

## CHAPTER XXVII

REIGN OF GEORGE III. TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF  
WILLIAM PITT.

GREAT subjects were discussed in England, and great events happened in America, during the latter years of the reigns of Frederick II., Catharine II., and Maria Theresa. These now demand attention.

George III. ascended the throne of Great Britain at a period of unparalleled prosperity, when the English arms were victorious in all parts of the world, and when commerce and the arts had greatly enriched his country and strengthened its political importance. By the peace of Paris, (1763,) the dominions of George III. were enlarged, and the country over which he reigned was the most powerful in Europe.

Mr. George Grenville succeeded the Earl of Bute as the prime minister of the king, and he was chiefly assisted by the Earls of Egremont and Halifax. His administration was signalized by the prosecution of Wilkes, and by schemes for the taxation of the American colonies.

Mr. Wilkes was a member of parliament, but a man of ruined fortunes and profligate morals. As his circumstances were desperate, he applied to the ministry for some post of emolument; but his application was rejected. Failure enraged him, and he swore revenge, and resolved to libel the ministers, under the pretext of exercising the liberty of the press. He was editor of the North Briton, a periodical publication of some talent, but more bitterness. In the forty-fifth number, he assailed the king, charging him with a direct falsehood. The charge should have been dismissed with contempt; for it was against the dignity of the government to refute an infamous slander. But, in an evil hour, it was thought expedient to vindicate the honor of the sovereign; and a warrant was therefore issued against the editor, publisher, and printer of the publication. The officers of the law entered Wilkes's house

late one evening, seized his papers, and committed him to the Tower. He sued out a writ of habeas corpus, in consequence of which he was brought up to Westminster Hall. Being a member of parliament, and a man of considerable abilities and influence, his case attracted attention. The judges decided that his arrest was illegal, since a member of parliament could not be imprisoned except for treason, felony, or breach of the peace. He had not committed any of these crimes, for a libel had only a *tendency* to disturb the peace. Still, had he been a private person, his imprisonment would have been legal; but being unconstitutional, he was discharged. Lord Chief Justice Pratt gained great popularity by his charge in favor of the liberation of Wilkes, and ever nobly defended constitutional liberty. He is better known as Lord Camden, the able lord chancellor and statesman during a succeeding administration, and one of the greatest lawyers England has produced, ranking with Lord Hardwicke, Lord Ellenborough, and Lord Eldon.

After the discharge of Wilkes, the attorney-general was then ordered to commence a state prosecution, and he was arraigned at the bar of the House of Commons. It was voted, by a great majority, that the forty-fifth number of the North Briton was a scandalous and seditious libel, and tending to excite traitorous insurrections. It was further voted that the paper should be burned by the common hangman. Wilkes then complained to the House of a breach of privilege, which complaint, being regular, was considered. But the Commons decided that the privilege of parliament does not extend to a libel, which resolution was against the decision of the Court of Common Pleas, and the precedents upon record in their own journals. However scandalous and vulgar the vituperation of Wilkes, and especially disgraceful in a member of parliament, still his prosecution was an attack on the constitution. Wilkes was arrested on what is called a *general warrant*, which, if often resorted to, would be fatal to the liberties of the people. Many, who strongly disliked the libeller, still defended him in this instance, among whom were Pitt, Beckford, Legge, Yorke, and Sir George Saville. But party spirit and detestation of Wilkes triumphed over the constitution, and the liberties of members of parliament were abridged even by themselves. But Wilkes was



not discouraged, and immediately brought an action, in Westminster Hall, against the Earl of Halifax, the secretary of state, for seizing his papers, and, after a hearing of fifteen hours, before Lord Chief Justice Pratt and a special jury, obtained a verdict in his favor of one thousand pounds damages and costs.

While the Commons were prosecuting Wilkes for a libel, the Lords also continued the prosecution. Wilkes, in conjunction with Potter, a dissipated son of Archbishop Potter, during some of their bacchanalian revels, had written a blasphemous and obscene poem, after the model of Pope's Essay on Man, called *An Essay on Woman*. The satire was not published, but a few copies of it were printed privately for the authors. Lord Sandwich had contrived to secure a copy of it, and read it before the House; and the Lords, indignant and disgusted, voted an address to the king to institute a prosecution against the author. The Lords, by so doing, departed from the dignity of their order, and their ordinary functions, and their persecution served to strengthen, instead of weaken, the cause of Wilkes.

