

CHAPTER IV.

Intense excitement during the prorogation.—Dangers from popular ignorance.—Incendiary fires and machine-breaking.—The Derby, Nottingham, and Bristol Riots.—Destruction of property at Bristol.—The Cholera approaching.—Cowardly alarmists.—Central Board of Health formed.—Parliament.—New Reform Bill passed by the Commons.—The Bill in the Lords, read a second time.—Political Unions.—The Lords' Committee, and the majority against Ministers.—The King refuses to create Peers.—The Ministry resign.—The Duke of Wellington attempts to form a Government.—The negotiations fail.—The Reform Ministry returns to power.—The King's consent to a creation of Peers given, but not exercised.—Final passing of the Reform Bill.

It is impossible to look back at the interval between the prorogation of Parliament on the 20th of October, 1831, and the conclusion of the labours of the last unreformed Parliament on the 16th of August, 1832, without a sense of relief in feeling that the country had passed without permanent damage through a crisis of unexampled danger, aggravated by a special visitation of Providence which many persons regarded as a judgment. The times were truly alarming. Nevertheless, during the great political conflict of seven months,—during the terrific outbreak of a knot of miscreants at Bristol, the occasional violence of the mob in London, the partial outrages of the peasantry of the southern counties, the terrors of a new and frightful disease for which no medical authority could prescribe a satisfactory treatment and which no public regulation could arrest—the political excitement was so great and universal, that, like combatants on a field of battle, the energy of the hour was sufficient to repress, whether amongst reformers or anti-reformers, any sentiment of fear that would have amounted to a panic. The nation, whether ranged on one side or the other, had never been so much in earnest since the days of the Long Parliament. It is true that the popular cause could number its supporters by thousands, whilst those on the other side might be counted by hundreds. But the leaders of the hundreds believed that they had everything to lose, and they not only fought with desperation themselves, but were cheered on by a most zealous following, who sincerely dreaded that the end of all government and the destruction of all property were close at hand. There were everywhere wrong-headed men in popular assemblies ranting about the unequal distribution of wealth; pretended teachers of political econ-

omy proclaiming the tyranny of Capital, and showing how easily a change might be made by which the labourers, without any intervention, might till the fields and work the looms. Some more modestly proposed that at the death of any member of the community his widow and children should have no exclusive claim; and that all his property should be divided amongst every member of society of adult age. The absurdities that hung around every scheme for the "division of property" neutralized their possible effect upon the great body of mechanics, who were not without some means of instruction that had been placed within their reach. There was another class more open to dangerous advice, and more incapable of weighing the probable consequences of lawless acts.

The labourers in husbandry had been often told that they had a claim upon a much higher rate of allowance from the poor's-rates, whilst at this very time the enormous pressure of those rates was driving the land even of whole parishes out of cultivation. The labourers believed, as they had been long encouraged by magistrates to believe, that the parish was bound to find work and pay wherever there was no profitable work to be done. The "Organization du Travail" of the French political philosophers in 1848 was not an original invention. In England we had not the National Workshop, but we had the Parish Gravel-pit. The gravel-pit lowered the wages of all agricultural labour, by confounding the distinctions between industry and idleness, between strength and weakness, between dexterity and clumsiness. All the moral qualifications that made one labourer more valuable than another were utterly broken down. And so, when the weekly pittance for unprofitable labour was doled out by the overseer of the poor,—when the farmer equalized the rate of wages by reducing his ploughman and carter almost to the level of the gravel diggers, and sent their wives to the overseers to make up by allowance the just payment of which they were defrauded—the peasantry took to burning ricks and breaking machines. The machine breaking was intelligible. Machines were held to be substitutes for manual labour, and thus to diminish profitable employment. But the rick burning: How could arson be a relief for hunger? The destruction of food raised the price of food. The excessive ignorance of the peasantry—the hateful isolation of their class from their employers—the neglect of the rich—made them apt listeners to the devilish promptings of some village Cade in the beer-shop. They had undoubted grievances; and we can scarcely wonder that paupers and poachers became rick-burners and machine breakers, in the

belief that those above them in rank were in a conspiracy to oppress them. The southern labourers knew nothing of the Reform Bill, and cared nothing. They thought only of the misery and neglect of their own unhappy lot. "Swing" was at work months before lord Grey came into power—"Swing" was their one reform leader. They took their own course of proclaiming their wretchedness and their ignorance, to the terror and shame of those who had kept them ignorant, and passed them by in the haughty indifference which regarded a peasant and a slave as something near akin—"slaves in ignorance, without having them chained and watched to prevent them hurting us."* The jail and the gallows seemed the only remedies when property became unsafe—

