

CHAPTER II

ENGLAND IN 1768

I

THE origins of the Hanoverian succession to the English throne are too remote from our present subject to detain us. Its immediate consequence was that the supporters of the settlement realised that it would take a generation or more of unremitting vigilance to overcome the very active elements of opposition, and accustom the national mind to its new allegiance. After the deposition of James II., Jacobite and Jesuit alike nursed pertinacious hopes that made desperate bids for realisation in the risings of 1715 and 1745. The reigns of the first two Georges afforded ministers unrestricted scope for the exercise of all the ingenuity that they could command. It often seemed beyond the wit of policy to keep any effective public sentiment in touch with monarchs who were so spectacularly foreign. George I. could speak no English, and as Sir Robert Walpole could speak neither German nor French, conversations between the King of England and his first minister had to be carried on in Latin. George II. learnt the language of his adoption, but never to speak it in anything but a rich guttural accent. Both Kings, moreover, were undisguisedly indifferent to the national hopes and character of their somewhat bewildered subjects. Each looked upon his capital as a place of exile and, while exasperated secretaries attempted to explain affairs of the British realm, mused with longing thoughts upon the happy Edens of Hanover. After a time a mutual accommodation was devised. The King was to be allowed to support the claims of his German Electorate with the aid of British resources, and in consideration of the privilege would leave the government at home to the discretion of his

ministers. Such was the arrangement by which George I. and George II. maintained the fiction of sovereignty. It led inevitably to much complaining. Disaffected opinion in the country could, with a tiresome show of reason; accuse ministers of suborning British wealth and arms in the interests of a fussy and insignificant German state, and the charge was a difficult one to meet. Supplies of men and funds to further their continental designs were looked upon by the first Georges as the paramount condition of their bargain not to meddle in home affairs of which they understood nothing, and they kept their ministers to the bond. On the other hand, Walpole and his colleagues could insist to the opposition that the compact was the only practical means of preserving the constitution under the new dynasty. Not to indulge the King would be to provoke interference in domestic policy that would wreck the working of the state, and inflame public feeling beyond control against the Hanoverian settlement. The Jacobites and Jesuits were a little shy of declaring openly that there was nothing that they would like better, but a significant shrug of the shoulders could make their feelings plain. Such aspirations Walpole was determined at any cost to frustrate; and he continued in the face of all criticism to make every possible concession to his German masters. The subsidy paid by England to Hanoverian ambitions under the agreement was a heavy one, but Walpole could claim that on the whole his long term of office was, apart from tributary campaigns, a term of peace, and that the country, if it was denied the ardours of personal loyalty, was making very consoling advances in commercial prosperity. In many respects as shameless a minister as has ever ruled at Westminster, Walpole was steadfast in his refusal to open the gates one inch to the Stuart or Romish intrigues against which they had been closed at so great a cost, and in this he proved a long-sighted

patriotism worthy of a finer spirit. His policy once determined, he clung to it with patience and ability, and left it to time to soften the personal antipathies that for over forty years alienated the House of Hanover from the English people. In this, too, his discretion was justified.

Democracy, with its attendant principles of adult suffrage and a genuine representation of the people, was an idea that in the times of which we write had but a nebulous habitation in a few speculative minds. The theories of popular rights and the liberty of the subject, for which the Puritan revolution stood, had, it is true, never receded wholly from the national consciousness, and the governing classes, from the sovereign himself to the doorkeeper, could never wholly forget the conditions on which Charles II. had been restored to his throne. After Cromwell, every Englishman knew that however elusive a blessing freedom still might be, it was one to which his title had been irrevocably proved, and one to which he might hope some day yet to attain in actual experience. The great folk at Westminster, it seemed, continued to take little notice of his real needs and welfare, but they were, he felt with growing conviction, at least aware of his existence. A little more patience, and perhaps they would do something about it. In the meantime, the great folk might honestly urge that they had no time for these considerations. Ever since the revolt of the Commons against the arbitrary kingship of Charles I., government had been kept busily employed in weathering one state crisis after another, and in such circumstances even the most liberal of ministers can pay little attention to progressive political measures. The consequence was that although there were in name two great opposing political parties, neither had anything that could properly be dignified by the name of a policy. The chief concern of ministers was to improvise expedients to meet im-

