

May. Although there might be some rejoicing at the majority for the second reading of the Bill, the popular conviction was, that it was not safe from mutilations which would have materially changed its character. For three weeks there was incessant agitation, far more formidable than riot and window-breaking. Petitions from almost every populous place exhorted "King William, the father of his country," not to hesitate if a necessity should arise for creating Peers. The petition from Birmingham to the Lords implored them to pass the Reform Bill into a law unimpaired in any of its great parts and provisions. On the day appointed for the Parliament to meet, the Political Unions of Warwick, Worcester, and Stafford were assembled in Birmingham, at New Hall Hill. It was considered to be the largest meeting ever held in Great Britain. There was a solemnity in the enthusiasm of this vast body of people which may awake the memory of the fervid zeal of the old Puritans. One of the speakers, Mr. Salt, called upon the vast multitude to repeat, with head uncovered, and in the face of Heaven, the words which he should repeat—and every man bared his head, and slowly uttered word by word this comprehensive resolve—"With unbroken faith through every peril and privation we here devote ourselves and our children to our country's cause." On that afternoon the House of Lords went into Committee on the Reform Bill. The first great principle of the measure was the disfranchising of the boroughs. Lord Lyndhurst moved, that the first and second clauses of the Bill be postponed. These were the disfranchising clauses; and the motion was carried against ministers by a majority of thirty-five. Lord Grey, on that Monday night, moved that the Chairman of the Committee should report progress, and ask leave to sit again on Thursday. His motion was carried. The interval of two days preceded a week of intense excitement, such as the country had not witnessed in any previous stages of this contest,—such as had certainly not occurred in the memory of man,—perhaps had not occurred since the Revolution of 1688.

On the morning of the 8th of May the Cabinet, not without some apprehensions of the ultimate consequences of such a proceeding, resolved upon asking the king to give his sanction to a large creation of Peers. Lord Brougham has recorded his doubts as to this step in the following words:—"I had a strong feeling of the necessity of the case, in the very peculiar circumstances we were placed in; but such was my deep sense of the dreadful consequences of the act, that I much question whether I should not have preferred running the risk of confusion that attended the loss

of the Bill as it then stood, rather than expose the Constitution to so imminent a hazard of subversion."* The king without any hesitation refused his assent to the proposition. "His Majesty's resolution had already been shaken by the threatening aspect of affairs, and by the apprehensions of his family and Court, and he not unnaturally shrank from so startling an exercise of his prerogative."† The resignation of the ministers was at once tendered to the sovereign, and the next day was formally accepted by letter. The details of this audience have not yet escaped into the materials for history which are found in private memoirs. Let us stray a moment from the dull highway of politics into the pleasanter by-path of a private interview between lord Althorp and the Lord Advocate of Scotland. "I went," writes Jeffrey on the 9th, "to Althorp at ten o'clock, and had a characteristic scene with that most honest, frank, true, and stout-hearted of all God's creatures. He had not come down stairs, and I was led up to his dressing-room, where I found him sitting on a stool, in a dark duffle dressing-gown, with his arms (very rough and hairy), bare above the elbows, and his beard half shaved, and half staring through the lather, with a desperate razor in one hand and a great soap-brush in the other. He gave me the loose finger of the brush hand, and with the usual twinkle of his bright eye and radiant smile, he said, 'You need not be anxious about your Scotch Bill for to-night, for I have the pleasure to tell you, we are no longer his Majesty's ministers.'" Lord Althorp's parting exhortation to the Lord Advocate was, "Do what you can to keep peace, and with your last official breath exhort and conjure the lovers of liberty to be lovers of order and tolerance." On the evening of the 9th, lord Grey announced to the Lords, and lord Althorp to the Commons, the resignation of ministers. On the 10th lord Ebrington moved, that the House should address the King, expressing their deep regret at the change which had taken place in the Councils of his Majesty, and to implore him "to call to his Councils such persons only as will carry into effect, unimpaired in all its essential provisions, that Bill for reforming the representation of the people which has recently passed this House." The motion was carried by a majority of eighty—ayes 288; noes, 208.

