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Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery – Seeking ‘the Palm without the Dust’
Archibald Primrose, the fifth Earl of Rosebery is reputed to have said as a young man that he had three ambitions in life – to win the Derby, to marry a great heiress and to be Prime Minister (McKinstry, p. 43). He obtained all three objectives, indeed winning the Derby three times, but much of his life can be accounted a long-drawn-out failure, and his achievements during his short premiership were virtually nil, despite his undoubted gifts.

The blame for this has been attributed by one writer (Iremonger, pp. 147–156) almost entirely to his severe deprivation of parental love during his childhood. He was born on 7 May 1847, the eldest son and third child of Lord Dalmeny, also named Archibald Primrose, and the heir to the Rosebery earldom, and his wife, Lady Wilhelmina Stanhope, a beautiful and highly cultivated, but intensely selfish woman. The young Archie was doted on by his father, who unfortunately died when he was only three, but was almost totally neglected by his mother, who instead lavished whatever love she was capable of giving on his younger brother, Everard.

Archie himself became Lord Dalmeny on the death of his father, and was to inherit the earldom from his grandfather when he was just short of 21. Three years after his father’s death, Lady Wilhelmina married for a second time, to Lord Henry Vane, later the Duke of Cleveland, an amiable but ineffectual grandee, who nevertheless failed to establish a close relationship with any of his four stepchildren. Archie proceeded to Eton when he was 13, where he impressed both the masters and his fellow pupils not only by his intellectual precocity and social assurance, but also by his apparent indolence. He was taken up by William Johnson, a highly erudite teacher and poet (the author of the words of the Eton Boating Song), who was scarcely able to conceal his homo-erotic interest in the boy. He wrote a series of letters to the Duchess of Cleveland, as she now was, recording the progress of her son, who, he said, had ‘in himself wonderful delicacy of mind, penetration, sympathy, flexibility, capacity for friendship – all, but the tenacious resolution of one that is to be great’ (Rhodes James, 1963, p. 30). Writing to a fellow Eton schoolmaster, Johnson made an even shrewder remark, which presciently foreshadowed the young Lord Dalmeny’s later career: ‘He is one of those who like the palm without the dust’ (McKinstry, p. 20). Dalmeny was by no means the only schoolboy who attracted Johnson, who, ten years later, was forced to leave Eton under a cloud, changing his name to Cory.

From Eton, Dalmeny proceeded, in 1866, to Christ Church, Oxford. Here he mixed with a boisterous crowd of Etonians, including Lord Randolph Churchill, who became for a time a close friend, joined the Bullingdon club, renowned for its drunkenness and general loutishness and infuriated his tutors by his unwillingness to conform. According to the recollections of a fellow student: ‘His patrician hauteur was unmistakable. Not an offensive hauteur but that calm pride by which a man seems to ascend in a balloon out of earshot every time he is addressed by one not socially his equal’ (McKinstry, p. 18).