

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Negro Slavery in the West Indies.—The Missionary Case.—Opening of Parliament, 1825.—Public Prosperity.—Joint-Stock Companies.—Mining Schemes.—The Panic in the Money-Market.—The Panic arrested.—Extensive failures of Commercial Houses.—Joint-Stock Banks established.—State of the Catholic Question.—Death of the duke of York.—Illness of Lord Liverpool.—Negotiations previous to the choice of a Minister.—Mr. Canning's Administration.—Violent opposition to Mr. Canning in both Houses.—Charge against the Prime Minister that he had given an unconstitutional pledge to the King on the subject of Catholic Emancipation.—Close of the Session.—Death of Mr. Canning.—His last Ministerial act, the conclusion of a Treaty on the Affairs of Greece.—Principles of International Law laid down by Mr. Canning.—List of the Cabinet of Mr. Canning.—Note on the Negotiations which preceded Mr. Canning's Premiership.

WITH the object of presenting a continuous view of the foreign policy of England from the period of the accession of Mr. Canning to office in 1822, we have passed over several matters of public importance to which we must now advert.

Negro Slavery in the West Indies was the subject of animated debates in the House of Commons in 1823 and in 1824. The difficult question of negro emancipation in our Colonies has been happily settled by a magnificent effort on the part of the government and the people. The curse of Slavery no longer exists on a single rood of the vast possessions and dependencies of the British Empire. But this result could not have been attained without the persevering efforts of the same zeal which had accomplished the abolition of the Slave Trade. A few of the first Abolitionists still remained. Younger men had joined their ranks, with the determination to banish Slavery from our own Colonies, and if possible to unite all Christendom in a league against the hateful traffic, which some States still openly perpetrated and others indirectly encouraged. On the 15th of May, 1823, Mr. Thomas Fowell Buxton moved as a resolution, "That the state of Slavery is repugnant to the principles of the British Constitution, and of the Christian religion; and that it ought to be gradually abolished throughout the British Colonies, with as much expedition as may be found consistent with a due regard to the well-being of the parties concerned." Mr. Canning met this resolution by proposing other resolutions, to the effect that decisive measures should be taken

for ameliorating the condition of the Slave population of the British Colonies; that through such measures the House looked forward to such a progressive improvement in the character of the Slave population, as might prepare them for a participation in civil rights and privileges. Mr. Canning's proposal was unanimously agreed to by the House. The West Indian interest at home was greatly alarmed. The resident proprietors were in a state of indignant terror when the Colonial Secretary issued a Circular which announced the determination of the British Government to interfere between the owner and his slave. This Circular contained an absolute prohibition to inflict the punishment of flogging under any circumstances upon female slaves, and a strong recommendation with regard to males that the whip should no longer be carried into the field and there displayed by the driver as the emblem of his authority, or employed as the ready instrument of his displeasure.* In most of the West India Islands the Circular of lord Bathurst produced only votes of indignation in their Local Assemblies. In Demerara the Court of Policy passed regulations in compliance with the instructions of the Circular, but the negroes entertained a belief that orders had come from England for their complete emancipation. The Government of the Colony had previously issued a prohibition against the negroes attending divine service except under certain conditions, in the belief that the sectaries incited them to insubordination. On the 18th of August a rising took place amongst some of the slaves, who imprisoned their masters but shed no blood. On the 19th martial law was proclaimed, and under sentences of Courts-martial forty-seven negroes were executed, and a great number were tortured by the most merciless flogging. The Colony was subjected to martial-law for five months. Under this law Mr. John Smith, a missionary of the Independent persuasion, was tried upon a charge of having incited the negroes to revolt, and of having concealed their intention to rise. He was convicted and sentenced to death. The governor did not venture to execute the sentence, but left the decision to the British cabinet, who rescinded the sentence, but decreed Mr. Smith's banishment from the Colony. Mr. Brougham brought the whole case before the House of Commons, on the 1st of June, 1824. The missionary, who had been cast into a loathsome dungeon, in a weak state of health, had died after some weeks of severe suffering. The feeling produced at home was that of pity for the victim, and of indignation at the injustice of the Court by which he was tried. The proceedings of this general Court-martial, held on the 13th of

* "Annual Register," 1823, p. 130.