"The blind mole casts
Copp'd hills toward heaven, to tell, the earth is throng'd
By man's oppression, and the poor worm doth die for't." †

In the same state of ignorance, especially of political ignorance, as the southern peasantry, but not with equal provocation for their outrages, were the dregs of the people who broke open the city jail at Derby and set the prisoners at liberty, and those who burnt down Nottingham Castle. More entirely distinct, even than the agricultural labourers, from those who cherished any over-zealous aspirations for an amended representation of the people, were those who formed the mass of rioters at Bristol. There, an insignificant mob of the merest outcasts of a seaport long remarkable for a filthy, ignorant, and drunken horde of labourers of the lowest class,—many of the so-called workers habitual thieves,—held during a Saturday afternoon, and the whole of Sunday till daybreak on Monday, the lives and property of the inhabitants of one of the great cities of the empire at the mercy of their reckless brutality.

Sir Charles Wetherell has been amongst the most determined opponents of the Reform Bill during its passage through the House of Commons. He was Recorder of Bristol, and being a man of as much eccentricity as talent, he disregarded the warnings which were given him, that it might be more prudent to open the City Sessions on the 29th of October without any public entry. Recorders now-a-days go more modestly about their business; but sir Charles Wetherell determined to have a procession. A large number of influential inhabitants, whether as political supporters, or to maintain the dignity of his judicial function, formed a great cavalcade around the sheriff's carriage in which the Re-

* Dr Arnold, "Life," vol. i. p. 282.

† "Pericles," act i. scene 1.

order was to enter the city. He reached the Guildhall amidst the hisses of the populace, but with no injury from the few stones that were thrown at his carriage. There was some confusion in the hall during the opening of the Commission: but the preliminary business having been gone through, and the court adjourned till Monday morning, the Recorder retired, the people giving three cheers for the king. Sir Charles Wetherell took up his residence at the Mansion-house. This, during the whole of the afternoon, was surrounded by a mob, upon which constables occasionally rushed to seize some prominent offender, boy or man, who manifested his spirit by hurling some missile at an irritated guardian of the peace. The evening came on; the mob of blackguards became more daring; colliers came in from the neighbouring pits to join the fun, and the Mansion-house was attacked in a far more formidable manner than at the earlier hour in the afternoon; for the greater number of constables had left the rioters to their diversion, and had quietly gone away to seek refreshment. In the darkness of that autumnal night, the windows of the Chief Magistrate's residence were shattered, the doors were forced, and preparations were made to set the Mansion-house on fire. Sir Charles Wetherell during the tumult effected his retreat. The troops arrived, and arrested the conflagration. The soldiers were cheered as they trotted their horses backward and forward; the Commander of the district, Colonel Brereton, exhorted the mob to peace, but he did not effectually clear the streets. The ragged populace were triumphant for that Saturday. On the Sunday morning the consequences of a too humane lenity were signally exhibited. The troops had remained in the streets all night. On the Sunday morning, all being quiet, they retired to their quarters. The churches and chapels were filled as usual, without any apprehension of danger. A crowd was again collected before the Mansion-house. They burst into the hall, and reaching the upper rooms threw the furniture into the street. They penetrated to the wine-cellars, and carrying off the corporation stores of the choicest port, were soon lying upon pavements dead with drunkenness. The troops again came out, and the tumult, which might have been quelled without bloodshed if the respectable inhabitants had been sworn in on the Saturday as special constables, which they entreated to be, now became a wide-wasting career of rapine and destruction. There was a little firing of the 14th Light Dragoons upon the mob, who assaulted them with brick-bats. Still there was a belief that the worst had passed. The soldiers were then, for the most part, withdrawn from the city. The subsequent

