

pose the abolition of the veto means the abolition of revision in Committee; because the one without the other would be fruitless and useless. But if you abolish the veto, and abolish the power of dealing in Committee—if you abolish the power of dealing with a bill on the second or third reading, or in Committee—what is the use of the House of Lords at all? You would simply keep it as a high court of justice, or a sort of State prison for a number of able and eminent men. It is, moreover, perfectly clear that the House of Lords would infinitely prefer total abolition to an abolition of the veto such as I have described, because by abolition they would be able to enter the House of Commons, and many of them would be rather formidable candidates. By abolition of the veto you would simply keep them in a state of suspended animation, if, indeed, you could call it a state of animation at all; and in order to induce them to put themselves into this unpleasant condition of suspended existence, you would have to use means as violent as you would have to employ in order to procure their abolition.

Well, gentlemen, after this discussion—of course, brief and imperfect, but still not wholly inadequate—of the methods of pure abolition and the abolition of veto, you come to find yourselves face to face once more with the salient facts of the situation, which is, that you can only deal with the House of Lords by bill or by revolution. There is no third way at all. That seems to be a discouraging result to arrive at. But I would not have you lose heart so quickly. It will not come to a revolution in the case of the House of Lords. There are means of making the will of the country felt without any violence or unconstitutional methods such as I have described. In this country, whatever the difficulty may be, the good sense of the constituent

body is such that we usually arrive at an agreement without any of the cataclysms that rend other countries. But I do wish you to realise precisely in your minds what is the constitutional aspect of the case—firstly, in order that you may realise the enormous difficulty of the task that you are ready to approach; and secondly, for another reason that I will proceed to set forth. Gentlemen, it would be foolish for me to disguise the fact that some of our candid friends have been somewhat disappointed with the tardiness of the Government in taking action against the House of Lords. They have said, "Why, there was a conference at Leeds. It passed resolutions for the abolition of the veto. We sent them up to London, and we expected that the veto of the House of Lords would be ended in about a fortnight. Bless me, there is something wrong here." We seem to hear from the different organs of disappointed opinion, "The Government must be lukewarm. There must be something wrong." Well, gentlemen, I know that the Government are responsible for everything—responsible for cholera, for the crops, for the weather, and for anything else that happens to go wrong. But I think you will admit that, in this particular case, it was not one in which we could move, under all the circumstances of the case, in any violent hurry.

I think also that those political philosophers seemed to imagine that some of the Government, from being Peers, were rather too much attached to the House of which they were members. Now, I am attached to individuals of the House of Lords, as I am attached to individuals in the House of Commons; but I confess that I should be either below or above human nature if I were attached to the House of Lords as a body. If you think it an agreeable thing for the head of a Government which has a majority in the House



of Commons to sit on a bench in the other House with half-a-dozen empty benches behind him and nothing else—(A voice, "Fill them up.") I see the gentleman has aspirations toward the peerage himself. But I should want to know more about him before I took any step in that direction, because peers are apt to change their opinions when once they get their peerage. Well, gentlemen, if you think that is an agreeable position, you may be able to believe that I am attached to the House of Lords. If you think it is an agreeable position, with a House of Commons majority behind your back, to come as a suppliant to the House of Lords for every bill you want passed, then you may believe that I am attached to the House of Lords. If you think it is agreeable to hear the sounds of conflict in the only place that really possesses political power, and to be shut up in a sort of gilded dungeon with your bitterest political enemies, you may believe that I am attached to the House of Lords. Gentlemen, I confess that I feel no ground in my conscience for any such impeachment, and if you still have any lurking distrust of my wish to deal with the House of Lords in a drastic manner, I will at once remind you—I will at once forbid any wrong or indecent inference from the proverb I am going to parody—that it may not sometimes be a bad thing to set a peer to catch a peer.