October, 1823, published by the Missionary Society, displayed "a series of errors so gross as to mock belief, and of oppressions which are unexampled in the dispensation of English justice." * Mr. Brougham, in this memorable debate, uttered a solemn warning to the Slave-holders:—"Yet a little delay; yet a little longer of this unbearable trifling with the commands of the parent state—and she will stretch out her arm, in mercy, not in anger, to those deluded men themselves; exert at last her undeniable authority; vindicate the just right and restore the tarnished honour of the English name!" In this debate Mr. Wilberforce spoke for the last time in Parliament. The speech of sir James Mackintosh was that of a statesman whose opinions were of far more practical importance than those of the too sanguine abolitionist: "I am as adverse as any one to the sudden emancipation of slaves; much out of regard to the masters, but still more, as affecting a far larger portion of mankind, out of regard to the unhappy slaves themselves. Emancipation by violence and revolt I consider as the greatest calamity that can visit a community except perpetual slavery. . . . I acknowledge that the pacific emancipation of great multitudes thus wretchedly circumstanced is a problem so arduous as to perplex and almost silence the reason of man. Time is undoubtedly necessary."

Of the six Bills for the repeal of Capital Punishments which sir James Mackintosh introduced in the Session of 1820, † three eventually became laws. ‡ These were the only formal results of the perseverance of the legislator upon whom the mantle of Romilly had fallen. In 1822 he obtained a pledge from the House that it would proceed to a general consideration of the Criminal laws in the next Session. On the 21st of May, 1823, he proposed nine resolutions, which went at once to do away with capital punishment in a number of offences to which they referred. Mr. Peel, who was now Secretary of State for the Home Department, objected to the extent of these measures. He admitted the necessity of some amendment, and intimated his intention to propose measures which should embrace several of the improvements which sir James Mackintosh contemplated. His son has recorded that the defeat on this occasion was a signal to sir James for surrendering the superintendence of further reforms into the hands of one whose position as a minister gave him peculiar facilities for carrying them into effect: "He lived," says his biographer, "to see the propriety

* Introduction to Mr. Brougham's speech in the Missionary Case, in his *Selected Speeches*, vol. ii. p. 116.

† *Ante*, p. 484.

‡ 1 Geo. IV., cap. 115, 116, 117.

of many of these very alterations acquiesced in to an extent which he dared scarcely have imagined, and which drew from him the expression, instancing the growth of opinion on these subjects, that he could almost think that he had lived in two different countries, and conversed with people who spoke two different languages." *

When the Session of Parliament was opened on the 3rd of January, 1825, the exultation of the Royal Speech upon "public prosperity" was far stronger than ministerial prudence and reserve often ventured to indulge. "There never was a period in the history of this country when all the great interests of the nation were at the same time in so thriving a condition." Alas for the instability of human affairs! In the King's Speech on the 2nd of February, 1826, we have this sentence: "His Majesty deeply laments the injurious effects which the late pecuniary crisis must have entailed upon many branches of the commerce and manufactures of the United Kingdom." The pecuniary crisis was indeed the most unexpected, the most astounding, and the most severe in its consequences, of any derangement of commercial operations ever produced by extravagant hopes and exaggerated alarms. This pecuniary crisis universally obtained the name of "The Panic." It was described by Mr. Huskisson as "such a complete suspension of all confidence as, contradistinguished from commercial distress, rendered it impossible to procure money upon even the most unobjectional security. . . . If the difficulties which existed in the money market had continued only eight-and-forty hours longer, he sincerely believed that the effect would have been to put a stop to all dealings between man and man, except by way of barter." †

There can be no doubt whatever that at the beginning of 1825 the sanguine views of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which obtained for him the name of "Prosperity Robinson," were really justified by whatever was apparent in the material condition of the country. In June of that year an article appeared in the "Quarterly Review" which went very carefully into the proofs that there had scarcely ever been a time when every branch of industry had been so generally prosperous. We are taken into the country to look upon fields better cultivated than a few years before; barns and stack-yards more fully stored; horses, cows, and sheep more abundant; implements of husbandry greatly improved: In cities, towns, and villages, more numerous and better shops, and a vast increase of goods, indicating the flourishing circumstances of the

