

porary suspension of the Corn-Law, should do so in terms which would show our decided intention to uphold the principle of protection in some way or other."

The discussions in the Cabinet continued till the 2nd of December, when sir Robert Peel brought before his colleagues a specific measure for the proposal of a new law which would be "founded upon the principle of the present law, while it continues in operation, but will in the course of that operation ensure the ultimate and not remote extinction of protective duties." He believed that some such measure as he had suggested might receive the assent of all his colleagues. Lord Stanley and the duke of Buccleugh, however, each signified his inability to support a measure involving the ultimate repeal of the Corn-Laws. Sir Robert Peel, thinking that the public interest would be very injuriously affected by the failure of an attempt made by a government to adjust the question of Corn-Laws, repaired to Osborne on the 5th of December, and humbly solicited the Queen to relieve him from duties which he could no longer discharge with advantage to her Majesty's service. The Queen then informed sir Robert Peel that it was her intention to propose to lord John Russell to undertake the formation of a government. In a letter to the Queen, written after the audience, sir Robert Peel stated that if the opinions of his colleagues had been in concurrence with his own, he had been fully prepared to take the responsibility of suspending the Corn-Laws, and of entering upon a comprehensive review of restrictions on the import of foreign grain and other articles of food, with a view to their gradual diminution and ultimate removal. With reference to the proposed new administration he adds—"Sir Robert Peel is prepared to support, in a private capacity, measures which may be in general conformity with those which he advised as a minister."

Lord John Russell was at Edinburgh when a summons reached him to attend the Queen. He went to her Majesty with the conviction that he could not accept the great trust now offered to him. He felt that his party being in a large minority in the Commons, he could not properly undertake the formation of a government. But the offer of sir Robert Peel, to give his assistance in a private capacity towards the settlement of the Corn-Law question, determined lord John Russell to depart from this resolution. There was a week of negotiation as to the specific nature of this limited offer. Sir Robert Peel was convinced that previous concert, or a previous pledge on his part, to support a particular measure of adjustment would be distasteful to the House of Commons, and

embarrassing to all parties. With this view lord John Russell expressed his concurrence; but required at the same time that sir Robert Peel should give assurances, that would have amounted substantially to a pledge, that he would support the immediate and total repeal of the Corn-Laws. The ex-minister did not feel it to be consistent with his duty to enter upon the consideration of this important question in Parliament, being fettered by a previous engagement of the nature of that required from him. Nevertheless lord John Russell, in the afternoon of the 18th of December, stated to her Majesty at Windsor Castle that he was ready to undertake the formation of a government. In consequence sir Robert Peel was invited by her Majesty to a parting interview on his relinquishment of office. On entering the room at Windsor, on the 20th of December, her Majesty said to him very graciously, "So far from taking leave of you, sir Robert, I must require you to withdraw your resignation, and to remain in my service." Lord John Russell had written to the Queen on the morning of that day that he had found it impossible to form an administration. He had informed the Queen that he had had solely in view the settlement of the question of Corn-Laws; he admitted that sir Robert Peel had been willing, from the commencement to the end, to diminish the difficulties of a new government in attempting that settlement, although sir Robert Peel could not of course rely upon the support of his political friends. It was therefore necessary, he wrote, that all those who were prominent in the political party to which lord John Russell was attached, should give their zealous aid, and act in concert in the new administration. "Lord John Russell had in one instance been unable to obtain this concert, and he must now consider that task as hopeless which has been from the beginning hazardous." The one instance was that of lord Grey; he had objected to one proposed appointment, and lord John Russell had been unwilling to admit the force of the objection. We can easily understand how the self-asserting inheritor of a great name should have failed in substantiating his objection to a statesman with the reputation of lord Palmerston. Lord John Russell having absolutely relinquished the formation of a government, sir Robert Peel at once decided, if such were her Majesty's pleasure, on the resumption of his office. He wished, he said, to be able to announce to his late colleagues that he had not hesitated to re-accept the appointment of First Minister. The Cabinet met at Downing-street in the evening of the 20th, and he told them that, whether supported or not, he was firmly resolved to meet parliament as her Majesty's minister, and to propose such measures as the public

