

CHAPTER VIII

FOX THE WHIG. THE DECLINE OF NORTH. 1777-1780

I

CHARLES went to Chatsworth for his vacation, as the guest of William Cavendish, fifth Duke of Devonshire, and his young wife Georgiana, now twenty years of age, who was presently to play so picturesque a part in the great Liberal's career. On September 8, 1777, he wrote to Burke, "with respect to public affairs, it seems to be the opinion of everybody that one must wait for events, to form a plan of operations; now, my opinion is, that no event likely to happen can be anything to the purpose; but from the days of Demosthenes down to ours, it has ever been the resource of all indolent people to prefer the waiting of news to the taking of any decisive measure. . . . I have been living here some time, with very pleasant and very amiable people, but altogether as unfit to storm a citadel, as they would be proper for the defence of it." In the same letter, he announced his intention, as parliament was to meet late, of visiting friends in Ireland. Thither, two days later, he set out, and while there was much fêted and dined, formed the acquaintance of Henry Gratton, and caused a local sensation by bathing unharmed in the icy waters of the Devil's Punch Bowl at Killarney. During his absence he received a long letter from Burke, little suited to his own impetuosity, and yet remarkable as an exposition both of the Whig attitude at the time and of Fox's contact with it. Its significance as a gloss on our later days will not pass unnoted. The main argument is directed against the complaint of insufficient unity of purpose. The Tories, so it runs, have been able to create a popular mood against which reason and generous impulses are powerless. They "do universally think their power and consequence

involved in the success of this American business. The clergy are astonishingly warm in it, and what the Tories are when embodied and united with their natural head, the Crown, and animated by their clergy, no man knows better than yourself. . . . There is something so weighty and decisive in the events of war, something that so completely overpowers the imagination of the vulgar, that all councils must, in a great degree, be subordinate to, and attendant on them. . . . So that, on the whole, what with the temper of the people, the temper of our own friends [Burke is unconvincingly careful to speak as for their friends rather than for himself—he also has been an absentee from debates], and the domineering necessities of war, we must quietly give up all idea of any settled, preconcerted plan. . . . However, to act with any people with the best degree of comfort . . . we must . . . a little . . . assimilate to their character. . . . They [the Rockingham Whigs] are, indeed, worthy of much concession and management; I am quite convinced that they are the honestest public men that ever appeared in this country, and I am sure that they are the wisest by far of those who appear in it at present.” Then, shrewdly glancing at his correspondent, “God knows whether this citadel is to be stormed by them or by anybody else. . . . I know that, as they are, abstractedly speaking, to blame, so there are those who cry out against them for it, not with a friendly complaint, as we do, but with the bitterness of enemies. . . . I am thoroughly resolved to give, both to myself and my friends, less vexation on these subjects than hitherto I have done; much less indeed. If *you* should grow too earnest, you will be still more inexcusable than I was; your having entered into affairs so much younger, ought to make them too familiar to you to be the cause of much agitation, and you have much more before you for your work. Do not be in haste. Lay your foundations deep in public opinion. . . . I have

never given you the least hint of advice about joining yourself in a declared connexion with our party . . . yet, as I am clear that you are better able to serve them than any man I know, I wish that things should be kept so as to leave you mutually very open to one another . . . and wish this the rather, because (presuming that you are disposed to make a good use of power) you will certainly want some better support than merely that of the Crown. For I much doubt whether, with all your parts, you are the man formed for acquiring real interior favour in this Court or in any; I therefore wish you a firm ground in the country, and I do not know so firm or so sound a bottom to build on as our party."

The good sense of many of these sentiments, the ingenuity of all, the masterly gift for large and apt generalisations, and the tone of sincere personal affection that informs Burke's anxiety, are immediately apparent. How better could the operation of war upon public feeling be defined, how could the case for waiting and seeing be advanced more adroitly? And such parentheses as that on the "interior favour" of a court—how could the essential promise of Fox's character be more incisively told? And yet, in this most notable composition, there is a certain blindness that is more suggestive than all its insight. The Whig character never found, perhaps, a finer vindication than in the courage, the broad-mindedness, and the intellectual scope of Burke. Learned, witty, and brave, the great Irishman carried the old Whig tradition to its furthest limits of enlightened daring. With this tradition, now under Rockingham's presidency, Fox was shortly to ally himself. But merely a Whig, even by Burke's lofty interpretation of the term, he could never be, and that is what Burke failed to understand. Charles Fox was the first great English Liberal, and this implied qualities and ambitions of mind that in some essential respects went far beyond Whig conceptions. He came