For one week the nation was left to its conjectures, to its fears, to its anger, at the position of the government. The functions, indeed, of a government were suspended. The Whig Cabinet had gone out without leaving one holder of a subordinate office, who

* "British Constitution," 1861, p. 270.

† May—"Constitutional History," p. 119.

would consent to join the government which the duke of Wellington had received authority from his sovereign to form. But though the nation was in suspense, that week was not a time of inactivity. In every populous place there were public meetings; and there was scarcely a town or city where resolutions were not entered into that petitions should be presented to the House of Commons, praying that no supplies should be granted till the Bill was passed unimpaired. Mr. John Wood,—whose political character was distinguished through many years of public service for his temperate support of liberal principles,—on presenting a petition from Manchester, signed in the space of three hours by twenty-five thousand persons, stated that the whole of the north of England, as a deputation which brought the petition informed him, was in a state of indignation which it was impossible to describe. It was his firm conviction that if a boroughmongering faction should prevail, the people would themselves take the most effectual mode of stopping the supplies, by telling the tax-gatherers to call again when the Reform Bill was passed. The dangerous scene coming on which Mr. Macaulay had dreaded when the first Reform Bill was rejected by the House of Lords: "I do not predict, I do not expect, open armed insurrection. What I apprehend is this,—that the people may engage in a silent but extensive and persevering war against the law. I fear that we may, before long, see the tribunals defied, the tax-gatherer resisted, public credit shaken, property insecure, the whole frame of society hastening to dissolution."* All these possible consequences presented a greater danger than the threats of some Political Unions that they would march to London and bivouac in the Squares; more fearful than the protestations of the Birmingham Union that two hundred thousand men should go forth from their shops and forges to encamp on Hampstead Heath, and there become the arbiters of the nation's destiny. Much of this was wild talk, and equally wild were the speculations that the duke of Wellington had resolved to put an end to such popular demonstrations by the power of the sword. A debate ensued upon the presentation of the Manchester petition, in which violent expressions were employed, touching "a fighting duke and a military government,"—of a people not to be diverted from their purpose by "swords and bayonets." It was stated that the duke of Wellington had stood pledged since the 9th to quiet the country in ten days. The Scots Greys, quartered at Birmingham, had been employed on the Sunday in grinding their swords, as was afterwards told the world in the Autobiography of a trooper

* "Speeches of T. B. Macaulay, corrected by himself," p. 59.

who held some strong political opinions in common with other members of his corps, and was punished, as many averred with some appearance of truth, for the too free expression of those opinions.* The duke of Wellington had other business in hand far more pressing, and with far more promise of success, than an attempt to govern England by the sword. He set out with confidence upon a royal commission to endeavour to give the necessary cohesion to the variously shaped atoms whose parliamentary union had thrown out the Reform Bill. Out of the conglomeration of these, a road was to be formed over which the state carriage might travel in safety,—not a macadamized road, but one constructed of round and square, smooth and rough materials, thrown together in a heap, to become serviceable when the people had sustained many accidents with fortitude, had ceased to be impatient of unavoidable obstruction, and were reconciled to what they deemed tyrannous. Of the failure of this plan the duke of Wellington gave a narrative to the House of Lords on the 17th of May. His majesty, when he was left entirely alone by his ministers, had sent for Lord Lyndhurst, "to inquire if, in his opinion, there were any means, and if so, what means of forming a government for his majesty, on the principle of carrying an extensive Reform in the representation of the people."† Lord Lyndhurst communicated with the duke of Wellington, and the duke found that a large number of his friends were not unwilling to give their support to a government formed upon such a principle, and especially to resist the advice which had been given to the king by his retiring ministers. His majesty thought an extensive measure of Reform should be carried. He, the duke, was always of opinion that Reform was unnecessary, and would prove most injurious. Nevertheless, he went about his task without any object of personal ambition. No part of the Bill before Parliament was safe, but undoubtedly a part of the Bill would be less injurious than the whole Bill. The duke very clearly pointed to a sufficient cause for his failure,—he had differed with some right honourable friends with whom he had been for many years in habits of cordial union. Sir Robert Peel, the next night in the House of Commons made the whole course of the negotiation perfectly intelligible. Lord Lyndhurst had conferred with him, although no communication was then made by the express command of his majesty—and had asked whether he, sir Robert Peel, would enter into the king's service at this crisis—whether he would accept that office which in political life is supposed to be the

* "Autobiography of a Working Man" (Somerville).

