

## CHAPTER III.

### WILKES AND THE MIDDLESEX ELECTION. 1763-1770

#### I

WHEN Fox took his seat in the House of Commons at the age of nineteen, George III. had been eight years on the throne. During that time the King's ministries had undergone a series of kaleidoscopic changes. The elder Pitt, whom he had found in power on his accession, resigned a year later when he was not allowed to declare war on Spain for interfering in his settlement with France after a struggle in the conduct of which he had shown his most splendid ability. He had been succeeded in office by Lord Bute, the King's favourite, and a man who raised the name of Scot to the highest pitch of odium in the English mind. Bute in turn had made way for George Grenville, whose administration Macaulay considered to be the worst that had been known for over a hundred years; and Grenville had made way for the Rockingham Whigs, who had the good fortune to find their eulogist in Edmund Burke. Lord Rockingham, whose cabinet was notable for integrity but weak in parliamentary talent, used every art of persuasion to induce Pitt to join him; and it has been marked by Pitt's admirers to his discredit that he refused. In 1766, Rockingham lost control of his subordinates, and the King again turned to Pitt himself, with whose influence he was no longer able to dispense, much as he distrusted it. Pitt was seriously ill, but at length he yielded to royal pressure, and consented to act on condition that he should not reassume the burden of leadership in the lower House. He went to the Lords as Earl of Chatham, and formed the Grafton Cabinet. It was now that the campaign of Wilkes against the King's government began to acquire its full momentum, and when, at the time of Fox's entry



into parliament, Chatham was forced to resign by continued ill health, the Grafton administration stumbled on with no sense of direction, its shiftless incapacity assailed at every turn by the scathing periods of Junius, whose first Letter was dated January 21, 1769. For our purpose, the chief thing to note in the Grafton ministry is that in 1767 it was joined by Frederick, Lord North, as Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the House of Commons.\*

During this prolonged exhibition of musical chairs, three important things had happened. In the first place, the old Whig ascendancy had come to an end. After the Rockingham interlude, a stray seat or two in the cabinet was all that was left of power to the party that had held office against all onsets since Hanover came to England. Secondly, the ascendancy that this country had reached under Pitt, whose war cabinet had inherited great resources from Walpole, had been destroyed by a succession of ministers who were either incompetent or unprincipled, and usually both. Parliament under Grafton was an easy mark for the diatribes of Wilkes and Junius. The charge that government was bankrupt in honour and sense was not only made in the best demagogic style, but had the powerful recommendation of being true. Neither at home, nor—what was soon to be even more significant—in the colonies, were the officers of the crown regarded with the smallest trace of confidence. And, thirdly, the crown itself had lost all the respect of which George's personal amiability had made so fair a promise. Faithful to his resolution to keep government exclusively in his own hands, he had for eight years intrigued in the formation of every cabinet, and had attempted to dictate the policy of every minister. Men of wit and integrity found that to serve under him was impossible, and these were qualities

\* North had entered parliament in 1754, and had already held junior official rank.



for which he did not look. In an extremity he could turn to Pitt, but in an extremity only and with open reluctance. His will was not to be influenced or questioned, but executed, and he surrounded himself with advisers who knew their places better than to advise. What he wanted nobody knew, himself as little as any. His inherited obsession that the King must rule was the extent of his mental processes. How he was to rule and to what end were questions that he never asked himself. Let people do as he told them, and the function of kingship was sufficiently fulfilled. With this determination, he never for a moment allowed his mind contact with the idea that the King could act only through ministers directly responsible to a parliament that was in turn responsible to the constituencies. He was, indeed, not aware of the gradual formation of such an idea that was taking place in English political life. The only kind of responsibility that he recognised was everybody's responsibility to him. In this mood he admitted to his inner counsels a select group of men who might or might not enjoy ministerial rank at the time, and who came to be known as the King's Friends. They formed a kind of secret service whose business it was to distribute the golden pills and influence votes in the House by any other means, fair or foul. They enjoyed the King's favour and his bounty, and were asked for implicit obedience in return. If any member of the cabinet showed signs of having opinions of his own, a pretext was found for removing him, so that the amenities of the elect might be undisturbed. It was George's tragedy, and his country's, that he really believed this evasion of reality to be a strong and prudent exercise of kingship. From the King's Friends the King heard nothing that was not reassuring to this conviction, and he was deaf to other voices. The first leader of this cabal had been Bute, and it was whispered that after he had resigned he still held secret communications with the



King. Even Chatham talked darkly of a power behind the throne. When Charles Fox entered parliament, George III. had done everything to lend point to the distinction that John Wilson Croker made fifty years later between government by party and government by faction.