to be known as the Tribune of the People. He earned this title not by demagogic revolt against constitutional order, but by bringing a strict observance of that order passionately to the service of popular causes. He really did love the rights and ideals of the English people, and he spent his life in asserting and advancing them. There had been, and still were, Whigs dominated by personal or family interest, and by their agency the party had at times been as fertile a seed-ground for corruption as any other. But Burke was right in his claim for the Rockinghams. The Whig theory of public service as expounded by these men, and by Burke himself, was one of generous probity. But, even at its best, it was regulated by a kind of cold prudence, of which Burke's letter is a striking example. That this was a defect in the Whig temper we need not maintain, but it was a quality that distinguished it sharply from Fox's passionate Liberalism. It is always difficult in the movement of history to assign the inception of an idea to a specific man or moment, but we need not be too cautious. It was Fox, more than any other man, who in English public life transfigured the Whig into the Liberal. How valuable this achievement was, remains a matter of opinion; but the nature of the achievement is clear. To stake everything for a cause, to lose everything, to fight the House of Commons, the nation, the world, single-handed if needs be in vindication of a belief, to be unsubduable and unsilenced in defeat, and to be prepared in all extremities to accept the consequences of liberty "in widest commonalty spread,"—we see Fox detaching himself from the great figures of the time, and going out alone to take up these advance positions in the field of political thought and action. There was, as always, an element of rashness in the intrepidity, and we can understand Burke's misgivings. But it was not the rashness only, it was the intrepidity itself that was beyond the scope even of the finest Whig idealism. To have so

disciplined your mind in a faith, that you could at all times obey your impulses and follow them confidently to the end, asking for no favour and fearing no cost, was Fox's personal enlargement of the Whig doctrine. It alarmed his friends, and it governed his life. When he exclaimed that if America must be defeated or abandoned, he would abandon it, there was not a Whig among them all but was startled by a logic that so outran discretion. It was a logic that was later to lead Charles inevitably to his support of the French Revolution. He realised, long before his time, that the freedom of any people must ultimately depend on the common freedom of civilisation, and it was here that his understanding survived the test, when Burke's failed. He even went beyond this intuitive sense of liberal expediency. He worshipped the idea of freedom for its own sake; it seemed to him a lovely thing, and he would promote it in any place or season. That it was also the source of all other loveliness no one believed more devotedly than he, but it was in itself sufficient. Such a gospel in such an age, delivered with so much fortitude and graced with so much pity, make his much-advertised follies seem strangely inconsiderable. We can see very clearly what Lauderdale meant when he said that Charles was the best man he had ever known.

II

Parliament opened its autumn session in the middle of November. The government news was bad. American privateers were swarming round our coasts; an attempt to fire Portsmouth dockyards had nearly succeeded; Benjamin Franklin was in Paris captivating throngs of eager listeners who pressed to hear the famous savant who attended the salons dressed in snuff-coloured broadcloth and with his grey hair unperiwigged. The court

spirits had survived a somewhat serious reverse in the preceding December at Trenton, Pennsylvania, and in August the King, on hearing of a minor success, had so far forgotten his dignity as to caper into the Queen's room crying, "I have beat them—beat all the Americans." But as Parliament opened the air was thick with rumours of nobody knew what event. Ministers pretended confidence in a substantial victory, but never had pretence been more ill-timed. A few days later was to arrive news of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga with six thousand men.