† Hansard, vol. xii. col. 993.

highest office of ambition, on the clear understanding that his majesty's past declarations with regard to Reform should be fulfilled. "I answered," said sir Robert, "under the influence of feelings which no reasoning could abate, that it would not be for my honour, or the advantage of the country, that I should accept office on the condition of introducing an extensive measure of Reform."* The different courses taken by the duke of Wellington and sir Robert Peel were characteristic of the two men. The first impulse, of the duke was to obey the wishes of his sovereign, not caring for a sacrifice of consistency. Sir Robert Peel took a broader view than that of a dutiful obedience to the wishes of his sovereign. He saw very clearly that no compromise of the principle of Reform would now satisfy the expectations of the people. He had made a sacrifice of his consistency on a previous great occasion. He would now maintain it, and let others carry the measure which he held to be dangerous. These personal questions are, to a certain extent, of a temporary nature. More important and permanent are the Constitutional questions which became prominent in this ministerial crisis. In the debate of the 17th the duke of Wellington said, with reference to the proposed creation of peers:—"I ask, my lords, is there any one blind enough not to see that if a minister can with impunity advise his sovereign to such an unconstitutional exercise of his prerogative, as to thereby decide all questions in this house, there is absolutely an end to the power and objects of deliberation in this House, and an end to all just and proper means of decision?" In answer to this question lord Grey said: "And I ask, what would be the consequences if we were to suppose that such a prerogative did not exist, or could not be constitutionally exercised? The Commons have a control over the power of the Crown by the privilege, in extreme cases, of refusing the supplies; and the Crown has, by means of its power to dissolve the House of Commons, a control upon any violent and rash proceedings on the part of the Commons; but if a majority of this House is to have the power, whenever they please, of opposing the declared and decided wishes both of the Crown and the people, without any means of modifying that power, then this country is placed entirely under the influence of an uncontrollable oligarchy."†

On the 15th of May it was announced in both Houses that Ministers had resumed their communication with his majesty. As the news went through the land the people everywhere settled down, in patience to abide the result. On the 18th lord Grey declared in the House of Lords that he now entertained a confident expecta-

* Hansard, vol. xii. col. 1074.

† *Ibid.*, col. 1006.

tion of being able to carry the Reform Bill unimpaired and immediately. Upon what grounds did this confidence rest? Lord Grey and lord Brougham had an audience of the King at Windsor, on the 17th. The King, it is stated, was alarmed, and manifested not only emotion, but displeasure. He kept the two peers standing, contrary to usage during their audience. He retained his private secretary, sir Herbert Taylor, in the room, during the whole time. Lord Grey and lord Brougham declined to return to office unless the King gave a promise to the necessary creation of Peers. The promise was most reluctantly given. Lord Brougham requested permission to have it in writing. The words of this document were as follows: "The King grants permission to earl Grey, and to his chancellor, lord Brougham, to create such a number of Peers as will be sufficient to insure the passing of the Reform Bill—first calling up peers' eldest sons. (Signed) William R., Windsor, May 17, 1832."* The power of creation was never called into exercise. The King, through sir Herbert Taylor, employed his personal influence with the opposition Peers to induce them to desist from further attempts to arrest the course of the Reform Bill. It has been stated that his private secretary—a man of remarkable sagacity and discretion—had communicated to some of the more vehement of the Peers a narrative of what had passed at the interview at Windsor, and had thereby incurred a tremendous responsibility. There was no personal danger in his writing a circular letter to the anti-Reform Peers in general, stating "that all difficulties to the arrangements in progress will be obviated by a declaration in the House to-night from a sufficient number of Peers, that, in consequence of the present state of affairs, they have come to the resolution of dropping their further opposition to the Reform Bill, so that it may pass without delay, and as nearly as possible in its present shape." The pressure of the royal will upon the Peers was unconstitutional. "This interference of the King with the independent deliberations of the House of Lords was in truth a more unconstitutional act than a creation of Peers."† But it overcame the difficulties of an alarming crisis. It saved the necessity of what was popularly called "swamping the House of Lords;" it averted the manifold dangers of a continued resistance to the wishes of the people; it removed a great embarrassment from the Cabinet,—for unquestionably the prime minister, the lord chancellor, and others, would have hesitated to use at all, certainly to use to their full ex-