mediate and, as they considered them, imperative needs. The chief concern of the opposition was, since abstract principles were not in question, to discredit the government as far as possible by personal innuendo and insult. The Whigs were responsible for the Hanoverian succession, and for a time Jacobite and Catholic elements gave to Toryism some distinctive character. But as the eighteenth century approached its noon, the majority of the Tories themselves were as little anxious as the Whigs for a return to the Stuarts or an accommodation with Rome. A few malcontents nursed their grievances for a final and fatal demonstration in the 'forty-five, but long before that time government and opposition alike were loyal in temper to the Hanoverian court. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that during the first half of the century the principal difference between the Whigs and the Tories was that the Whigs were in office while the Tories coveted it, and that if the positions had been reversed the Tories, once their Jacobite passions had subsided, would have employed power in all essential respects as it was employed by the Whigs. When Walpole retired in 1742, the government was still nominally Whig, but it fell into chaos and dishonour for fourteen years until it was rescued by the elder Pitt, who so far as he belonged to the tradition of either party belonged to that of Walpole's. But so confused had one become with the other, so little, indeed, for many years had they been in any vital sense distinct, that the historian* can truly observe of Pitt that "it is a misuse of the terms Whig and Tory to rank [him] with either of those parties." There was very soon to be a distinction sharp enough, and it was one to which Charles James Fox was to give much of its memorable character. But until the accession of George III., the idea of political party as we know it in our modern state—that is to say, political party inspired

* W. B. Donne.

by democratic influences—had not been developed. At that date, 1760, the governing classes had been engaged for exactly a hundred years in deciding who the King of England should be. At length they had reached an agreement on this question, and the coming generations were to dispute two others: what the King of England should be, and what precisely was the status of his subjects, in all grades of society, and in the practical enjoyments and responsibilities of daily life. The first of these may today be taken as answered; the second is still in debate.

II

When on October 25, 1760, George II. fell down dead in Kensington Palace at the age of seventy-seven, a thrill of expectation went through the English people. Hardly within living memory had there been a king to whom they had had the smallest opportunity of showing attachment, and a long-starved national sentiment was hungry for expression. It was, in the occasions that immediately followed, not disappointed. The young Prince of Wales was then twenty-two years old. His father had died in 1751 after a life-time of disgraceful wrangling with the King, and had left his widow, Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, to supervise the education of the new heir to the throne, with the assistance of Lord Bute, whose constant presence at Carlton House was turned to most unlikely uses by the scandal-mongers. The boy's tutelage was conducted with the narrowest severity, and an intellect of rather less than average dimensions was afforded no opportunity of expansion. Among his tutors were men of some talent, but they were intimidated by Augusta's pedantic ceremony, and the young prince was admitted to nothing of liberal learning. His personal movements were controlled with exemplary zeal, and when he succeeded his grandfather to the throne he was as little acquainted

with the world of men in which he was to take so eminent a place, as he was with the lessons and the achievements of the past. The first weeks of his reign were spent in fantastic disputes about precedence and etiquette, and on these points he had been drilled to a nicety, but when questions arose demanding knowledge and insight, the poor young King's mind was pathetically at a loss. He was aware of it, and himself lamented that he had been so little blessed with profitable instruction. In the absence of this, he had but one resource with which to meet his difficulties, the obstinate courage of his race. He employed it unsparingly, with what results we shall see.

But while his naturally pedestrian mind had been encouraged in prejudice and ignorance, George's character had a good deal of native excellence that, combined with any degree of understanding, might have made him a genuinely popular and powerful monarch. At his accession, the people knew hardly anything of him. He had been kept in seclusion, and allowed to take no share in the duties or amenities of public life. But there was a lively hope that the new King might at least prove himself to be English in tastes and interests. His great-grandfather had never troubled to conceal his regrets that the six months of each year that he spent in Germany were not twelve, and his brave and choleric little grandfather, who had distinguished himself with Marlborough at Oudenarde, used to chatter in German while his English chaplains were preaching, and always kept eight hundred horses, ready-groomed against his arrival, in the stables at Herrenhausen. The new King had never been out of England. The people were on tiptoe. Who knew but what they might get something more palatable than sauerkraut for their money at last? George made a splendid opening. When the draft of his first speech from the throne was submitted to him, he inserted with his own hands the words, "Born and educated in this