* "Life of Mackintosh," vol. ii. p. 391. † "Huskisson's Speeches," vol. ii. p. 445.

community: In manufactories similar manifestations of the increase of wealth. We are then told that if we could examine the accounts of the bankers of the metropolis, and in the small as well as large provincial towns, we should find that the balances resting with them were increased to an enormous amount. The reviewer then adds: "This indeed may be fairly inferred from the low rate of interest in the floating public securities, from the prices of the funds, from the avidity with which every project for the employment of capital is grasped at, and from the general complaint, almost the only complaint heard, that there is now no way of making interest for money."* Those who in all times are ready to treat such maladies in the body politic by salutary venesection, were most busy and successful at the end of 1824 and the beginning of 1825. Joint-Stock Companies suddenly rose up, some for provident schemes of home industry, but others holding forth the prospect of enormous wealth by working the mines of South America. "All the gambling propensities of human nature were constantly solicited into action, and crowds of individuals of every description—the credulous and the suspicious—the crafty and the bold—the raw and the experienced—the intelligent and the ignorant—princes, nobles, politicians, placemen, patriots, lawyers, physicians, divines, philosophers, poets, intermingled with women of all ranks and degrees—spinsters, wives and widows—hastened to venture some portion of their property in schemes of which scarcely anything was known except the name."†

The South American mining schemes required large remittances in money, and an equal expenditure in stores and machinery for the operations to be carried on. The new South American States asked and obtained considerable loans. Speculations in goods were carried forward to an extent, and with a temporary amount of profit, previously unknown. The rush of purchasers to invest in coffee, in spices, in indigo, in tallow, and in cotton, with a total ignorance of everything connected with the relation of the supply to the consumption, had for a while the effect of producing a general rise of prices. Every article which had not advanced in price was soon made the subject of an exaggerated demand. Very soon after Parliament had separated, cheered by the official announcement of public prosperity, a reaction commenced. The price of every article that had been the subject of this overtrading began to fall. More precipitous was the downward tendency of the loan and share market; for no dividends came from the South American loans; no remittances in the precious metals to attest

* Vol. xxxii. p. 189.

† "Annual Register," 1824, p. 3.

that increased productiveness of the mines which was expected to arise out of the application of British capital and machinery. The rage for speculation had so penetrated into uncommercial circles, and the sober tradesman who once used to be content with the moderate profits of his own industry had so embarked his capital in rash ventures, that, when a want of confidence began to be felt, universal distrust soon succeeded. The Bank of England, which had ten millions of bullion and coin in its coffers in April, had only one million three hundred thousand pounds in November to meet the rapid drain that was going forward. The directors of the Bank of England, in their alarm, suddenly diminished their circulation to the extent of 3,500,000*l.* In the general want of confidence, the country bankers had to endure the consequences of an almost unlimited circulation of their notes, nothing loath as they had been to assist the speculative tendencies of their customers by what seemed a method so easy to themselves. The time was at hand when every man would look suspiciously upon the dirty pieces of paper which he had held to be as good as gold; and these promises to pay would travel, first slowly and then rapidly, to the banker's counter, and many who saw these obligations return to their source would ask what they had done to provoke this run upon them. In London those large balances in the hands of the bankers which the reviewer described as "ready to embrace favourable changes in the price of any commodity, or to be placed at interest as beneficial securities presented themselves," were suddenly withdrawn to meet unforeseen losses, to satisfy unexpected demands, and, in many cases, out of a selfish mistrust of the security of those depositories which had once justly received the public confidence. Selfish and shortsighted was the panic that drove men to the banker's counter, in their ignorant belief that it was his duty to have ready in his till an amount sufficient to pay the balances of every customer. On the 5th of December the banking-house of sir Peter Pole and Company stopped payment. On the 6th the bank of Williams and Company followed. The author of this history cannot easily forget the scene which he witnessed on the morning of the 7th of December. On the night of the 6th two personal friends, partners in a country bank, who had their accounts with Williams and Company, arrived at his house in town to consult with him on the best course to be pursued in this hour of danger. It was agreed that one of the partners should immediately return home and countermand an order that had been given for the closing of the bank on the following morning. The