Associated with him, in his writings and his revels, was the poet Churchill, a clergyman of the Establishment, but as open a contemner of decency as Wilkes himself. For some years, his poetry had proved as bad as his sermons, his time being spent in low dissipation. An ill-natured criticism on his writings called forth his energies, and he started, all at once, a giant in numbers, with all the fire of Dryden and all the harmony of Pope. Imagination, wit, strength, and sense, were crowded into his compositions; but he was careless of both matter and manner, and wrote just what came in his way. "This bacchanalian priest," says Horace Walpole, "now mouthing patriotism, and now venting libertinism, the scourge of bad men, and scarce better than the worst, debauching wives, and protecting his gown by the weight of his fist, engaged with Wilkes in his war on the Scots, and set himself up as the Hercules that was to cleanse the state and punish its oppressors. And true it is, the storm that saved us was raised in taverns and night-cellars; so much more effectual were the orgies of Churchill and Wilkes than the dagger of Cato and Brutus. Earl Temple joined them in mischief and dissipation, and whispered where they might find torches, though he

took care never to be seen to light one himself. This triumvirate has even made me reflect that nations are most commonly saved by the worst men in them. The virtuous are too scrupulous to go the lengths which are necessary to rouse the people against their tyrants."

The ferment created by the prosecution of Wilkes led to the resignation of Mr. Grenville, in 1765, and the Marquis of Rockingham succeeded him as head of the administration. He continued, however, the prosecution. He retained his place but a few months, and was succeeded by the Duke of Grafton, the object of such virulent invective in the Letters of Junius, a work without elevation of sentiment, without any appeal to generous principle, without recognition of the eternal laws of justice, and without truthfulness, and yet a work which produced a great sensation, and is to this day regarded as a masterpiece of savage and unscrupulous sarcasm. The Duke of Grafton had the same views as his predecessor respecting Wilkes, who had the audacity, notwithstanding the sentence of outlawry which had been passed against him, to return from Paris, to which he had, for a time, retired, and to appear publicly at Guildhall, and offer himself as a candidate for the city of London. He was contemptuously rejected, but succeeded in being elected as member for Middlesex county.

Mr. Wilkes, however, recognizing the outlawry that had been passed against him, surrendered himself to the jurisdiction of the Court of the King's Bench, which was then presided over by Lord Mansfield. This great lawyer and jurist confirmed the verdicts against him, and sentenced him to pay a fine of one thousand pounds, to suffer two years' imprisonment, and to find security for good behavior for seven years. This sentence was odious and severe, and the more unjustifiable in view of the arbitrary and unprecedented alteration of the records on the very night preceding the trial.

The multitude, enraged, rescued their idol from the officers of the law, as they were conducting him to prison, and carried him with triumph through the city; but, through his entreaties, they were prevailed upon to abstain from further acts of outrage. Mr. Wilkes again surrendered himself, and was confined in prison.



When the Commons met, Wilkes was again expelled, in order to satisfy the vengeance of the court. But the electors of Middlesex again returned him to parliament, and the Commons voted that, being once expelled, he was incapable of sitting, even if elected, in the same parliament. The electors of Middlesex, equally determined with the Commons, chose him, for a third time, their representative; and the election, for the third time, was declared void by the commons. In order to terminate the contest, Colonel Lutterell, a member of the House, vacated his seat, and offered himself a candidate for Middlesex. He received two hundred and ninety-six votes, and Wilkes twelve hundred and forty-three, but Lutterell was declared duly elected by the Commons, and took his seat for Middlesex.

This decision threw the whole nation into a ferment, and was plainly an outrage on the freedom of elections; and it was so considered by some of the most eminent men in England, even by those who despised the character of Wilkes. Lord Chatham, from his seat, declared "that the laws were despised, trampled upon, destroyed; those laws which had been made by the stern virtues of our ancestors, those iron barons of old, to whose spirit in the hour of contest, and to whose fortitude in the triumph of victory, the silken barons of this day owe all their honors and security."

Mr. Wilkes subsequently triumphed; the Commons grew weary of a contest which brought no advantage and much ignominy, and the prosecution was dropped; but not until the subject of it had been made Lord Mayor of London. From 1768 to 1772, he was the sole unrivalled political idol of the people, who lavished on him all in their power to bestow. They subscribed twenty thousand pounds for the payment of his debts, besides gifts of plate, wine, and household goods. Every wall bore his name and every window his picture. In china, bronze, or marble, he stood upon the chimney-pieces of half the houses in London, and he swung from the sign-board of every village, and every great road in the environs of the metropolis. In 1770 he was discharged from his imprisonment, in 1771 was permitted to take his seat, and elected mayor. From 1776, his popularity declined, and he became involved in pecuniary difficulties. He, however,

*Popularity of Wilkes.*

emerged from them, and enjoyed a quiet office until his death (1797.) He was a patriot from accident, and not from principle and corrupt in his morals; but he was a gentleman of elegant manners and cultivated taste. He was the most popular political character ever known in England; and his name, at one time, was sufficient to blow up the flames of sedition, and excite the lower orders to acts of violence bordering on madness.

During his prosecution, important events occurred, of greater moment to the world. The disputes about the taxation of America led to the establishment of a new republic, whose extent and grandeur have never been equalled, and whose future greatness cannot well be exaggerated.

