new members. It was known to be impossible that he should find

himself supported by a majority after a fresh election. He had been

treated with manifest forbearance; the cake had been left in his

hands for twelve months; the House was barely two years old; he

had no "cry" with which to meet the country; the dissolution was

factious, dishonest, and unconstitutional. So said all the Liberals,

and it was deduced also that the Conservatives were in their hearts

as angry as were their opponents. What was to be gained but the poor

interval of three months? There were clever men who suggested that

Mr. Daubeny had a scheme in his head - some sharp trick of political

conjuring, some "hocus-pocus presto" sleight of hand, by which he

might be able to retain power, let the elections go as they would.

But, if so, he certainly did not make his scheme known to his own

party.

He had no cry with which to meet the country, nor, indeed, had

the leaders of the Opposition. Retrenchment, army reform, navy

excellence, Mr. Palliser's decimal coinage, and general good

government gave to all the old-Whig moderate Liberals plenty of

matter for speeches to their future constituents. Those who were more

advanced could promise the Ballot, and suggest the disestablishment

of the Church. But the Government of the day was to be turned out

on the score of general incompetence. They were to be made to go,

because they could not command majorities. But there ought to have

been no dissolution, and Mr. Daubeny was regarded by his opponents,

and indeed by very many of his followers also, with an enmity that

was almost ferocious. A seat in Parliament, if it be for five or six

years, is a blessing; but the blessing becomes very questionable if

it have to be sought afresh every other Session.

One thing was manifest to thoughtful, working, eager political

Liberals. They must have not only a majority in the next Parliament,

but a majority of good men - of men good and true. There must be no

more mismanagement; no more quarrelling; no more idleness. Was it to

be borne that an unprincipled so-called Conservative Prime Minister

should go on slicing the cake after such a fashion as that lately

adopted? Old bishops had even talked of resigning, and Knights of the

Garter had seemed to die on purpose. So there was a great stir at the

Liberal political clubs, and every good and true man was summoned to

the battle.

Now no Liberal soldier, as a young soldier, had been known to be more

good and true than Mr. Finn, the Irishman, who had held office two

years ago to the satisfaction of all his friends, and who had retired

from office because he had found himself compelled to support a

measure which had since been carried by those very men from whom he

had been obliged on this account to divide himself. It had always

been felt by his old friends that he had been, if not ill-used, at

least very unfortunate. He had been twelve months in advance of his

party, and had consequently been driven out into the cold. So when

the names of good men and true were mustered, and weighed, and

discussed, and scrutinised by some active members of the Liberal

party in a certain very private room not far removed from our great

seat of parliamentary warfare; and when the capabilities, and

expediencies, and possibilities were tossed to and fro among these

active members, it came to pass that the name of Mr. Finn was

mentioned more than once. Mr. Phineas Finn was the gentleman's

name - which statement may be necessary to explain the term of

endearment which was occasionally used in speaking of him.

"He has got some permanent place," said Mr. Ratler, who was living

on the well-founded hope of being a Treasury Secretary under the new

dispensation; "and of course he won't leave it."

It must be acknowledged that Mr. Ratler, than whom no judge in such

matters possessed more experience, had always been afraid of Phineas

Finn.

"He'll lave it fast enough, if you'll make it worth his while," said

the Honourable Laurence Fitzgibbon, who also had his expectations.

"But he married when he went away, and he can't afford it," said Mr.

Bonteen, another keen expectant.

"Devil a bit," said the Honourable Laurence; "or, anyways, the poor

thing died of her first baby before it was born. Phinny hasn't an

impidiment, no more than I have."

"He's the best Irishman we ever got hold of," said Barrington

Erle - "present company always excepted, Laurence."

"Bedad, you needn't except me, Barrington. I know what a man's made

of, and what a man can do. And I know what he can't do. I'm not bad

at the outside skirmishing. I'm worth me salt. I say that with a just

reliance on me own powers. But Phinny is a different sort of man.

Phinny can stick to a desk from twelve to seven, and wish to come

back again after dinner. He's had money left him, too, and 'd like to

spend some of it on an English borough."

"You never can quite trust him," said Bonteen. Now Mr. Bonteen had

never loved Mr. Finn.

"At any rate we'll try him again," said Barrington Erle, making a

little note to that effect. And they did try him again.

Phineas Finn, when last seen by the public, was departing from

parliamentary life in London to the enjoyment of a modest place

under Government in his own country, with something of a shattered

ambition. After various turmoils he had achieved a competency, and

had married the girl of his heart. But now his wife was dead, and he

was again alone in the world. One of his friends had declared that

money had been left to him. That was true, but the money had not been

much. Phineas Finn had lost his father as well as his wife, and had

inherited about four thousand pounds. He was not at this time much

over thirty; and it must be acknowledged in regard to him that, since

the day on which he had accepted place and retired from London, his

very soul had sighed for the lost glories of Westminster and Downing

Street.

There are certain modes of life which, if once adopted, make

contentment in any other circumstances almost an impossibility. In

old age a man may retire without repining, though it is often beyond

the power even of the old man to do so; but in youth, with all the

faculties still perfect, with the body still strong, with the hopes

still buoyant, such a change as that which had been made by Phineas

Finn was more than he, or than most men, could bear with equanimity.