other partner, who was a member of Parliament, was to set out with the present writer to seek the assistance of friendly capitalists before the general world was astir. In the chambers in the Albany of one of the members of a city bank they found the firm assembled, deliberating by lamp-light, as many others were deliberating, whilst the watchman still cried the morning hour. The request for aid was made, and was as promptly answered: "We shall stop ourselves at nine o'clock." The two friends proceeded to Lombard street and its neighbourhood as the morning dawned. Long before the time of opening, the doors of the banking-houses were surrounded by eager crowds, each struggling to be foremost, as at the entrance of a theatre. Many such doors were opened; and after the first rush some began to be ashamed of their suspicious impatience. Heads of firms stood quietly beside their clerks, sometimes smiling, with an unmistakable meaning, upon those who showed how easily are "benefits forgot;" some pointed to their title-deeds and other securities, as ready for any sacrifice to preserve their commercial honour. Before the close of the year seventy-three banks had failed, of which seven were metropolitan. The country bank in which we felt an interest was saved by the more sensible of the townsmen coming promptly forward to declare their opinion of its solvency and their resolution not to press in the hour of difficulty. This was a very general course throughout the country.

During the three weeks of alarm and misery which preceded the Christmas of 1825, the Cabinet was daily deliberating upon measures to be pursued to stop the disorder and to mitigate its consequences. The Bank Directors came forward to lend money upon any description of property; and relaxed all their accustomed regulations for the discount of bills. The amount of mercantile bills under discount had been four millions on the 3rd of November; it had increased to fifteen millions on the 29th of December. Sovereigns were coined at the Mint at the unprecedented speed of 150,000 daily. At the Bank of England notes were printed with equal promptitude; for with the sanction of the Cabinet it was determined that one and two pound notes which the Bank of England had called in should again be issued for temporary purposes. Still these two supplies of an unexceptionable currency could not be produced fast enough to fill up the vacuum occasioned by the almost total withdrawal of country bank paper. An accidental circumstance solved the difficulty. A box containing about seven hundred thousand pounds of one pound notes, which had been put aside unused, was accidentally dis-

covered at the Bank. Mr. Harman, one of the directors, stated it as his opinion, that the timely issue of these notes "worked wonders—it saved the credit of the country."*

The credit of the country was saved; in other words the excessive demand for gold did not involve the danger at one time apprehended—a suspension of cash payments. The credit of the country was saved; but the destruction of private credit, the consequent ruin of many commercial firms, and the terrible struggle of others to keep their position, were wide-spread consequences of the panic of 1825. It was not till towards the end of January, 1826, that important mercantile failures began to create alarm. These failures continued to a vast extent throughout the whole year. The total number of bankruptcies in 1825 was a little above eleven hundred; in 1826 the number was nearly two thousand six hundred. The destruction of capital and credit paralyzed all the exertions of industry, and produced excessive distress amongst the manufacturing population. Diminished employment and lower wages, added to the loss which many who lived by their daily labour had sustained in the failure of country banks, rendered the year 1826 a very unhappy one to all those, whether wealthy or poor, whose means of support were connected with the industry of the country. Many indeed had to pay the penalty of their indulgence in wild speculation, and others had to suffer a severe retribution for their abuse of the facilities for raising money upon bills, which had gone on till the sudden crash came, and borrowers and lenders were involved in equal difficulty. One well-known example is an illustration of the dangers that always beset men of sanguine hopes, who regard their facility of creating wealth in the future as a power already realized, so as to warrant the large outlay which belongs to accumulated capital. On the 18th of December, 1825, there is this entry in the diary of sir Walter Scott:—"Rich and poor four or five times; once on the verge of ruin, yet opened a new source of wealth almost overflowing. Now to be broken in my pitch of pride, and nearly winged (unless good news should come), because London chooses to be in an uproar, and in the tumult of bulls and bears a poor inoffensive lion like myself is pushed to the wall. But what is to be the end of it? God knows; and so ends the catechism." The lion would not have been pushed to the wall in the tumult of bulls and bears in London if, in building, and planting, and furnishing, and exercising hospitality upon the most sumptuous scale, he had not only anticipated the resources of his own genius, but had incurred debts

* Porter's "Progress of the Nation."

on his private account, and as a partner in a printing establishment, to the extent of nearly one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. The printing and publishing houses with which Scott was connected necessarily failed, and he failed with them. Then began the heroic period of his life, in which his great intellect received the noblest stimulus—that of a desire by his own unaided exertions to discharge the obligations which he had incurred by his former disregard of prudence and moderation. Many a man who had been bowed down by the storm might have felt the same aspiration again to stand erect, but few could have accomplished it so thoroughly as the great author, who never lost heart or hope, and in the darkest hour said, “If God grant me life and strength for a few years longer, I have no doubt that I shall redeem it all.”