Well, gentlemen, I fully acknowledge the responsibility that lay upon the Government. It was because that responsibility was so grave that we have been silent. I fully acknowledge the importance to be attached to the Leeds conference. I acknowledge the sincerity and earnestness with which its proceedings were conducted. But one swallow does not make a summer, and one conference in itself does not make the overwhelming mass of public opinion

which alone will enable you to deal effectively with the House of Lords. At any rate, it was not sufficient to justify action in the last days of the last session. I would ask you to remember two vital questions in connection with the present attitude of the Government to the House of Lords. In the first place, at the last general election, you gave the Government no mandate to deal with the House of Lords; and in the second place, even if you had, you did not give the Government a sufficient majority to deal with it. Therefore, gentlemen, in my opinion, we should not merely have been guilty of levity and want of forethought—we should have been culpable and criminal if, without a mandate and without sufficient majority, we had risked all the measures—and there were many of them, on the acknowledgement of Mr. Chamberlain himself—in which you and I set store, in order to cast them into a seething whirlpool of constitutional agitation. As leaders of the Liberal Party, we should, in my opinion, have merited, if we had followed any such course, not your applause and confidence, but your severest censure and severest condemnation. No, gentlemen, if you are going to proceed and to enter upon this great campaign, you must walk boldly but must walk warily. You will have to work with perseverance. You must not expect the most prompt and immediate results. You will not carry the House of Lords by storm or by rush. You will rather have to imitate that great captain, the Duke of Wellington, at Torres Vedras, who carefully entrenched his position before he made his effective and fatal attack. I confess, therefore, that I feel "my withers unwrung" by any censure as to our tardiness.

I know well that before we deal with this, the greatest of constitutional questions, if we wish to deal with it success-



fully, we must bring into play the greatest constitutional force we possess. What is that greatest constitutional force? In the first place it is the House of Commons. No lesser force than the House of Commons can confront the House of Lords. No lesser force than the House of Commons is competent to insist upon the position and privileges of the House of Commons. No lesser body than the House of Commons is able to lay down, in clear and unmistakable terms, that shifting in the balance of the Constitution, which has been produced by the great Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884. Well, it is quite clear that our first step, if we propose to deal with the House of Lords—and we do propose to deal with the House of Lords—is to bring the House of Commons into play.

And how are we to bring the House of Commons into action? The House of Commons, in my opinion, after a long consideration of this most difficult of subjects, can only proceed in the first place—as it has always proceeded in its contests with the House of Lords—by resolution. In regard to the powers of the House of Lords over finance, they were restricted once, twice, and thrice by resolutions of the House of Commons. As regard the powers of the House of Lords to interfere in elections to the House of Commons, those have been equally restricted by resolutions of the House of Commons. But the great resolution which I suppose we should have in our minds, in framing a resolution which will assert the privileges of the House of Commons as against the irresponsible control of the House of Lords, the resolution of 1678—as I think it is—which asserts the free and uncontrolled right of the House of Commons to represent the people in matters of finance—and I suppose—of course I do not pledge myself at this moment to the exact form of

the resolution—but I take it that that resolution would declare in clear and unmistakable terms what I have once before said, in a phrase which I have often heard since, that the House of Commons, in the partnership with the House of Lords, is unmistakably the predominant partner.

I hear you say—"But the House of Commons has passed such resolutions before." That no doubt is true; I think indeed that there was some little resolution of that kind passed this year. But there will be one vital and essential and pervading difference between such a resolution as I suggest and any resolution that has been passed before. This resolution will be passed at the instance and on the responsibility of the Government itself. It will be the duty of the Government to move the House of Commons to pass such a resolution; and I cannot doubt, in the temper of the House of Commons, that it will do so. It will be the duty of the Government to move the House of Commons to pass such a resolution, and if it be passed, remember this—that never before in the history of Parliament has such a resolution at the instance of the responsible Government been passed in the House of Commons against the House of Lords. What will that represent? It will represent the joint demand of the Executive Government of the day and of the House of Commons for a revision of the Constitution; and in that way the question will enter in itself on a new phase. The resolution will stand forever upon the journals of the House. No Government, however bold or cynical it may be, that may eventually succeed ourselves will be bold enough or cynical enough to propose its reversion. Not all the perfumes of Araby itself will wash that resolution out of the books of the House of Commons. Even if the verdict of the country should go against us on that resolu-



tion, I believe no leader of the House of Commons would be daring enough to propose its reversal.