exigencies required. Lord Stanley declared that he must persevere in resigning. He thought the Corn-Laws ought to be adhered to, and might have been maintained. The duke of Buccleugh would not at once decide upon resigning. The other members of the Cabinet declared their determination to support sir Robert Peel in the course he had announced to them. The duke of Wellington was the man to admire courage whether civil or military. He told the House of Lords, on the ministerial explanations, "I applauded the conduct of my right honourable friend; I was delighted with it. It was exactly the course which I should have followed myself under similar circumstances, and I therefore determined to stand by him." The new Cabinet enlisted an able coadjutor in lord Dalhousie; and Mr. Gladstone, who had retired from office some time previous, succeeded lord Stanley as Secretary of State for the Colonial Department. Lord Wharnccliffe, the President of the Council, had died, during this great crisis, on the 19th of December.

The biographer of sir Robert Peel has described his hesitation in the session of 1845, to apply the strict principles of commercial freedom to the trade in corn, as the "touching perplexity of a sincere and conscientious mind, carried forward in the direction of its own inclination by a great flood of public opinion and passion, and struggling painfully against its adversaries, its friends, and itself."* The "perplexity" was now over. The struggle of the "sincere and conscientious mind" against itself was passed. Six days after sir Robert Peel had declared to the Cabinet that he was again her Majesty's minister, he wrote to the princess Lieven at Paris a short note, in which he casts off the reserve of the statesman to give unrestrained expression to his natural feelings: "However unexpected is the turn which affairs have taken, it is for the best. I resume power with greater means of rendering public service than I should have had if I had not relinquished it. But it is a strange dream."†

It was the 22nd of January, 1846, when the Queen opened the Parliament in person. The Royal Speech necessarily alluded to the failure of the potato crops in Ireland, and to the means that had been adopted for alleviating the sufferings caused by this calamity. Her Majesty had had great satisfaction in giving her consent to the measures for the repeal of prohibitory, and the relaxation of protective, duties. The prosperous state of the reve-

* Guizot—"Memoirs of Sir Robert Peel," p. 250.

† "Memoirs by Sir Robert Peel," p. 251.

nue, the increased demand for labour, and the general improvement which had taken place in the internal condition of the country, were strong testimonies in favour of the course that had been pursued: "I recommend you," said the Queen, "to take into your early consideration, whether the principles on which you have acted may not with advantage be yet more extensively applied, and whether it may not be in your power, after a careful review of the existing duties upon many articles, the produce or manufacture of other countries, to make such further reductions and remissions as may tend to insure the continuance of the great benefits to which I have adverted." There might have been some doubt as to the interpretation of the words "further reductions and remissions;" but the ministerial explanations of sir Robert Peel and of lord John Russell, in which the details of the negotiations for the formation of a government were fully stated, left no doubt whatever that a free trade in corn, however gradually to be accomplished, was now the great object of sir Robert Peel's administration. After the mover and seconder of the Addresses in the House of Commons had delivered their speeches, sir Robert Peel immediately rose. Having gone through the explanatory details expected from the head of the government after a ministerial crisis, he did not wait for the attacks of those adversaries who were once his submissive friends. He boldly proclaimed his determination to stand free from the trammels of party. "Sir, believe me, to conduct the government of this country is a most arduous duty; I may say it without irreverence, that these ancient institutions, like our physical frames, are 'fearfully and wonderfully made.' It is no easy task to ensure the united action of an ancient monarchy, a proud aristocracy, and a reformed constituency. I have done everything I could do,—and have thought it consistent with true conservative policy,—to reconcile these three branches of the state. I have thought it consistent with true conservative policy to promote so much of happiness among the people that the voice of disaffection should be no longer heard, and that thoughts of the dissolution of our institutions should be forgotten in the midst of physical enjoyment. These were my attempts, and I thought them not inconsistent with true and enlarged conservative policy. These were my objects in accepting office—it is a burden too great for my physical, and far beyond my intellectual, structure; and to be relieved from it with perfect honour would be the greatest favour that could be conferred on me. But as a feeling of honour and a strong sense of duty require me to undertake those responsible functions, I declare, sir, that I am ready to incur these risks,