proceedings of the mob sufficiently indicated the class of persons of which it was composed. They beat in the doors of the Bridewell with sledge hammers, set free the prisoners, and fired the building. Another party conducted the same operations with equal success at the New Borough Jail. A third manifested their zeal for Liberty by releasing all confined in the Gloucester County Jail. There were to be no more prisons in Bristol. From these three places of confinement the flames were rising at one and the same time. Fire now became the great manifestation of the savagery which some dreaded, or pretended to dread, as the natural result of the Reform agitation. The Mansion-house was set on fire. The demoniacs ran from room to room, kindling the flames, and when the roof fell in the progress of the conflagration had been so rapid that many were cut off from a retreat. The bishop's palace was reduced to ashes. The Custom-house followed. This building was near the Mansion-house in Queen's Square. Prisons and stately buildings were not the sole objects of this most careless outbreak. There was no rallying-cry in the streets, such as that of "No Popery" in 1780, and of "Church and King" in 1791. No voice was heard to exclaim "The Bill." It was all mad fury without any possible object except plunder and the indulgence of the grossest sensuality. At three o'clock in the morning there were forty-two dwelling-houses and warehouses burning. Two sides of Queen's Square, with the exception of two houses, were destroyed. The flames were lighting the ruffians who paraded the streets and, knocking at the doors of ale-houses and liquor-shops, were demanding "drink or blood." Their intoxication quelled the outrages even more effectually than the soldiery, who were now brought back into the city and hesitated not to fire and charge as they might have done far more advantageously had force been employed at the commencement of the outbreak. The outrages were at an end; not through this final act of tardy vigour by direction of the magistracy, but through the exhaustion of the handful of blackguards when the daylight showed the extent of the ruin which they had perpetrated. It was a lamentable circumstance, though one not without its lesson, that Colonel Brereton, having been brought to trial at a court-martial for neglect of duty, shot himself on the fourth day of the inquiry. The law avenged itself in January on the rioters. Bristol had for many a year to levy a rate of 10,000*l.* for compensation to the losers of property.

The Author of the "Popular History" ventures to obtrude some words which he wrote at this fearful season—not as containing any

very striking reasoning or exhortation, but as expressing his own feelings in common with those of the eminent men with whom he was then associated in the diffusion of knowledge: "In moments such as these, when we hear of a few hundreds of abandoned miscreants,—not working men in any sense of the title, but thieves and outcasts,—not knowing the first interests of working men because wanton destroyers of the capital by which labour must be supported,—when we hear of a small band of these most ignorant of mankind, in this enlightened country, in this intellectual age, holding the lives and possessions of a community of eighty thousand people,* even for a single hour at the mercy of their lawless passions, we could almost be tempted to think that real freedom should never be the birthright of such spurners of the laws of God and man. Cast your eyes for a moment upon such scenes of frantic riot, of desperate outrage, of grovelling drunkenness in the lowest stage of brutal abandonment; think of the terror of the peaceful inhabitants of such a place in those hours of midnight plunder and Sabbath riots; and picture to yourselves the wives and children of those once happy families clinging to their husbands and their parents to shield them from the destruction that was let loose in such unnatural and hideous shapes. When you have pondered upon these things, look round for the remedy. It is the diffusion of sound knowledge which leads to the cultivation of genuine religion. Unless you, each in your own circle, put down that ignorant spirit that would make this temple of our once industrious and peaceful island 'a den of thieves,' our liberties are at an end, because our security is at an end. There can be no liberty without security. Unless you, each in your own circle, endeavour to instruct the less informed in the knowledge of their rights in connexion with their duties, we shall all go backward in freedom, and therefore in national prosperity."†

Whilst Bristol was burning, the cholera had come to England. At the beginning of November, cases which had terminated fatally were reported from Sunderland. A true Christian,—one whose honour it was to lead the way in the establishment of a better system than prevailed in great public schools,—a liberal thinker who regarded "the Ministerial Reform Bill as a safe and necessary measure,"—is described as filled with the most anxious fears towards the end of 1831. Dr. Arnold was accustomed to

* The population of Bristol in 1831, as shown by the Population Returns published in 1832, was above 100,000.