When the Session of Parliament was opened on the 2nd of February, 1826, it was truly said in the royal speech that some of the causes of the evil which occurred were beyond the reach of direct parliamentary interposition, nor could security against the recurrence of them be found, unless in the experience of the sufferings which they had occasioned. But to a certain portion of the evil correctives at least, if not effectual remedies, might be applied. It was desirable to place on a more firm foundation the currency and circulating credit of the country. Lord Liverpool then stated the measures which Government intended to submit for the consideration of Parliament. One of those measures was a regulation by which one and two pound bank-notes should be gradually withdrawn from circulation, and a metallic currency substituted for them. The other measure had reference to the exclusive privileges of the Bank of England, under their charter, which would not expire till 1833. Lord Liverpool said—“If the Bank could be induced to give up so much of their exclusive privilege as related to country banks, and if they would accompany that surrender with a measure which would be desirable for their own sakes, namely, the establishment in some parts of the country of branches of their own institution, the effect on the general circulation of the country would, he thought, be most beneficial.” The privilege of the Bank of England had prevented the establishment of any banking concern with a greater number of partners than six. Lord Liverpool said he was old enough to remember the time when there was scarcely such an institution as a country bank except in great commercial towns, and when the transactions of the country were carried on in Bank of England Notes, and money obtained from London. There had been a great change. Any small tradesman, a cheesemonger, a

butcher, or a shoemaker, might open a country bank. The exclusive privilege of the Bank of England did not touch them. But an association of persons with fortune sufficient to carry on a banking concern with security was not permitted to do so. * The panic of 1825 produced the great measure of 1826, sanctioning the establishment of Joint-Stock banks, under which enactment a banking firm might include any number of partners, except within sixty-five miles of London. This year was also the date of the establishment of Branch Banks of the Bank of England. Scotland was exempted from the prohibition of the small note currency. It is worthy of note, that during the panic not a single Scotch Bank failed.

The difficulties of capitalists in the manufacturing districts produced, as their inevitable consequence, distress amongst the workers. In those days riot was too commonly the concomitant of distress. The popular excitement took the usual course of the days of popular ignorance,—the destruction of machinery. At various places in Lancashire, from the 23rd to the 30th of April, one thousand power-looms were destroyed, with the old accompaniments of reading the Riot Act and calling out the military. At Trowbridge the populace, who found potatoes dearer in their market than on the previous week, believing themselves injured by the monopolists of vegetables, attacked all the standings of the market gardeners and country butchers, so effectually doing their work that they scared away for some time all those who kept down the prices of the town dealers by competition. There were riotous proceedings and destruction of property in most cases where the operatives were suffering distress. Lamentable as such outrages must be in their effects upon the sufferers themselves, they sometimes speak with a stronger voice than the sober arguments of those who would mitigate the suffering by inquiries into its remediable causes. Whilst the noble and the rich of Lanarkshire, in a public meeting, resolved that the distress of the working people of Glasgow was to be attributed to machinery, they, and most other landed proprietors, strenuously resisted any approach to a relaxation of the Corn Laws. The price of wheat had fallen in March below the price of January, chiefly in consequence of a belief that the Government intended to release bonded wheat at a low duty. The ministers declared they had no such intention, and the average price again rose to that of the beginning of the year. The complaints and violence of the manufacturing districts alarmed the government, and at the beginning of May the release of the corn in bond was

* “Hansard,” vol. xiv. col. 19.

proposed and carried, with a discretionary power to admit foreign grain to the extent of five hundred thousand quarters, in the event of the next harvest proving unfavourable. These concessions were not obtained without great difficulty,—without a protest on the part of the ministers that they had not, and could not, have any connection whatever with any measure affecting the existing system of the Corn Laws. “If,” said lord Eldon, “the measure pledged that House, or any man in that House, to any alteration unfavourable to the Corn Laws, he would be the last man to stand up as its advocate.”*