to bear these burdens, and to front all these honourable dangers. But, sir, I will not take the step with mutilated power and shackled authority. I will not stand at the helm during such tempestuous nights as I have seen, if the vessel be not allowed fairly to pursue the course which I think she ought to take. I will not, sir, undertake to direct the course of the vessel by the observations taken in 1842. I will reserve to myself the marking out of that course; and I must, for the public interest, claim for myself the unfettered power of judging of those measures which I conceive will be better for the country to propose. Sir, I do not wish to be the minister of England; but while I have the high honour of holding that office, I am determined to hold it by no servile tenure. I will only hold that office upon the condition of being unshackled by any other obligations than those of consulting the public interests, and of providing for the public safety.*

This speech was of course accepted as a declaration of war by all those who interpreted Conservative Policy as one almost exclusively directed to the upholding of class interests and class prejudices. Mr. Disraeli, in declaring his intention of adhering to the principles of protection which had sent him into that House, did not attempt to defend those principles, but confined himself, as he did for the greater part of the Session, to the bitterest attacks on the minister who was about to give them their final and irrevocable blow. Sir Robert Peel's conduct, he said, was that of the captain, who having received the command of a fleet from the sultan to attack Mehemet Ali, steered that fleet at once into the enemy's port. Sir Robert Peel, a great statesman, who was always marching after the events of his age! He was just as much a great statesman as he who got up behind a carriage was a great whip. There could be no mistake as to the intentions of the so-called Conservative Party, whether they spoke in the "wild and hurling words" of the brilliant orator, or in the bucolic accents of the lords of many acres. By the mouth of Mr. Miles they gave notice that the "strongest constitutional opposition would be given to the minister's plan, and that every impediment would be made use of to prevent its passing into law." The plan was not yet developed, but its scope and objects were pretty correctly anticipated.

On the 27th of January the avenues of the House of Commons were filled with eager crowds: the seats below the bar were thronged with listeners, amongst whom were prince Albert and the duke of Cambridge; the strangers' gallery was crammed to excess, whilst hundreds who had obtained tickets were unable to get

* Hansard, vol. lxxxiii, col. 94.

admission. His whole plan of financial and commercial policy was developed by sir Robert Peel in a speech of four hours. He said, in the onset, that he was not about to apply the principle of relaxation of protective duties to any one particular class: "I am not about to select that great interest connected with the agriculture of the country, and call upon the landowners to relinquish protection, unprepared at the same time to call upon other protected classes to relinquish protection also. In the confidence that the principle for which I contend is a just and a wise one, I ask all protected interests to make the sacrifice, if it be a sacrifice, which the application of that principle will render necessary."* The duties on tallow and timber were to be extensively reduced; these were the only raw materials still subject to duty. The duties on foreign manufactured goods were to be abolished or reduced. As the silk manufacture had increased in the ratio of the removal of duties, there was now to be a further reduction. On cotton and woollen fabrics duties were to be removed or lessened by one-half. Articles of food were relieved from taxation either wholly or partially. The differential duties on free-labour sugar were abated about fifty per cent. Animal food and vegetables were admitted duty free. One-half of the existing duties on butter, cheese, hops, and cured fish were removed. Live animals were no longer to be subject to any import duty. Here was a tariff which a few years before would have shaken the isle from its propriety; but what a clamour would have gone through the land, echoed at every county meeting and every market table, if a minister had proposed, as sir Robert Peel now proposed, to admit buck-wheat and Indian corn duty free; to submit colonial grain to a merely nominal duty; and altogether to remove protection from every other species of grain at the end of three years. In the interval the duties on grain were to be as follows. When wheat was under 48s. per quarter the duty was to be 10s.; at every rise of a shilling per quarter in the market price the duty was to be a shilling lower; till wheat should be at 54s. and the duty at 4s.; after which the duty should not further change. The existing price of wheat being 54s. the duty would be at once reduced from 16s. to 4s. Some relief of the burthens upon agriculture, involved in an alteration of the law of settlement, a consolidation of highway boards, the removal of the cost of prisoners from the county rates—these and other minor concessions, which were real benefits, were received only with ridicule, in the face of the startling fact that the staff of protection, which had so long been leant upon, would be utterly broken and