But the verdict of the country will not be against us. I feel as sure of the country as I do of the House of Commons. Neither the House of Commons nor the country would stultify themselves by sending up a majority to reverse any such resolution as that; and therefore I may consider that if such a resolution be passed, it will stand, perhaps not as a law of the Medes and Persians, but as substantially as the resolution of 1678, to which I have alluded. The resolution in itself would be a new charter, or, as the Americans would say, a new constitutional amendment; and this would be the first act of a great drama of which, perhaps, we may have to see a third, fourth, and a fifth, as well as a second act. But, gentlemen, you may ask—"Will this be enough? The House of Lords may snap their fingers at your resolution. They may say, 'We have had resolutions of this kind before, and we do not care a fig for your resolutions.'" Well, I admit that, in my judgment, it will probably not be enough. Powerful as the House of Commons is, for such a purpose as this it must have a power greater than itself. That power can only be given, that strength can only be conferred, that inspiration which I have been derided for demanding can only be afforded by the people of Great Britain and Ireland. Nothing else will suffice for us. To that august tribunal we will appeal. We will ask it to give us strength and authority—a majority and a mandate—to deal with that question, and to go back with power to deal in your name with the question of constitutional revision.

The Government then will put this force in motion at the proper time. It will ask the House of Commons to pass

such a resolution as I have indicated; and at the proper time it will endeavour to appeal to the country on such a resolution. Why do I say at the proper time? Why don't I say, "Do it at once?" Why don't I call Parliament together, and at once put a resolution before them, and at once ask the Queen to grant the Ministry a dissolution upon that resolution? Well, I think the members of the House of Commons would answer the question without the slightest difficulty. In the first place, the course of this Parliament is not entirely run. We hope to pass some useful, if not much useful, legislation before we end this Parliament. In the second place, it would be rather hard to punish the House of Commons for the faults of the House of Lords. This, then, gentlemen, is the second act. The first act is the resolution. The second act is an appeal to the country to support that resolution. Beyond that I cannot go to-night. For the will of the people is the final and supreme court of appeal. It will be for the nation to decide between the House of Lords and its own responsible representatives. And therefore what we are, what we shall be, practically asking you is this—for a popular reference, such as in other countries is called the referendum—for a direct popular reference as to whether you desire a revision of the Constitution in this sense, or whether you do not.

We think, then, that the time has come, or has nearly come, for a free popular reference, to ask the people of Great Britain and Ireland to settle this question of the Constitution of this country once for all—not in reference merely to tradition, but in reference also to accomplished facts. And then will come your part. The Government will have done its part, and it will then be your turn. If you have come to the conviction that the House of Lords



understands your wishes better than do your own representatives, you will give effect by your verdict to that impression. You will annihilate your own representation and abide contentedly by the unbiased, patriarchal mellow wisdom of the House of Lords. You will thank them for having done you the favour of having been born. It will be unnecessary any further to go through the musty and superfluous process of popular election; for you will have beside you a self-constituted body that will save you any trouble of the kind.

But if, gentlemen, you take a different view—if for years you have been champing and chafing under the bit of the House of Lords—if for years you have been wondering at this strange survival of an almost apparently antediluvian period—if for years you have been instructing your representatives to do all that in them lies to maintain your rights against their interference—why, then, you will give your verdict in accordance with the facts, and you will make ready for the fight. You will remember, as I have told you before, that in this great contest there are behind you, to inspire you, all the great reforms, all the great aspirations, and all the great measures on which you have set your hearts. Before you are encamped all the forces of prejudice and privilege. Before you frown the sullen ramparts, behind which are concealed the enemies you long to fight, and so long have fought. And I would ask you, if you are prepared to go into this fight, to fight it as your old Puritan forefathers fought—fight with their stubborn, persistent, indomitable will—fight as those old Ironsides fought in Yorkshire, never knowing when they were beaten—and determined not to be beaten. Fight, as they would have said themselves, not with the arm of the flesh, but with the arm

of the spirit. Fight by educating your fellow men—not as to the object, for in that you are clear already, but as to the proper means of obtaining that object. And if you believe that we of the Government are in earnest in this matter, and capable of dealing in this matter, you will give us your support. We fling down the gauntlet. It is for you to back us up.