country, I glory in the name of Briton." The phrase went like wildfire. "What a lustre does it cast upon the name of Briton when you, Sir, are pleased to esteem it among your glories"—so the Lords; and the Commons, not to be outdone, acknowledged "with the liveliest sentiments of duty, gratitude, and exultation of mind, these most affecting and animating words." The people were delighted. Society observed, with Horace Walpole, that "the young King has all the appearance of being amiable. There is great grace to temper much dignity, and extreme good nature, which breaks out on all occasions." The vendors of ballads along the pavements of Whitehall and Cheapside dispensed a new turn of loyalty in their wares. Everyone was heartily glad, the King being dead, to cry "Long live the King!"

This early promise was in many important respects fulfilled. The manners of the new King were very obliging. He moved with easy condescension in any company, and formed habits that did not strain flattery. He took to farming with some enthusiasm, and, as Mr. Ralph Robinson, contributed little notes to an agricultural paper. When the band played for him of an evening, he always rose at the end of the programme and took off his hat and said, "Thank you, gentlemen," and he would call for "Rule, Britannia" or "Britons, strike Home." On his rambles round Windsor he would drop in at any cottage that took his fancy, and gossip about pigs or the price of shoe-leather. If not handsome, he was a considerable figure of a man, with a frank laugh and a firm hand. He was a good horseman, not afraid of walking, fond of the theatre with a preference for side-splitting farces, and not above a chaffing match in public. On one of his Windsor expeditions he found the tenant of a cottage roasting a goose on a string. He observed that it seemed to be rather an unsatisfactory method, and before leaving contrived to leave five guineas

on the dresser in a screw of paper on which he had scribbled, "To buy a jack." Such stories of the King's personal kindness are common, and there is no reason either to doubt their authenticity or to suppose that they had their origins in an eye for public effect. George just liked being agreeable to nobodies, and indulged his fancy. He was, moreover, something of a wit. A dealer from whom he had just bought a horse handed the King a pedigree; George glanced at it, and returned it to the dealer, remarking that it would serve as well for the next animal he sold. An unsatisfactory master of staghounds waiting on the King to enquire when the hounds should be turned out, he was answered: "I cannot exactly tell, but I can inform you that your lordship was turned out about an hour ago."

In an unenlightened way George was a patron of the arts. Without discrimination, he recognised that they ought to be encouraged. He founded the Royal Academy, with Reynolds as President, but preferred the paintings of Benjamin West. He was civil to men of letters, and thought James Beattie a great poet. He must be a cynic indeed who is not charmed by the exchange of courtesies with Johnson. The famous interview took place when the King was just under thirty, and the doctor twice his age. Johnson, in reply to a question whether he was then writing anything, said he thought he had told the world all he knew. "I should have thought so too," said the King, "if you had not written so well." Johnson, in telling his friend of this, observed: "No man could have paid a handsomer compliment; and it was fit for a King to pay. It was decisive." Reynolds asked him whether he had thanked the King: "No, sir. When the King had said it, it was to be so. It was not for me to bandy civilities with my Sovereign." The King remarked that he could wish that someone equal to the work would undertake to write the literary biography

of the country; Johnson took the hint, and proceeded to the *Lives of the Poets*. "Sir," he said afterwards, "they may talk of the King as they will, but he is the finest gentleman I have ever seen"; and again, "his manners are those of as fine a gentleman as we may suppose Louis the Fourteenth or Charles the Second." When, shortly after the meeting, the King's attention was drawn to certain sceptical writers of the day, he expressed a wish that "Johnson would mount his dray-horse and ride over them."