## II

John Wilkes, born in 1727 of a good middle-class family, had been well educated, was allowed even by his bitterest enemies to be one of the wittiest men of his time, and seems to have found a sallow complexion and a conspicuous squint no hindrance in a youthful career of gallantry. His early ambition to be admitted into the childish and blasphemous fraternity notorious as the Morks of Medmenham was frustrated by the claims of superior profligacy advanced by the fourth Lord Sandwich, with whom he competed for election. His resentment against that nobleman and Sir Francis Dashwood, the founder of the society, was not appeased by the success of an exploit that diverted the town. Wilkes contrived to let a baboon loose upon one of the orgiastic rites at Medmenham that was being conducted in darkness, and had the satisfaction of throwing his victims into hysterics at the apparition of what their befuddled wits took to be the devil. Wilkes continued to nurse his grievance, as Sandwich and Dashwood were presently to learn. Until he was twenty-seven, Wilkes employed himself as a fashionable rake, chiefly at the expense of a rich but otherwise unattractive wife several years his senior, whom he made no pretence of liking, but whose money he used lavishly to entertain his dissolute friends. But in spite of his early depravities, Wilkes had more sober and serious qualities that allied to his wit were destined to make him an extremely formidable figure in national affairs. In 1754 he became High Sheriff of Buckingham-



shire, and three years later was returned to parliament as member for Aylesbury, after having unsuccessfully contested Berwick-upon-Tweed. He at once declared himself a supporter of the elder Pitt.

On being re-elected in 1761, he found immediate opportunity for his remarkable gift of destructive criticism. The friends of Pitt were outraged by their champion's deposition in favour of Bute, and their anger was reflected in popular feeling as soon as the paltry character of the new ministry exhibited itself. Bute himself was blamed for the wholesale dismissal of government servants in all ranks who owed their places to the old order; it was said that he turned out everyone who had risen by favour of the Whigs, with the exception of the King. The elevation of a Scotsman to the chief office of state was, moreover, obnoxious and even alarming to a public that had not forgotten the events of 'forty-five. In the general ferment of suspicion, the minister's relations with the Queen Mother did not escape irresponsible but damaging comment. Bute had hardly a friend in the country.

If he had been a man of any ability and character, or with enough sense to attach himself to men who had these, he might have made some front against personal unpopularity. But he was incompetent and unscrupulous, and his associates in office were worthy of their leader. Everywhere signs accumulated of those "Present Discontents" that Edmund Burke was to anatomise so memorably in 1770. The King and his minister, startled at length even out of their complacency, opened a corrective campaign, among their propagandists being Tobias Smollett, who edited a weekly journal called *The Briton*. Wilkes's hour had come. His genuine indignation as a patriot and the political friend of Pitt was aggravated by two circumstances of a more personal nature. Finding the expenses of a seat in parliament beyond his means,



he had applied for diplomatic employment, and had been refused, as he was convinced, at the instigation of Bute. Further, Bute's Chancellor of the Exchequer was none other than the Francis Dashwood against whom Wilkes bore an ancient grudge. Dashwood in office was a figure too contemptible to be even funny, though his budgets were openly derided by the House. He had not the most elementary ideas as to how to perform his duties, or even as to what his duties were. He infuriated the West of England by putting a tax on cider, a beverage little esteemed by a chancellor who drank with the fixed and single purpose of getting drunk. Wilkes took up the challenge of the court pamphleteers with the double zest of public duty and private animosity, and when the first number of *The North Briton* appeared in 1762 rounds of applause greeted the mingled strains of passion and invective. A popular champion had arisen, and the King and his Friends were filled with angry misgivings.

Not that George for a moment lost confidence in himself. Mutiny might be tiresome; but it could always be quelled. As number followed number of *The North Briton*, it became clear that something must be done; the difficulty was to decide what. When forty-four numbers had been issued, Bute resigned, and it was thought that Grenville, his successor, would be more favourably inclined towards Pitt, and in this belief Wilkes suspended publication. In a few weeks it was found that this hope was not to be realised, and the speech from the throne, stigmatised by Pitt as a tissue of ineptitude and bad faith, inflamed Wilkes's temper to fever-pitch. On April 23, 1763, he sent out the famous No. 45, and the government proceeded to disgrace itself in raptures of imbecility.