He had revelled in the gas-light, and could not lie quiet on a sunny

bank. To the palate accustomed to high cookery, bread and milk is

almost painfully insipid. When Phineas Finn found himself discharging

in Dublin the routine duties of his office, - as to which there was

no public comment, no feeling that such duties were done in the face

of the country, - he became sick at heart and discontented. Like

the warhorse out at grass he remembered the sound of the battle

and the noise of trumpets. After five years spent in the heat and

full excitement of London society, life in Ireland was tame to

him, and cold, and dull. He did not analyse the difference between

metropolitan and quasi-metropolitan manners; but he found that men

and women in Dublin were different from those to whom he had been

accustomed in London. He had lived among lords, and the sons and

daughters of lords; and though the official secretaries and assistant

commissioners among whom his lot now threw him were for the most part

clever fellows, fond of society, and perhaps more than his equals in

the kind of conversation which he found to be prevalent, still they

were not the same as the men he had left behind him, - men alive with

the excitement of parliamentary life in London. When in London he had

often told himself that he was sick of it, and that he would better

love some country quiet life. Now Dublin was his Tibur, and the

fickle one found that he could not be happy unless he were back again

at Rome. When, therefore, he received the following letter from

his friend, Barrington Erle, he neighed like the old warhorse, and

already found himself shouting "Ha, ha," among the trumpets.

 - - Street, 9th July, 18 - .

MY DEAR FINN,

Although you are not now immediately concerned in such

trifling matters you have no doubt heard that we are all

to be sent back at once to our constituents, and that

there will be a general election about the end of

September. We are sure that we shall have such a majority

as we never had before; but we are determined to make it

as strong as possible, and to get in all the good men that

are to be had. Have you a mind to try again? After all,

there is nothing like it.

Perhaps you may have some Irish seat in your eye for which

you would be safe. To tell the truth we know very little

of the Irish seats - not so much as, I think, we ought

to do. But if you are not so lucky I would suggest

Tankerville in Durham. Of course there would be

a contest, and a little money will be wanted; but the

money would not be much. Browborough has sat for the place

now for three Parliaments, and seems to think it all his

own. I am told that nothing could be easier than to turn

him out. You will remember the man - a great, hulking,

heavy, speechless fellow, who always used to sit just over

Lord Macaw's shoulder. I have made inquiry, and I am told

that he must walk if anybody would go down who could talk

to the colliers every night for a week or so. It would

just be the work for you. Of course, you should have all

the assistance we could give you, and Molescroft would put

you into the hands of an agent who wouldn't spend money

for you. L500 would do it all.

I am very sorry to hear of your great loss, as also was

Lady Laura, who, as you are aware, is still abroad with

her father. We have all thought that the loneliness of

your present life might perhaps make you willing to come

back among us. I write instead of Ratler, because I

am helping him in the Northern counties. But you will

understand all about that.

Yours, ever faithfully,

BARRINGTON ERLE.

Of course Tankerville has been dirty. Browborough has

spent a fortune there. But I do not think that that need

dishearten you. You will go there with clean hands. It

must be understood that there shall not be as much as a

glass of beer. I am told that the fellows won't vote for

Browborough unless he spends money, and I fancy he will be

afraid to do it heavily after all that has come and gone.

If he does you'll have him out on a petition. Let us have

an answer as soon as possible.

He at once resolved that he would go over and see; but, before he

replied to Erle's letter, he walked half-a-dozen times the length

of the pier at Kingston meditating on his answer. He had no one

belonging to him. He had been deprived of his young bride, and left

desolate. He could ruin no one but himself. Where could there be a

man in all the world who had a more perfect right to play a trick

with his own prospects? If he threw up his place and spent all his

money, who could blame him? Nevertheless, he did tell himself that,

when he should have thrown up his place and spent all his money,

there would remain to him his own self to be disposed of in a manner

that might be very awkward to him. A man owes it to his country, to

his friends, even to his acquaintance, that he shall not be known to

be going about wanting a dinner, with never a coin in his pocket. It

is very well for a man to boast that he is lord of himself, and that

having no ties he may do as he pleases with that possession. But it

is a possession of which, unfortunately, he cannot rid himself when

he finds that there is nothing advantageous to be done with it.

Doubtless there is a way of riddance. There is the bare bodkin. Or a

man may fall overboard between Holyhead and Kingston in the dark, and

may do it in such a cunning fashion that his friends shall think that

it was an accident. But against these modes of riddance there is a

canon set, which some men still fear to disobey.

The thing that he was asked to do was perilous. Standing in his

present niche of vantage he was at least safe. And added to his

safety there were material comforts. He had more than enough for his

wants. His work was light: he lived among men and women with whom he

was popular. The very fact of his past parliamentary life had caused

him to be regarded as a man of some note among the notables of the

Irish capital. Lord Lieutenants were gracious to him, and the wives

of judges smiled upon him at their tables. He was encouraged to talk

of those wars of the gods at which he had been present, and was so

treated as to make him feel that he was somebody in the world of

Dublin. Now he was invited to give all this up; and for what?

He answered that question to himself with enthusiastic eloquence. The

reward offered to him was the thing which in all the world he liked

best. It was suggested to him that he should again have within his

reach that parliamentary renown which had once been the very breath

of his nostrils. We all know those arguments and quotations,

antagonistic to prudence, with which a man fortifies himself in

rashness. "None but the brave deserve the fair." "Where there's a

will there's a way." "Nothing venture nothing have." "The sword is

to him who can use it." "Fortune favours the bold!" But on the other

side there is just as much to be said. "A bird in the hand is worth

two in the bush." "Look before you leap." "Thrust not out your hand

further than you can draw it back again." All which maxims of life

Phineas Finn revolved within his own heart, if not carefully, at

least frequently, as he walked up and down the long pier of Kingston

Harbour.