* Roebuck's "History of the Whig Ministry," vol. ii. p. 331. Mr. Roebuck states that the document is missing from the papers of Lord Brougham, but that it was seen by many persons at the time.

† May, vol. i. p. 120.

tent, the powers which were granted to them. The advice tendered by sir Herbert Taylor was at once adopted. The duke of Wellington withdrew after his explanation on the 17th, and did not return to the House of Lords till the night after the passing of the Reform Bill. His wise and patriotic example was followed by a sufficient number of Peers to afford a decided majority for the ministers. On the 21st of May the discussion of the Bill was resumed. The duke of Newcastle, after several of the clauses had been passed, said, with bitter irony, that he would recommend to the Committee to vote all the details of the Bill at once, and send it up to a third reading. The business in Committee was finished on the last day of May. On the 4th of June the Bill was passed by a majority of eighty-four. The Commons next day agreed to the unimportant amendments proposed by the Lords, and on the 7th of June the English Reform Bill received the royal assent. The Reform Act for Scotland and the Reform Act for Ireland were also quickly passed—the Scotch Bill on the 13th of July; the Irish on the 18th. After the experience of thirty years this measure has been described by one perfectly well acquainted with the theory and practice of Parliament, as “a measure at once bold, comprehensive, moderate and constitutional; popular but not democratic, it extended liberty without hazarding revolution. . . . That it was theoretically complete, and left nothing for future statesmen to effect, its authors never affirmed; but it was a masterly settlement of a perilous question.”*

* May, “Constitutional History,” p. 357.

CHAPTER V.

Dissolution of Parliament.—Proceedings for Elections under the Reform Act.—Effect of Changes in the system of Representation.—Condition of the Nomination Boroughs.—Electoral changes in close Corporations.—The new Representation.—Metropolitan Boroughs.—Manufacturing Towns.—Scotland.—Ireland.—Approaching meeting of the Reformed Parliament.—Fears of Anti-Reformers.—Extension of Popular Literature during the Crisis.

PARLIAMENT, having been prorogued on the 16th of August, was dissolved by proclamation on the 3rd of December. A new parliament was then summoned. During the autumn and early winter the entire population had been engaged in preparing for that reconstruction of the entire framework of the representative system with which, according to some, a new and more glorious temple of liberty should be built up. According to others, this disoriented and dangerous scaffolding of modern experiment would perish in that whirlwind of anarchy which was soon to sweep over the land. The preparations for a general election were altogether so new,—so entirely different from the rough and ready license long associated with the exercise of the suffrage—that many in England began to think with regret of the good old times when the oath at the election-booth, amidst the bluster of counsel and the cheers or hisses of the mob, was the sole test of the freeholder's or occupier's right to vote. What formalities were now to be gone through. On the 20th of June there was affixed on the door of every church and chapel a notice, requiring all persons who might be entitled to vote for Knights of the Shire in respect of property situate in that parish or township, to send the particulars of their claims to the overseers. On the claims thus made the overseers were to prepare a list, and publish it in the same manner before the last day of July. A similar process, with some slight variation, was to be pursued in boroughs. The overseers were to prepare the list, and parties who had been omitted were to demand the insertion of their names. But now arises a second process which, whether in village or in town, is for a fortnight to be a perpetual source of discussion and dispute, at every market dinner-table and in every club-room. Objectors to the names in the lists are to send their objections to certain authorities. The cavillings are hushed for awhile. The