* Hansard, vol. lxxxiii, col. 241.

cast away. The philosophical reasoners knew well that the hale man would then be able to walk without his crutch; but the country party were not greatly addicted to philosophical politics. Sir Robert Peel concluded the speech, in which he offered, on the part of the government, these proposals "for the ultimate adjustment of this question by affirming that there had been a great change in the opinion of the great mass of the community with respect to the Corn-Laws." He recommended his plan as a whole to their calm and dispassionate consideration, with no other feeling or interest in its ultimate issue than that it might, to use the words of her Majesty's speech, conduce to promote "friendly feelings between different classes of my subjects, to provide additional security for the continuance of peace, and to maintain contentment and happiness at home, by increasing the comfort and bettering the condition of the great body of my people."

On the 9th of February a debate was begun, which continued twelve nights, on the motion that the Speaker should leave the chair to go into Committee on the Customs and Corn Importation Act. Mr. Miles had proposed as an amendment, "that this House will, upon this day six months, resolve itself into the said Committee." On the fifth night of the discussion, the 16th of February, sir Robert Peel, with even more than his ordinary debating ability, reviewed every species of objection, whether from agriculturists, or shipowners, or manufacturers, that had been raised to the various details of his measure. Towards the conclusion of his speech he warmed into an eloquence such as had been rarely equalled since the days of the great orators of former generations.

"This night is to decide between the policy of continued relaxation of restriction, or the return to restraint and prohibition. This night you will select the motto which is to indicate the commercial policy of England. Shall it be 'advance' or 'recede'? Which is the fitter motto for this great empire? Survey our position; consider the advantage which God and nature have given us, and the destiny for which we are intended. We stand on the confines of Western Europe, the chief connecting link between the old world and the new. The discoveries of science, the improvement of navigation, have brought us within ten days of St. Petersburg, and will soon bring us within ten days of New York. We have an extent of coast greater in proportion to our population and the area of our land than any other great nation, securing to us maritime strength and superiority. Iron and coal, the sinews of manufacture, give us advantages over every rival in the great competition of industry. Our capital far exceeds that which they can com-

mand. In ingenuity—in skill—in energy—we are inferior to none. Our national character, the free institutions under which we live, the liberty of thought and action, an unshackled press, spreading the knowledge of every discovery and of every advance in science—combine with our natural and physical advantages to place us at the head of those nations which profit by the free interchange of their products. And is this the country to shrink from competition? Is this the country to adopt a retrograde policy? Is this the country which can only flourish in this sickly artificial atmosphere of prohibition? Is this the country to stand shivering on the brink of exposure to the healthful breezes of competition?"*

Turning then from commercial freedom in manufactures to commercial freedom in agriculture, he asked if in some future season, when "the years of plenteousness shall have ended," and "the years of dearth may have come," would it be no satisfaction to you to reflect, that by your own act you have been relieved from the grievous responsibility of regulating the supply of food? "When you are again exhorting a suffering people to fortitude under their privations; when you are telling them, 'these are the chastenings of an all-wise and merciful Providence, sent for some inscrutable but just and beneficent purpose—it may be, to humble our pride, or to punish our unfaithfulness, or to impress us with a sense of our nothingness and dependence on His mercy;' when you are thus addressing your suffering fellow subjects, and encouraging them to bear without repining the dispensations of Providence, may God grant that by your decision of this night, you may have laid in store for yourselves the consolation of reflecting that such calamities are, in truth, the dispensations of Providence—that they have not been caused, they have not been aggravated, by the laws of man, restricting in the hour of scarcity the supply of food!"†

On the 27th of February the debate on Mr. Miles's amendment on the motion for going into Committee on the Customs and Corn Importation Act, was brought to a conclusion. During the twelve nights of debate, forty-eight members spoke in favour of Free Trade and fifty-five on the side of Protection. To attempt the briefest analysis of the general arguments for the removal of Protection, and of the anticipations of commercial and agricultural ruin if Protection were abolished—arguments now so perfectly understood, and fears now, so thoroughly exploded—would be as wearisome as useless. Upon a division the numbers were, for Mr. Miles's amendment, 240; against it, 337, being a majority for the

* Hansard, vol. lxxxiii. col. 1041.