At the close of the Session on the 31st of May, the royal intention was announced “to dissolve without delay the present Parliament.” It was the seventh session of that Parliament. The dissolution at this early season had no reference to the state of political parties, but simply had regard to the convenience of the time for a general election. The leading question upon which men’s minds would be most stirred throughout the kingdom, and especially in Ireland, would be that of Catholic Emancipation. The Cabinet remained in the position as to this question which it occupied in 1812, when lord Castlereagh became one of its members. Catholic Emancipation was what is called an “open question,” upon the principle described by Mr. Canning,—“the principle of treating it as a question out of the ordinary course of ministerial business; as one to be argued upon its own merits, such as they might appear to each individual member of the administration.”† Lord Liverpool, as the head of the government, was opposed to the Catholic claims, but his opposition was qualified by the moderation of his character, and no one doubted his sincerity. Lord Eldon again and again avowed his “firm and determined purpose to support to the last our establishment in church and state.”‡ When Mr. Canning became Secretary of Foreign Affairs, he was unpopular with the Anti-Catholic party in general, and obnoxious to the Lord Chancellor in particular. § Lord Eldon was, however, consoled by the decided views of Mr. Peel on this subject, whose influence with the Anti-Catholic party was materially strengthened by his position as representative of the University of Oxford. Mr. Peel, although then of comparative unimportance as a political leader, was in 1818 preferred by the University as a representative of its orthodoxy, whilst Mr. Canning was rejected. Upon the great “open question,” the party of Mr. Canning in the Cabinet obtained in 1825 a majority in the House of

* “Hansard,” vol. xv. col. 1375.

† *Ibid.*, vol. xii. col. 491.

‡ Twiss, “Life of Lord Eldon,” vol. ii. p. 538.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

Commons upon a Bill for the repeal of disabilities, the enactment of a state provision for the Roman Catholic clergy, and the raising of the qualification of the Irish franchise from forty shillings to ten pounds. The Bill passed the Commons by a majority of twenty seven. It was rejected by the Lords by a majority of forty-eight. On the 25th of April the duke of York, on presenting a petition from the Dean and Canons of Windsor, made a speech which produced an enormous sensation throughout the country, and especially from his concluding words:—“My own opinions, my lords, are well known. They have been carefully formed. I cannot change them. I shall continue to act conformably to them, to whatever obloquy I may be exposed, in whatever circumstances and in whatever situation I may be placed. So help me God!” The Relief Bill had been read a second time in the House of Commons four days before this memorable declaration by the Prince of the Blood next the throne,—the heir presumptive; but it had no doubt a great influence in producing the large majority in the House of Lords against the bill. Lord Eldon writes:—“If the duke of York’s speech was imprudent, it has, nevertheless, on account of its firmness and boldness, placed him on the pinnacle of popularity.”* The duke became the Protestant hero; his speech was printed in letters of gold, and zealous Protestants interpreted the words “in whatever circumstances I may be placed,” as an assurance that whatever might be the dangers of the country, whatever might be the risk of a rebellion in Ireland, probably of a disruption of the Union, the duke of York, if he came to the throne, would interpret the Coronation Oath as his father had interpreted it. The duke, by the frankness of his character, his attention to the interests of the army, and his popular demeanour, had many friends and admirers, who, nevertheless, privately thought, as the Lord Chancellor privately wrote:—“It is to be regretted that in his highly important and lofty situation he spends so many days with blacklegs, and so many nights at cards.”† In the session of 1826 the question of Catholic Emancipation was not agitated in Parliament.

On the 1st of January, 1827, the death of the duke of York was momentarily expected. The duke died on the 5th. The Lord Chancellor mourned deeply over the loss of the Prince, chiefly because he had great influence with the King, and in correspondence with his Majesty upon political questions, and in his recommendation of proper persons to be continued or appointed ministers, was much governed in his judgment, by what had been, and what he thought would be, the conduct of each person as to the Catholic

* Twiss, “Life of Lord Eldon,” vol. ii. p. 547.

† *Ibid.*, vol. ii. p. 547.