George also took an interest in the advancement of science, and subscribed generously to the Royal Society. It is true that his prejudices sometimes interfered with his zeal for truth. Benjamin Franklin having declared for the superiority of lightning conductors with sharp ends, the King, much out of humour with everything American, requested the President of the Royal Society to pronounce officially in favour of knobs; but that gentleman humbly submitted that he was unable to reverse the order of nature. The King's genuine love of music was sometimes affected in the same way. He had an insatiable appetite for Handel's oratorios, but on one occasion soon after the American war had broken out, when during a performance of *Alexander's Feast* they came to the lines

The princes applaud with furious joy,
And the King seized a flambeau with zeal to destroy,

his Britannic Majesty rolled his score up into a truncheon, and leaping to his feet flourished it above his head, exclaiming, "Bravo, bravo!" and insisted on the passage being repeated. But music was a delight that remained with him to the last. There are few more pathetic pictures in history than that of George in his madness and old age being surprised by the Queen while he was singing a hymn and accompanying himself on the harpsichord. He finished the hymn, and knelt down to pray

for his family and the nation, ending with a desire that God would let him be made no longer. He then burst into tears, and all was dark again, and he had nothing but the harpsichord left.

III

As a young King, however, George had other qualities to recommend him to his people, beyond his friendliness, and anxiety to foster right and pleasant things, and public enthusiasm. His private life set an example that an age accustomed to reckless waste and profligacy in the fashionable world found not a little astonishing. Personal virtue in a King had not at all been expected, and the common people were strangely impressed when it was so singularly displayed, while society found itself looking uncomfortably down its nose. The King's manifestly genuine piety affected different people differently, but it could escape the observation of no one. The Defender of the Faith no longer gossiped or snored in church; no sermon was too long, and courtiers were quickly brought to understand that Lifting up the Heart to Thee was no occasion for levity. One restless gentleman who was afflicted by tedium, received a rap on the head from the royal hymn-book and a request that he would not fidget. Soon after the accession, a chaplain preaching such compliments at the King's head as he supposed would advance him towards a bishopric, was much disconcerted at the end of the service to be told by the King that he came to church to hear God praised, not himself. Further, the habits of George's household were almost sensationally decorous. In 1761 he married Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, after an idyll with Lady Sarah Lennox that greatly alarmed his family. The royal couple settled at once into a domestic routine that was the despair of lords and ladies in waiting, but that viewed at a distance greatly edified the people. The King

himself having risen at seven in the morning, rode, attended to private business, ate, gave audiences, listened to the band, visited the nursery, received ministers, changed his clothes, took stock of the cellars, checked the steward's additions, wrote memoranda to the departments, and played backgammon, at precisely stated hours. Both he and the Queen could be lavish in public benefactions, and he even went so far as to bestow a pension on the young Pretender, who used it to console a middle-aged exile with tipsy amours. But in the domestic circle George and Charlotte promoted economy to an extent that was extremely dispiriting to the household. The only indulgence that the Queen allowed herself was a daily ounce or so of snuff, for which she had a passion, and in the technique of which she was an adept. The King generally dined alone, his favourite dish being a leg of mutton with caper sauce, followed by a cheesecake, and perhaps a slice of the cherry pie that was ordered to be on his table every day of the year. He took a little wine, usually diluted in water. Of this frugal fare he partook very sparingly, chiefly, it is suggested, because he had been warned that any excess would make him as fat as his uncle, the Duke of Cumberland, who was hardly less celebrated for his obesity than for the ferocity of Culloden. The breakfast of the young princes and princesses was limited to a dish of porridge, and the maids of honour had to follow the royal example of going supperless to bed, until they got so low in their minds about it that the lord steward carried their complaint to the King. His Majesty regretted that what was good enough for himself and the Queen was not good enough for them, but, while the discipline of the household could not be openly relaxed, he would make the young women an additional allowance such as would "enable them to provide themselves with moderate suppers for the future." In the patronage of art, so long

as it was in some sense an official duty, George could be generous enough, and he is said to have bought two pictures a year for thirty years from West at an average of five hundred pounds apiece, but then everyone spoke so highly of Mr. West, and when the King condescended to small reputations, he was all for a bargain. Richard Wilson having painted a landscape by command for the royal collection, the King, on asking the price and being told that it was a hundred guineas, exclaimed that it was a daub and the dearest picture he ever saw, and would they please let Mr. Wilson know as much. Young Opie was put into a flutter of excitement by a summons to the palace and a request that he would take with him a picture that had attracted the King's notice at a dealer's. George said it was well enough and that he would keep it, but he could, he was sorry to say, not afford to pay more than ten guineas for it.* The King asked Reynolds to write an interlude for home performance, and sent him five pounds for the work. Sir Joshua returned the money, doubtless to the royal satisfaction, and on receiving a request later for a similar piece, regretted that he was otherwise engaged. On being taxed with the impropriety of a King selling stock from his farms at public auction, George justified himself by saying that "anybody might accept a sheep and neglect it; but no one would buy one who did not mean to take care of it."