† *Ibid.*, col. 1044.

government of 97. The House of Commons went into Committee on the 2nd of March. The various clauses of the proposed Bill were debated with the same earnestness for four nights; when the second reading was carried by a majority of 88. On the third reading there was a debate of three nights. On the 15th of May, at four in the morning, 327 members voted for the third reading; and for an amendment of the marquis of Granby, that the Bill be read that day six months, 229 voted, giving a majority for the third reading of 98. In the House of Lords the Bill was passed with less difficulty than might have been anticipated. The duke of Wellington on the 18th moved the first reading of the Corn Importation Bill, and on the 19th the duke of Buccleugh moved the first reading of the Customs Duties Bill. It is as unnecessary to follow the course of debate in the Lords as in the Commons. The second reading of the Corn Bill was carried by a majority of 47; 211 being for the second reading, against it 164. The second reading of the Customs Duties Bill was carried without a division. The various clauses of the Corn Bill having been debated in Committee, the Bill on the 19th of June was reported without amendments. On the 25th of June both Bills were read a third time and passed; to which on the 26th the royal assent was given by commission. By the Corn Importation Act, that scale of duties, as proposed by the government on the 27th January, was to continue until the 1st of February, 1849; after which day a duty upon grain of one shilling per quarter, and of fourpence-halfpenny per cwt. upon flour and meal, was to be levied, for purely statistical purposes. A revolution, scarcely second in importance to the Reform Bill, was thus accomplished. England entered on a new course of commercial policy; of whose beneficial results the experience of the succeeding sixteen years has left too strong an evidence to allow any but a few devotees of an obsolete creed to abide in "their temples dim."

During the progress through the House of Commons of the measures of commercial freedom, a Bill entitled, "For the Protection of Life in Ireland," which had passed in the House of Lords, was brought under discussion in the House of Commons. It was opposed with the utmost vehemence by the Protectionists, who in the rejection of the measure hailed the prospect of being revenged on sir Robert Peel; and by the majority of the Whigs, who, consistently adhering to their often declared principles upon coercion bills in Ireland, nevertheless saw in the defeat of the government the door opened for their return to power after it had been closed against them for five years. On the 21st of June sir Robert

Peel accurately calculated upon the double event—the passing of the Corn-Law Repeal Bill unmutated in the House of Lords, and the rejection of the Bill for the Protection of Life in Ireland by the House of Commons. He took a decision at once dignified and patriotic. He addressed a memorandum on the position of the government to the Cabinet, in which he suggested to the deliberate and dispassionate consideration of his colleagues, "to determine whether, after the passing of the Corn and Customs Bills, it would be for the interest of the Crown, of the country, and for the honour and character of the government, that they should remain in office." He said, with an honesty worthy of all imitation, "a government ought to have a *natural* support; a conservative government should be supported by a conservative party; support from the compassion of its enemies, or even from the personally friendly feelings of those who *ought* on public principle to oppose a government, is a hollow and not a creditable support. Depend upon it that we shall not pass the Irish Bill into a law." He was decidedly, he told them, of opinion "that we should not fall into the errors of the last Whig government—retain office after we have lost power, or advise a Dissolution with little prospect of securing a majority of members, honestly and cordially concurring with us on great political principles."* The memorandum being communicated to the other members of the government, there was not the slightest difference of opinion as to the course to be pursued.

There were six nights of debate upon the Irish Bill. On the 25th of June lord George Bentinck, who had for some time filled the office of the aristocratic leader of the Protectionists, expressed himself with a violence towards the Prime Minister that more than rivalled the attacks of his untitled coadjutor. Mr. Cobden answered lord George Bentinck: "I have to say, in contradiction to the noble lord, that if the right honourable baronet chooses to retire from office in consequence of this vote, he carries with him the esteem and gratitude of a larger number of the population of this empire than ever followed any minister that was ever hurled from power." After Mr. Cobden had spoken the division took place; for the second reading, 219; against it, 292; majority against the government, 73. On the 29th of June the resignation of ministers was announced by sir Robert Peel. He cast a retrospect over the reasons which had influenced his conduct, and the results which had been obtained. "The name," he said, "which ought to be associated with the success of those measures, is not the name of the noble lord, the organ of the party of which he