These disputes commenced during the administration of George Grenville. The proposal to tax the American colonies had been before proposed to Sir Robert Walpole, but this prudent and sagacious minister dared not run the risk. Mr. Grenville was not, however, daunted by the difficulties and dangers which the more able Walpole regarded. In order to lighten the burden which resulted from the ruinous wars of Pitt, the minister proposed to raise a revenue from the colonies. The project pleased the house, and the Stamp Duties were imposed. It is true that the tax was a light one, and was so regarded by Mr. Grenville; but he intended it as a precedent; he was resolved to raise a revenue from the colonies sufficiently great to lighten the public burden. He regarded the colonists as subjects of the King of Great Britain, in every sense of the word; and, since they received protection from the government, they were bound to contribute to its support.

But the colonists, now scattered along the coast from Maine to Georgia, took other views. They maintained that, though subject in some degree to English legislation, they could not be taxed, any more than other subjects of Great Britain, without their consent. They were willing to be ruled in accordance with those royal charters which had, at different times, been given them. They were even willing to assist the mother country, which they loved and revered, and with which were connected their brightest and most cherished associations, in expelling its enemies from adjoining territories, and to fight battles in its defence. They were willing

*Taxation of the Colonies.*



to receive the literature, the religion, the fashions, and the opinions of their brethren in England. But they looked upon the soil which they cultivated in the wilderness with so many difficulties, hardships, and dangers, as their own, and believed that they were bound to raise taxes only to defend the soil, and promote good government, religion, and morality in their midst. But they could not understand why they were bound to pay taxes to support English wars on the continent of Europe. It was for their children, and for the sacred privilege of religious liberty, that they had originally left the mother country. It was only for themselves and their children that they felt bound to labor. They sought no political influence in England. They did not wish to control elections, or regulate the finances, or interfere with the projects of military aggrandizement. They were not represented in the English parliament, and they composed, politically speaking, no part of the English nation. Great, therefore, was their indignation, when they learned that the English government was interfering with their chartered rights, and designed to raise a revenue from them to lighten taxes at home, merely to support the government in foolish wars. If they could be taxed, without their consent, in any thing, they could be taxed without limit; and they would be in danger of becoming mere slaves of the mother country, and be bound to labor for English aggrandizement. On one point they insisted with peculiar earnestness—that taxation, in a free country, without a representation of interests in parliament, was an outrage. It was on account of this arbitrary taxation that Charles I. lost his crown, and the second revolution was effected, which placed the house of Hanover on the throne. The colonies felt that, if the subjects of the king at home were justified in resisting unlawful taxes, they surely, on another continent, and without a representation, had a right to do so also; that, if they were to be taxed without their consent, they would be in a worse condition than even the people of Ireland; would be in the condition of a conquered people, without the protection which even a conquered country enjoyed. Hence they remonstrated, and prepared themselves for resistance.

The English government was so blinded as not to perceive or feel the force of the reasoning of the colonists, and obstinately

resolved to resort to measures which, with a free and spirited people, must necessarily lead to violence and strife. The House of Commons would not even hear the reports of the colonial agents, but proceeded, with strange infatuation and obstinate bigotry, to impose the Stamp Act, (1765.) There were some, however, who perceived its folly and injustice. General Conway protested against the assumed right of the government, and Colonel Barré, a speaker of great eminence, exclaimed, in reply to the speech of Charles Townshend, who styled the colonies "children planted by our care, and nourished by our indulgence,"—"They planted by your care!—No! your oppressions planted them in America; they fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated wilderness, exposed to all the hardships to which human nature is liable! They nourished by your indulgence!—No! they grew by your neglect; your *care* of them was displayed in sending persons to govern them who were the deputies of deputies of ministers—men whose behavior, on many occasions, has caused the blood of those sons of liberty to recoil within them; men who have been promoted to the highest seats of justice in a foreign country, in order to escape being brought to the bar of a court of justice in their own." Mr. Pitt opposed the fatal policy of Grenville with singular eloquence; by arguments which went beyond acts of parliament; by an appeal to the natural reason; and by recognition of the great, inalienable principles of liberty. He maintained that the House had *no right* to lay an internal tax upon America, *that country not being represented.* Burke, too, then a new speaker, raised his voice against the folly and injustice of taxing the colonies; but it was in vain. The commons were bent on imposing the Stamp Act.

But the passage of this act created great disturbances in America, and was every where regarded as the beginning of great calamities. Throughout the colonies there was a general combination to resist the stamp duty; and it was resolved to purchase no English manufactures, and to prevent the adoption of stamped paper.

Such violent and unexpected opposition embarrassed the English ministry; which, in addition to the difficulties attending the prosecution of Wilkes, led to the retirement of Grenville, who was

Indignation of the Colonies.

The Stamp Act.