But parsimony within doors, though it made life in the palace harassing to robust appetites, did not spoil the general effect of temperance and regularity, and it was an effect very pleasing to popular sentiment, emphasised as it was by the nice friendly way the King and Queen had with them. People liked to know that a sovereign who could shake with laughing at the buffooneries of Foote, and could stand in the street among

* It is fair to add that he put other work in Opie's way.

the citizens of Worcester to give three cheers for their new bridge, could also write to a prince of the church reproving him for turning the episcopal palace into a scene of "levities and vain dissipations," and begging that they be immediately suppressed so that there may be no further occasion for marks of the royal displeasure—and "May God take your grace into his Almighty protection." They liked also to know that a Queen who, paying a call on Mrs. Garrick, found her getting Mr. Garrick's dinner ready, and sat down to peel the onions with her, could say to a court favourite who had rashly promised to get permission for a notorious baggage to visit the royal drawing-room, "Tell her that you did not dare to ask me." Queen Charlotte must have been an extremely difficult person about the house, sententious and exacting, but she was perfectly placed in the picture of domestic piety that her husband presented to the world. Benjamin Franklin made a shrewd point when he noted in his journal: "If George the Third had had a bad private character, and John Wilkes a good one, the latter might have turned the former out of his kingdom."

For it was unquestionably the reputation of his private virtues that saved George III. from the full consequences of his public follies. The progress of these follies belongs to the development of Fox's story, but it will be well here to glance at their origin. The inadequacy of George's education as boy and youth was not due to any conviction in his mother that a future King had no need of being educated at all. On the contrary, she believed, with a tenacity that nothing could shake, that preparation for kingship should consist of an ever-narrowing concentration on one fixed idea, and with that idea the young prince's mind was relentlessly assailed. He was, he was told, going to be King, and a King's first and last obligation was to rule. However people, parliament, and ministers might adjust themselves in the state, they were

all alike to be directed by the King's personal will and judgment. The conception of policy was the King's prerogative, and it was the business of ministers to convey his wishes to parliament, whose privilege it was to preserve in themselves and in their constituents a mood of docile obedience. The choice of ways to this end was of no consequence. So long as the King's authority was undisputed, it did not matter how it was imposed. Royal menaces would go far when persuasion failed, and the King had always favours to bestow or withhold. Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, too, believed that every man had his price, and it would always be within the King's, that is to say the nation's, means to pay it. In any case, determination to rule must never be relaxed. In that alone was security of the King's honour.

Far from finding this hourly repetition tiresome, the young George found it increasingly apt to his own inclinations, and by the time he succeeded to the throne, his whole being was impregnated with the doctrine. Two things, however, he and his mentors had overlooked. The theory of limited monarchy that had been established by the Puritan revolution, and was the seed of the constitutional monarchy that we now know, could not in any significant sense be said to have been tested since the succession of George I. The special conditions under which that sovereign and his son were Kings of England gave their reigns the character not so much of a monarchy, limited or otherwise, as of an interregnum. In 1760 the new King and his ministers were alike approaching the problems of government pledged to a system of which they had no practical knowledge. But that the system was one that had been made part of English polity a hundred years ago was a circumstance of which ministers and parliament and the people were all aware, even though it had been suspended by an accident of succession for nearly two generations. The consciousness was not

yet very active, but it was there, and nothing had been able to destroy it. This consideration was one of which George and the advisers of his youth had taken no account whatever, and that was their chief miscalculation. He ascended the throne with ideas that differed in no essential respect from those that inspired and destroyed Charles I. The other error into which his mother and her troop of obsequious pedagogues had fallen was not to see that even assuming it to be possible for a king to impose an autocratic rule on England at that time of day, he must have some foundations of knowledge and experience upon which to work in the designing of policy. And of these he had not been allowed to acquire a vestige. George III. came to the throne deeply committed in his mind to an obsolete theory of kingship, and wholly unequipped with the education and insight by which alone it could at any time have been successfully practised.

