

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST DAYS. 1806

I

CHARLES'S malady was a dropsy. The symptoms had been developing for several months, but he did not like doctors, and fancied himself as his own physician. He supposed he was suffering from scurvy, and treated himself accordingly, with very unsatisfactory results. The anonymous young gentleman who had relieved the tedium of Mr. Fox's leisure by submitting his drama for perusal tells us that his patron ran up considerable annual bills for "rhubarb and vegetable decoctions," with Paytherus, a chemist of Bond Street.

Fox's London house at this time was in Stable Yard, St. James's, and it was here that he laid up on retiring from Westminster. Early in July, his condition was such that his friends insisted on authoritative medical advice, and it was then that his disease was for the first time rightly diagnosed. For a week or two there seemed to be no imminent danger. Mrs. Fox, in pages of her journal printed as an Appendix to *The Life and Letters of Lady Sarah Lennox*, wrote on June 22, "Carl, not better, dined at home. . . . Carl did not come out of his dressing room, but saw a few people there." On July 12, after several anxious days, she adds, "Yesterday . . . I thought him a great deal better, and God Almighty be praised, I was not deceived, for he has had a charming night, and seems better still."

But the recovery was brief. By the turn of the month he was known to be a very ill man, and "the garden of the House at Stable Yard was daily filled with anxious enquirers."* His cabinet colleagues, foreign ambassadors,

* Trotter.

and a host of private friends were among the visitors. Though Charles could see but few of them, the Prince of Wales was admitted freely to his room. When His Royal Highness was out of town, Trotter was asked to forward a daily report of the patient's condition. On August 7 the operation of tapping became necessary, and was borne "with great calmness and resolution." When it was over, Charles gave instructions to his nephew that he was to be told plainly when he was in real danger: "We are neither of us children, and it would be ridiculous to conceal anything." For three or four days he was prostrated, and then a gleam of hope returned. He gained strength, and was able to see a few friends, even to show a momentary and parting interest in state affairs. He begged to be taken to St. Anne's Hill. The doctors decided against the journey at a single stage, and the Duke of Devonshire offered his house at Chiswick as a resting place by the way. On August 27 he accordingly left London, and the next morning *The Globe* printed the following account of his departure:

"Mr. Fox left his house in Stable Yard, St. James's, yesterday, at four o'clock in the afternoon, for Chiswick. . . . A platform, covered with green baize, was raised from the hall door, gently ascending to the bottom of the carriage, so that he might enter it with more ease than by the gradation of the steps. A crowd of people attended from an early hour at the door, where the carriage had been waiting for a considerable time. . . . Mr. Fox had a brown loose mantle thrown over his shoulders, and wore very wide nankeen pantaloons, and a fur travelling cap. His appearance excited great emotion among the spectators, many of whom shed tears on seeing the change in his countenance, which bore strong marks of the severity of his disease."

The change of air brought a little benefit, but the trouble now was beyond cure. On the 27th it was decided that there must be a second operation. Charles consented on condition that he was first removed to St. Anne's Hill. The condition was impossible, the operation was performed, and again he bore the most horrible and revolting ordeal with lovely courage. He talked to the physicians, says Trotter, "with all his usual force, accuracy, and pleasant natural manners," until he succumbed to the faintness of pain. It was immediately clear that the operation had accomplished no more than a moment's respite.

II

There was now nothing left but the love of friends, and, above all, the exquisitely devoted attention of Elizabeth Fox. In the intervals between lethargy and lethargy, Charles was eager always to be read to, and his wife, Trotter, Caroline Fox, and "dear Young One" took turns with Dryden, Virgil, Johnson's *Lives*, Swift, and the new novels. Fitzpatrick joined the company of faithful watchers. On the Friday after the second operation Charles took an airing in a garden-chair, and on the two following days was able to go out in the carriage with Elizabeth. He was cheerful, kept his hand in hers all the while, asked her several times to kiss him, and when they came within sight of the Thames made her repeat Denham's lines from *Cooper's Hill*—

Thames, the most lov'd of all the Ocean's sons
By his old sire, to his embraces runs;
Hasting to pay his tribute to the sea,
Like mortal life to meet eternity.

On September 7 he transacted his last public business. George Jackson, the British *Chargé d'Affaires* in Prussia,

had returned to England, and Fox insisted on seeing him. Jackson, who was a young man of twenty at the time, has left his own account of the interview in his *Diaries and Letters*. He found Fox, who received him at ten in the morning, "looking wretchedly ill," but "conversing more cheerfully and freely than I had expected." He discovered, however, that Mrs. Fox had been taken unawares, and, *en deshabelle*, was imprisoned in an adjoining closet, whence he heard at length a voice complaining, "Mr. Fox, my dear, the young man's gone, I think? Can't I come out, my dear? I'm so very, very cold." So that for young Mr. Jackson it was all rather an amusing experience.

On the next day, September 8, the symptoms dispelled the last remaining hope. For five days more he struggled on. Elizabeth had sent to St. Anne's Hill for "a comfortable sick-chair" that she knew he liked, and in it he would sit, putting up a brave pretence. Once only did Elizabeth give way before him, and he said, "Oh, fie, Liz, is this your promise?" For, "we had agreed . . . that whichever was likely to die first, the other should stay by all the time, and try to look gay and cheerful." After his Paris visit, Charles had written to his nephew, "I do not reckon Lord Henry Petty because I have been speaking of foreigners only, but never did I see a young man I liked half so much." And now, on September 12, Henry Petty, Chancellor of the Exchequer at twenty-six, came to the bedside of his chief, and "unable to repress his emotions" was desired by the physicians to "retire to another part of the room." On the same day, someone brought in a young clergyman. Prayers were read: Charles was making his own peace, but he liked to think that the prayers would be a comfort to Elizabeth; that comfort, indeed, was now his chief concern. A peculiar gentleman, the Right Hon. George Rose, closely associated in administration with Pitt, has left, in his *Diaries and*

Correspondence, reflections on this scene which should not pass unrecorded here.

“ Thus died . . . he whom Lord Holland ventures to call ‘ the best and greatest man of his time.’ Whether he was in any sense good or great, he and Lord Holland, and the whole world will know, when we all stand before the judgment seat of Christ; but, in the meantime, what can be more shocking to a well-regulated mind, than the picture here presented to us of a dying man, with expanded understanding, almost it would appear destitute of divine grace, with no care apparently for his soul, no fear of judgment, submitting to a cold formality of prayer, in which he takes no interest, and seeks no profit, not from any sense of duty, or any desire of spiritual good, but merely to soothe and satisfy his wife ?”

It appears, however, that the right honourable gentleman was an authority on finance.

“ The night which succeeded,” says Trotter, “ was one of horror.” And Elizabeth: “ He had very little sleep, and continued getting out of bed every moment almost as soon as he was in.” The next morning he was quieter, and lay silent until noon. Then he said good-bye to “ dear Young One,” and asked Elizabeth to kiss him. Taking her hand, he looked at her “ with a heavenly smile, and said, ‘ L die happy, but pity you.’” He drowsed again, until he found her still standing by him, trying desperately to keep her promise. With an effort he spoke: “ It don’t signify, my dearest, dearest Liz.” And on the clear September afternoon, at “ twenty minutes before six by a watch regulated by the sun,” he died. He was buried, on October 10, in Westminster Abbey.