† "The Rights of Industry: addressed to the Working Men of the United Kingdom. By the Author of 'The Results of Machinery.'" 1831.

preach a practical sermon to his school on Sundays. His biographer says,—“There are those among his pupils who can never forget the moment when, on that dark November afternoon, after the simple preface, stating in what sense worldly thoughts were or were not to be brought into that place, he at once began with that solemnity which marked his voice and manner when speaking of what deeply moved him:—‘I need not tell you that this is a marked time,—a time such as neither we, nor our fathers for many generations before us, have experienced; and to those who know what the past has been it is no doubt awful to think of the change which we are now about to encounter.’ But in him the sight of evil, and the endeavour to remove it, were hardly ever disjoined; and whilst everything which he felt partook of the despondency with which that sermon opens, everything which he did partakes of that cheerful activity with which the same sermon closes in urging the example of the Apostle’s ‘wise and manly conduct amidst the dangers of storm and shipwreck.’” * Very different from a counsellor of “wise and manly conduct” was a writer in a periodical work of the highest authority, published in November, 1831. To produce a terror amongst the community for a political object has been considered the especial function of a corrupt minister. To exaggerate real causes of alarm, in the endeavour to terrify the heads of families into a retreat from the political battle-field, was now the object of a factious journalist. He asked, what has been done to meet this fatal contagion? Anticipating the sudden paralyzation of commerce through every limb of our body politic,—with prodigious masses of artisans sunk at once into the depths of pauperism,—he asks whether the ministers have considered the necessity of guarding against the rapacity of monopolists as respects food and fuel; whether they had begun to think of public stores of bread? Have they considered what ought to be done for the supply of our markets, the regulations as to travellers, inns, and public conveyances of all kinds? “Have they even dreamed of the enormous burden of care that may within a week devolve upon them as a cabinet?” Unquestionably the ministers had not so dreamed. They knew perfectly well, as the author of this article most probably knew, that any interference with the laws of demand and supply would render a temporary disturbance of the ordinary intercourse between man and man, between town and country, ten thousand times more dangerous. The advice to private persons is as remarkable for the most extravagant selfishness, as the advice to the government is conspicuous for ignorance of the commonest

* “Life of Dr. Arnold,” vol. i. p. 272.

laws of political economy. Such families as mean to quit the town in which they reside ought to hold themselves prepared for immediate flight; the civil power should be prepared to take charge of the houses and property left behind; the opulent must expect to pay dearly for such protection, “but they have a right to expect it.” When the desire to quit the town becomes general, the more that go the better; but none must go unless they have the means of conveyance. There should be lazarettoes out of town to which families might if they pleased remove; care being taken that families of the same class be placed together. Encampments might be allowed under proper regulations. All these recommendations are for the runaways. Those who have the courage to remain in great cities, such as London, are not to be less scrupulous in manifesting the same selfish cowardice. To the utmost practicable extent disfurnish the house. Get rid of all superfluous domestics, and take care that it shall be impossible for those that are retained to communicate with any one out of doors. All letters and supplies of food must be received from the police messengers. They must be drawn up to a window of the first floor by means of a rope having a yard of chain and an iron pail attached to it. Mixed up with some semi-medical precautions, the article sets forth how in some cities this pest destroys here a sixth, there a fourth, and in a third town a half of the population. The plague of Marseilles, the plague of Messina, are examples of false confidence. To excite fear is a true mode of being safe. At Messina, where no precaution was adopted, “all at once the pest was found raging, and the populace rose in the frenzy of wrath and despair, and glutted themselves with murder.” * Marseilles was named without a word of “Marseilles’ good bishop.” There were many in England, lay and clerical, who remembered noble examples in their own country, of the duty of the rich to the poor in such a season of calamity, and they followed them in the spirit of Christian brotherhood. Perhaps the cholera awakened some of this feeling which had been too long slumbering.