IV

That was not an end of the difficulties. The King was obstinate and ignorant, but he was also profoundly in earnest, and he had a tireless capacity for industry. He sincerely believed that his, the King's, rule would be beneficent because he knew best; and he knew nothing. His goodness stopped short at personal piety and the charming amiabilities of Farmer George. As soon as questions arose demanding vision and imagination he was lost. In almost every large issue of policy his judgment was foolish, bigoted, cruel. So long as the people were the cottagers of Windsor or the shopkeepers of Worcester, the King met them with an unaffected good-fellowship; but when they were a formidable power moving in opposition to his own political caprice and infatuated self-sufficiency, they were "wicked and disappointed men" whose "outrageous licentiousness"



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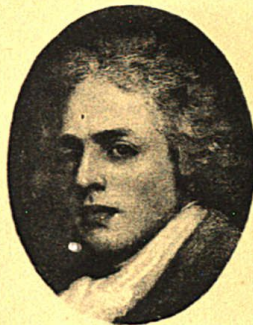
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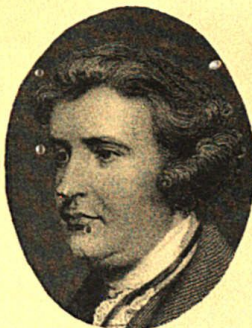
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6

GROUP OF PORTRAITS

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|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. George III. (Zoffany) | 4. Lord North (Dance) |
| 2. The Prince of Wales (Wivell) | 5. William Pitt the Younger (Hoppner) |
| 3. Charles James Fox (Opie) | 6. Edmund Burke (Reynolds) |
| 7. R.B. Sheridan (Reynolds) | |

must be ruthlessly suppressed. His methods of control knew no scruple. The doctrine of any means to the end made corruption a sacred obligation, and the King's "golden pills" were dispensed with genial and shameless candour. It would be difficult to find a more decisive contrast than that afforded by the private and the public character of George III. In the one we have a kindly and considerate gentleman, a little dull it may be, but warm-hearted, honest, and full of generous impulses. In the other there appears a figure of stupid and habitual arrogance, capable of any spite and petty cunning, grossly incapable of understanding or the attempt to understand anything beyond the shuffling of offices or the deft placing of a bribe, suspicious of ability, jealous even of his own fawning shadows, and intolerant to the point of insanity of the very name of independence. A far better, a far braver, and a far more attractive man than Charles I., he rivals even that monarch in squalid insufficiency as a King.

Add to all this the industry, that suffocating industry. He blundered through the lucid years of his reign with a thoroughness approaching genius. He worked early and late, no detail of state business escaping his supervision. Every crown appointment, every movement of troops, every debate in the Houses, every speech reported from the hustings, every echo of popular feeling, was placed under his minute personal scrutiny. A continual procession of messengers hurried through the gates of the royal residence on their way to ministers, each bearing a note or a sheaf of notes written in the King's hand. These notes, meticulously dated "Queen's House. January 3rd, 1775. 3 min. pt. 9 p.m.," "Kew, July 31st, 1779. 59 min. pt. 7 a.m.," often written in tumbling haste, and crowded with figures, names, and urgent messages on every conceivable topic, represent an intensive application that almost defies belief. Lord North

alone received some eight hundred of them. Here was an energy for mischief that not the stoutest opposition could quell, and George III. for something like half a century did his very effective worst. As this story proceeds, it is this public misdirection that will chiefly claim our notice. Its effect should be softened by recollection of the private virtues that were its complement.

Such then, in briefest outline, was the condition of English political life when Charles Fox was passing from childhood to youth, and such the character of the King under whose influence his own career was shaped. For it was in antagonism to everything that George III. represented that his genius was developed, and his memory assured as one of the most intrepid servants that our state has known.