The offending article was outspoken, but the terms applied to it were wildly extravagant. Wilkes told his readers that the King's speech had "always been considered by the legislature and the public at large as the



speech of the minister." The present speech, he added, was "the most abandoned instance of ministerial effrontery ever attempted to be imposed on mankind," confessing himself in doubt as to whether to bestow his sympathy chiefly on the sovereign who was forced to lend it his name or the nation to whom it was addressed, and lamenting that "a prince of so many great and amiable qualities" should be betrayed into association with "the most odious measures and the most unjustifiable public declarations." If that kind of thing were treated today as it was then, there would be a general exodus from the editorial offices of London to the gaols. George gave orders that the transgressor was to be punished with the utmost possible rigour. It was not for his instruments to reason why, but to devise a means. They proceeded to this task with a gross irregularity that failed of its object, and brought the crown and themselves into open contempt. Without waiting for an answer from the law officers whom they had made a pretence of consulting, they issued a General Warrant\* for the apprehension of "the authors, printers, and publishers of a seditious and treasonable paper entitled *The North Briton*," and for the seizure of any papers found in their possession. This flagrant outrage on public decency was executed, and Wilkes was brought before two Secretaries of State for examination. He refused to answer their questions, and considered himself fortunate that he was at least in a country where torture was no longer permitted. He intimated that he as much as any man respected the King, but that in his opinion the King's advisers were a disgrace to the name of government. He thereupon entered his plea of privilege as a member of parliament. It was disallowed, and Wilkes was committed to the Tower.

Popular sentiment at once rose to fury. It was sup-

\* *I.e.*, a Warrant without specification of persons by name.



ported by the opinion of large numbers of responsible citizens who knew that ministers had grossly exceeded their prerogative. There was a general feeling that the persecution of Wilkes was dictated by the King; and the King was now to find that the contest was going to be no easy one. The Court of Common Pleas, before which Wilkes was summoned from the Tower, admitted his plea of privilege, and ordered his release. He was taken to his house by a cheering mob, and at night the town blazed with bonfires in his honour. Wilkes took legal advice, and wrote to Secretaries Halifax and Egremont, demanding the return of his papers, which he quite properly accused them of stealing. They replied that his letter was "indecent and scurrilous," and told him that in due course such papers as did not constitute proof of his guilt would be returned to him. Wilkes became more indecent and scurrilous still, and he instituted proceedings for false imprisonment against the authors of the General Warrant. The government brought up all their forces; the Chancellor of the Exchequer undertook on behalf of the King to pay all costs in which the much aggrieved Secretaries might be involved; Lord Halifax secured a written pledge from the Privy Seal that whatever happened he should not be held personally responsible for damages; and the defendants entered court in cheerful anticipation of a verdict that should teach cross-eyed agitators what it meant to incur sovereign displeasure. To their consternation they heard a judge of the High Court declare, "upon the maturest consideration, I am bold to say that this warrant is illegal." He added that if a superior authority should reverse his judgment, he would kiss a rod that he should nevertheless regard as "a rod of iron for the chastisement of the people of Great Britain." It is not too much to say that in these words Chief Justice Pratt saved George III. from a perilous step towards the fatal path that had been trodden by



Charles I. There is no telling to what length at that moment legal sanction of the King's arbitrary spleen might have driven the temper of the country. But His Majesty showed no signs of gratitude. He was, indeed, enraged to hear that the plaintiff had been awarded damages against a number of his obedient servants, Lord Halifax being mulcted in no less than four thousand pounds. The costs that had been so happily guaranteed amounted to a hundred thousand. Wilkes retired to Paris, sharing with Mr. Justice Pratt the excited homage of a nation.

### III

But the King was by no means prepared to let bad alone, and for seven years he and his ministers used every ingenuity to make it worse. Wilkes returned for the reassembling of parliament on November 15, 1763, when, as we have read, the boy Fox heard Lord North rise to denounce "a false, scandalous and seditious libel, containing expressions of the most unexampled insolence and contumely towards his Majesty, the grossest aspersions upon both Houses of Parliament, and the most audacious defiance of the authority of the whole Legislature." A stout minority, led by Pitt, opposed the motion, but it was carried by a House that had been carefully doped by the King's Friends, and an order was issued for No. 45 to be burnt by the common hangman. When that officer attempted to perform his duty, he was prevented by a mob that now attended Wilkes's comings and goings in a state of frenzy. The government thereupon had another inspiration. Wilkes was found to be the publisher of a versified *Essay on Woman*, an obscene pamphlet of the kind that is described as "curious" in the booksellers' catalogues. He had, in fact, printed thirteen copies only at a private press, doubtless for the edification of old Medmenham friends. The copies were never sent out,