The Ministers were solemnly warned by this writer of the responsibility they incurred, if they neglected those preparations which they alone could make. “The more rigorous the laws, and the more strictly they are enforced, the more certainly will the government be pronounced a merciful one.” The government did not neglect preparations; and did not shrink from wise precautions; but these were of a very different character than such as would have plunged the whole country into a confusion far more

* “Quarterly Review” No. xci. November, 1831, article viii.

dreadful than any visitation of the most pestilent disease. A Central Board of Health was formed, which, in a circular letter dated from the Council Office, recommended as to precautionary measures, that every large community should be divided into sections to form distinct Boards of Health, each to consist, if possible, of a resident clergyman, of a number of substantial householders, and of one medical man at least. Such boards were to appoint inspectors, each of whom was daily to visit a hundred houses, and upon their reports to endeavour to remedy such deficiencies as might be found to exist in the primary elements of public health, namely, food, clothing, bedding, ventilation, space, cleanliness, habits of temperance, prevention of panic. With regard to intercourse with suspected or infected persons or places, they strongly deprecated all measures of coercion for avoiding communication, which measures, when tried upon the Continent, had invariably been found productive of evil. Temporary cholera hospitals, detached, insulated, and thoroughly exposed to free and open air, were recommended to be established. Fortunately the good sense of the English people prevented a natural and wholesome alarm being degraded into panic. Religious trust and active benevolence were much better supports than the practical atheism which would have turned domestic servants out of doors, and have fled from the duties of social life to seek some imaginary hiding-place where the destroyer could not come. On the 6th of November the people knelt in their churches to utter a form of prayer, whose words would not be forgotten in their private orisons: "Lord! have pity on thy people, both here and abroad; withdraw thy heavy hand from those who are suffering under thy judgments, and turn away from us that grievous calamity, against which our only security is in thy compassion." The visitation of this calamity, although very fatal in some districts, was by no means extensive, compared with the aggregate number of the population. It had died out after the ensuing summer. There had not been during its continuance any marked interruption in the ordinary intercourse of life, and in the communications between place and place. The cholera left a real blessing behind it. The care of the public health from that time became a duty which no ministry could neglect, and which, after many experiments in the organization of a fit machinery, placed us in a condition not only to mitigate the effects of any pest in recurring years, but to elevate the whole body of the people in habits of cleanliness and comfort, and to prolong the duration of life in village and in city, in the pleasant fields and in the close factories.

In the midst of the cholera visitation, Parliament assembled on the 6th of December. In the King's Speech, first of all was recommended a careful consideration of the measures to be proposed for the Reform of Parliament; a speedy and satisfactory settlement of the question becoming daily of more pressing importance to the security of the State and to the contentment and welfare of his majesty's people. On the 12th of December, lord John Russell introduced the new Bill for Parliamentary Reform. It was in many respects really a new measure. The results of the Census of April had been obtained. The Census of 1821 had been found a fallacious guide as to what boroughs ought or ought not to be disfranchised. Taking the Census of 1831 as the basis of the population test, the boundaries of towns, which had been carefully surveyed, were included in the boroughs of which they had previously formed no part. A mixed test of the importance of boroughs was to be determined by the number of persons, the number of houses and the amount of assessed taxes paid. The disfranchised boroughs were still to be fifty-six, though the list of those to be placed in what was called Schedule A was materially varied from that formerly proposed. Schedule B, of boroughs to return only one member, was now reduced from forty-one to thirty, whilst others which had formerly been in this schedule were to be taken out, and to return two members. These variations from the former scheme were rendered necessary chiefly by the determination of the government not to diminish the number of the House of Commons, continuing the number as it then stood of six hundred and fifty-eight. Some of the most ardent Reformers thought that the Bill was impaired by these alterations. Sir Robert Peel taunted the ministers with having adopted amendments offered from his side of the House, but nevertheless expressed his determination of giving to the principle of this Bill a steady and firm opposition. On the second reading in the House of Commons there was a debate of two nights, terminating on the morning of Sunday the 18th, when the ministerial majority was a hundred and sixty-two. Parliament was now adjourned to the 17th of January.

To follow the progress of the Reform Bill through the House of Commons during the next two months would be impossible for us to attempt, even if the details of the conflict—in which the cleverness, pertinacity, and unfairness of the opposition were strikingly in contrast with the good-humoured steadiness of lord Althorp, and the impassability of lord John Russell—were less wearisome than they now would be when the interest of such a session of skirmishes is wholly lost in the result of the great bat-

tle. The Scotch and Irish bills were brought in on the 19th of January. On the 20th, the House went into Committee on the English Bill, which Committee was not ended till the 10th of March, the Report being considered on the 14th. On the 19th, the third reading of the Bill was moved. There was again a final debate, in which the combatants on each side were marshalled in as great numbers as on any previous occasion. In a House of five hundred and ninety-four members the Bill was passed by a majority of a hundred and sixteen.