* "Memoirs by Sir Robert Peel," pp. 288, 297.

the leader, nor is it mine. The name which ought to be, and will be, associated with the success of these measures, is the name of one who, acting, as I believe, from pure and disinterested motives, has, with untiring energy, made appeals to our reason, and has enforced those appeals with an eloquence the more to be admired because it was unaffected and unadorned: it is the name of Richard Cobden." He concluded his speech with those emphatic words which have been inscribed upon the pedestal of more than one monumental tribute of a nation's gratitude:—"It may be that I shall leave a name sometimes remembered with expressions of good will in the abodes of those whose lot it is to labour and to earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow, when they shall recruit their exhausted strength with abundant and untaxed food, the sweeter because it is no longer leavened with a sense of injustice."

The House of Commons adjourned to the 3rd of July. On the 6th lord John Russell, as First Lord of Treasury, and the other members of the Administration were sworn into office.

From the 16th of July, when, after the change of government, the House of Commons met again for the dispatch of business, to the 28th of August, when parliament was prorogued by commission, the measures passed were various and important. The impending distress in Ireland occupied much of the attention of the Legislature. Two measures of permanent social interest became law. One enactment has worked a most material and salutary change in the power of the people to obtain cheap justice—the establishment of County Courts for the Recovery of Small Debts. The other, directed to important sanitary objects, which received the royal assent on the 26th of August, declares that "it is desirable for the health, comfort, and welfare of the inhabitants of towns and populous districts, to encourage the establishment therein of Public Baths and Washhouses, and open Bathing Places." To town councils and parish vestries is given the power to establish such public conveniences, the expenses of which, beyond the receipts, are to be paid as part of the poor's-rate.

On the 4th of July sir Robert Peel wrote to lord Hardinge, "there is nothing I would not have done to insure the carrying of the measures I had proposed this Session. I pique myself on never having proposed anything which I have not carried; but the moment their success was insured, and I had the satisfaction of seeing two drowsy Masters in Chancery mumble out at the table of the House of Commons that the Lords had passed the Corn and

Customs Bills I was satisfied. Two hours after this intelligence was brought we were ejected from power; and, by another coincidence as marvellous, on the day on which I had to announce in the House of Commons the dissolution of the Government, the news arrived that we had settled the Oregon question, and that our proposals had been accepted by the United States without the alteration of a word."*

The settlement of the Oregon question was announced to the House of Lords on the 29th by the earl of Aberdeen. He made a brief statement of what had occurred since the President of the United States, Mr. Polk, had sent his message to the Senate with a direct refusal of the repeated proposals of the British Government to submit the whole question to arbitration. When lord Aberdeen afterwards saw that the Senate and House of Representatives had adopted Resolutions of a conciliatory and friendly description, he at once put aside all idea of diplomatic etiquette, and sent over to the British minister the draft of a convention to be proposed for the acceptance of the United States' Government. The President having submitted this draft for the opinion of the Senate, that body, by a majority of thirty-eight votes to twelve, adopted a Resolution advising the President to accept the terms proposed. Mr. Buchanan, the American Secretary of State, accordingly informed our minister that the conditions offered were accepted, "without the addition or alteration of a single word."†

This settlement of the Oregon question relieved the British nation and the government from a long-continued cause of anxiety. In 1845 Mr. Polk, in his inaugural address, affirmed that it was his duty "to assert and maintain by all constitutional means, the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains. Our title to the country of the Oregon is clear and unquestionable; and already are our people preparing to perfect their title by occupying it with their wives and children."‡ The value of the Oregon territory was so little understood when the treaty of peace was concluded in 1783, that no provision whatever was made for its occupation. Forty years later the claims of the British government and that of the United States to this region had become so opposed, that lord Castlereagh said to Mr. Rush, the American minister, that by holding up a finger a war regarding Oregon might be produced between the two countries. During the foreign secretaryship of Mr. Canning the apprehension of hostilities became greater. In 1818 a convention had

* "Memoirs by Sir Robert Peel," p. 309.

† "Annual Register for 1845," p. 279.

‡ Hansard, vol. lxxxvii. col. 1038.