and whatever we may think of this kind of salacity, the decision to make it a pretext for government action was grotesque. The proceedings, with an incomparable sense of fitness, were entrusted to Lord Sandwich, now a Secretary of State. Distinguished from nearly all his colleagues by ministerial ability, and a man of some engaging qualities, Sandwich was nevertheless notable even in that age as a corrupter of public and private morals. He was enchanted by the prospect of squaring accounts with Wilkes in the matter of the baboon. An obliging chaplain was employed to steal a copy of the *Essay* from Wilkes's papers, and Sandwich read the poem to the House of Lords, under protest as he submitted, but resolved not to spare his own delicacy in bringing the publisher of this outrage to book.\* The audacity of the performance made a sensation in the town. *The Beggar's Opera* was being played at the time, and at the line "But that Jemmy Twitcher should peach, I own surprises me," the audience cried Sandwich! Sandwich!, and Jemmy Twitcher he was till the end of his days. But the King's purpose was served. In January, 1764, Wilkes was expelled from the House in terms of Lord North's motion, and in February he was found guilty in the Court of King's Bench of indecent publication. He had again gone to Paris; in his absence, sentence was postponed, and he was outlawed. For a time he disappeared from the scene of action, but his name had become a popular cry that accompanied a continual fusillade against the King's pretensions. Liberty has appeared in few odder guises than the person of John Wilkes, but perhaps in none more effective.

In March, 1768, he risked arrest by returning to London, hoping that ministerial changes and the lapse of time

\* The author is said to have been Thomas Potter, son of an Archbishop of Canterbury.



would have softened the temper of authority. He petitioned for a royal pardon. Wilkes's taste for martyrdom had, in fact, been satisfied, and a conciliatory word at this time might easily have silenced him for ever. The King's Friends were sick of harvesting the dead-sea fruits of 1763, and advised their master to an act of clemency. But George was inflexible. At this moment a general election took place. As we have seen, Charles Fox was returned for Midhurst, and Wilkes offered himself to the electors of the City of London. He polled heavily, but was defeated, and the next day he appeared as candidate for the County of Middlesex. After a campaign of intense excitement, he was elected by a majority of over four hundred. The King stiffened in his determination, and the order went forth that the new member was not to be allowed to take his seat in the House. Before parliament assembled, Wilkes had managed to get his outlawry removed on a technical point, and appeared before the King's Bench to hear the suspended judgment of the court. He was sentenced to imprisonment for twenty-two months, a fine of one thousand pounds, and a term of seven years' probation on leaving gaol. The mob tried to rescue him as he was being conveyed from the court, and failing in this consoled itself with the assurance that he would be liberated as soon as parliament met. But May 10, the date fixed for that event, arrived, and Wilkes did not appear. A great crowd gathered at the prison gates, demanding his release. The King had anticipated the move, and had a Highland regiment in readiness. A riot followed, several persons were wounded, and one killed. The magistrate who had given the order to fire, and the soldier who had obeyed so successfully, were tried for murder; the one was acquitted, and the other dismissed the service with a pension. Wilkes in prison got hold of a copy of the letter conveying the royal thanks to the Highlanders for their zeal, and



had it published as showing "how long the horrid massacre in St. George's Fields had been planned and determined upon . . . and how long a Hellish project can be brooded over by some infernal spirits without one moment's remorse." In February, 1769, after ten months of confinement, he was summoned to the Bar of the Commons to answer for this offence. He denounced the letter as a "bloody Scroll," and by two hundred and nineteen votes to a hundred and thirty-seven was expelled the House. A fortnight later Middlesex again returned him unopposed. The government submitted that his expulsion still stood after re-election, and carried their point. Yet again the Middlesex electors declared that Wilkes, and none but Wilkes, should be their member, and again the election was declared void. Seeing that this farce was to be enacted for a fourth time, the government put forward a candidate of their own, a bullying colonel by name Henry Luttrell. And among his most ardent supporters in the booths were the sons of Lord Holland, dutifully employing their youthful eloquence at the paternal bidding. It was not notably effective. The poll was declared, and read Wilkes, 1143, Luttrell, 296. It is to be hoped that Messrs. Whittaker and Roche did not spend much time or money on this election, as the former gentleman polled five votes and the latter none.

Unwearied in docility, the House resolved "that Henry Luttrell, Esquire, is duly elected a Knight of the shire to serve in the present Parliament for the county of Middlesex." The quarrel now entered a phase of unrestrained violence. Every other topic was banished from the public mind. Horace Walpole told of a man who began a letter, "I take the Wilkes-and-Liberty to assure you. . . ." The House debated little else for some months. In January, 1770, Chatham in the Lords raised his voice against Luttrell's presence in the lower House in words



of crushing moderation, but his protest attracted only thirty-six votes against two hundred and three. This was on the 9th of the month, and on the same day Charles James Fox rose in the Commons to address the House.