On Monday the 26th of March the Reform Bill was carried up to the House of Lords, and was read a first time on that day. There was a general opinion that the Bill would not pass unscathed through the Upper House without a large creation of Peers. On the 7th of January Sydney Smith wrote to the countess Grey, that everybody expected a creation as a matter of course: "I am for forty, to make things safe in Committee."* It was impossible that lord Grey should not have felt the most extreme reluctance to resort to so bold and hazardous a measure. Somewhat later, Sydney Smith wrote, "If you wish to be happy three months hence, create Peers. If you wish to avoid an old age of sorrow and reproach, create Peers." Upon this letter of Sydney Smith, which was addressed to lady Grey, the following note is written by herself: "Many of lord Grey's friends, as represented by Mr. S. Smith, concurred in the opinions expressed in this letter, and the whole of the liberal press, the 'Times' in particular, urged the necessity of creating Peers, with alarming violence, and did not scruple to assert that even the life of an old and timid man should be sacrificed for the good of the country! And had the Bill been again thrown out, there is every probability that lord Grey would have run considerable risk. Fully aware of this fact, it was therefore an act of no inconsiderable courage to resist the entreaties of his friends and the opinion of the public; but the event justified the wisdom of his decision."† The "alarming violence" of the liberal press at this subsequent period was only the reflection of the more alarming violence which then prevailed throughout the country. In the concluding portion of his speech on moving the second reading, lord Grey said, "My lords, I admit that we have of late heard none of that outcry on the part of the people which first marked the progress of this Bill. In its place, a fearful silence at present prevails,—a silence which may, perhaps, lead some persons foolishly to imagine that the people are

* "Memoir," vol. ii. p. 334.

† "Life and Opinions of Charles, Earl Grey, by his son, the Hon. C. Grey," p. 16.

no longer looking at this question with the same feelings of interest. But I caution your lordships to beware how you form that opinion."* The previous strong manifestation of popular opinion; the formation of Political Unions throughout the country; the open talk of making force prevail if reason could not prevail, had produced some alarm in the Court. Communications, it is affirmed, had passed between the king's private secretary and lord Wharnccliffe, in which the royal wish had been expressed that the opposition to the Bill in the House of Lords should be less decided. Lord Grey was aware of some partial change of opinion. He said on this first debate on the second reading, "I must confess that I look with something like hope to that which appears to be a sort of approach to a favourable decision on the part of this House." Lord Wharnccliffe and lord Harrowby had announced to him that they intended to vote for the second reading, but with a full intention of striking from the Bill those parts which they deemed the most obnoxious. † The debate was carried on for four nights, lord Ellenborough having moved as an amendment that the Bill be read that day six months. At seven o'clock in the morning of the 14th of April, the Bill was read a second time by a majority of nine—a hundred and eighty-four contents; a hundred and seventy-five non-contents. There were votes for the Bill from some who had been absent from the division in 1831; some who had voted against it now abstained from voting; seventeen who had voted against the previous Bill now voted for this Bill. Jeffrey, who was present through the debate, described it as not very brilliant, but in its latter stage excessively interesting. Lyndhurst's, he said, was by far the cleverest and most dangerous speech against the government; lord Grey's reply, considering his age and the time, really astonishing,—he having spoken near an hour and a half after five o'clock, from the kindling dawn into full sunlight. Of the aspect of the House through that night the Lord-Advocate has left a striking picture. ‡ The benches of the Peers very full; their demeanour, on the whole, still and solemn; nearly three hundred members of the Commons clustered in the space around the throne, or standing in a row of three deep below the bar; the candles renewed before the blue beams of the day came across their red light, and blazing on after the sun came in at the high windows, producing a strange effect on the red draperies and dusky tapestries on the walls.

Parliament was adjourned for the Easter recess till the 7th of

* Hansard, vol. xii. col. 25.

† Roebuck's "Whig Ministry," vol. ii. p. 261.

‡ Cockburn—"Life of Lord Jeffrey," vol. i. p. 330.