The royal speech again professed pacific intentions, and asked parliament to augment the forces in such measure as should be necessary to bring His Majesty's rebellious subjects to a sense of their own good. Walpole called it "the most pusillanimous speech" for which the crown party had yet been responsible, "timid, feeble, and disheartening." Fox concentrated his attack on Lord George Germaine, declaring that ever since "that inauspicious Minister" had forced himself into administration, our affairs had rapidly declined. It must be allowed that Charles would have been in a difficulty for an answer had he been asked when he had not claimed as much, but Germaine, whose past record included conviction by a court martial for cowardice in the field, had certainly been an unhappy choice for the American Secretaryship. Fox had no difficulty in showing that the war was steadily drifting away from any hope of a successful conclusion, and he maintained, moreover, that our conduct of it was now completely at the mercy of France, who might declare for the colonists at any moment, and make our withdrawal from America imperative. North rose in defence of his colleague, and said that he was glad Fox had abandoned "an old hulk [North himself] to attack a man-of-war." Any satisfaction Germaine may have derived from the compliment evaporated as he later overheard his

chief remarking to Fox, "Charles, I am glad you did not fall on me to-day, for you was in full feather."

At the end of the month Charles wrote to Ossory that he could not help believing that, while the opposition made no ground in divisions, there was a steady veering of opinion, and that this must presently influence votes. On December 2 he moved for An Enquiry into the State of the Nation. North signified his assent, but, on being asked for specific papers, refused. Burke was reminded of the situation of Sancho Panza, who, seated before a well-furnished table, had suffered the mortification of seeing each dish removed on some specious pretence before he had touched it. At this point a whispered message came in that the Lords had granted the papers in question, and North for once lost his temper. Fox insisted that there could now be no objection to his demand, and that a complete investigation of affairs be forthwith ordered. They knew that the situation was extremely grave, but unless they were informed as to the precise nature of the gravity it was impossible for the House to fulfil its duty by suggesting remedies. In any case, violence was clearly proving ineffective. For two years under Germaine, he said, "the most violent, scalping, tomahawk measures have been pursued; bleeding has been his only prescription. If a people deprived of their ancient rights are grown tumultuous, bleed them! If their fever should rise into rebellion, bleed them, cries this state physician, more blood, more blood, still more blood! When Dr. Sangrado had persevered in a similar practice . . . killing by the very means which he adopted as a cure, his man took the liberty to remonstrate. . . . The Doctor answered, 'I believe we have, indeed, carried the matter a little too far, but you must know I have written a book upon the efficacy of this practice; therefore, though every patient should die of it, we must continue the bleeding for the credit of the book.'" And in

passing he asked the noble lord (Germaine) what he now thought of Mr. Washington, whom he had esteemed so lightly, in view of the tidings at that moment before them? A few hours before the debate opened, accounts of Burgoyne's disaster had reached London. Fox lost his motion by a hundred and seventy-eight votes to eighty-nine. The ministers, a little sobered now but unconverted, were fixed on keeping the country's misfortunes to themselves. At his levee the next morning, the King, in order to show how negligible the misfortunes really were, assumed so lively a mirth that North had to whisper to him that he was overdoing it. Later in the day, Fox pressed Germaine for definite news of Burgoyne, and, on the Secretary's expression of a pious hope that the defeated General would not be condemned unheard, told his lordship to look nearer home for the culprit, and was extremely disrespectful on the topic of a second trial. Burke and Wedderburne fell into a dispute that was like to have ended in a duel had not Charles and other friends intervened. During the following days tension was at fever-heat in both Houses, Fox's private character being assailed by Thurlow, the Attorney-General; Chatham accusing a fellow peer of having been a rake, to which the offended nobleman replied hotly that Chatham was still a dolt, to be corrected by another lordship who said that the oracle had only lost his memory; the opposition making motions that were supported by an unexpected vote or two from the government benches, and Wilkes making motions that were supported only by himself. As the storm subsided, North emerged from Utopian consultations with the King, gloomily convinced, nevertheless, that at last something had to be done. On December 10 he informed the House that after the holidays he should lay before them "a plan for treating with the Americans," adding, in terms from which the old confident lustre had gone, "I trust we still have force enough to bring forwards

an accommodation." Charles protested that in this hour of national danger there ought to be no holidays. Chatham urged the same point in the Lords, when the young Earl of Suffolk, who was not too bright in his mind, indecently distinguished himself by telling the great old statesman that he naturally wished to be heard as much as possible in the House, as nobody would listen to him out of it. North decided that a holiday was very much to be desired, and Parliament adjourned for six weeks. The King, in order to mark his disapproval of the situation in general, dismissed two quite inoffensive gentlemen of his household because they had Whig friends.

III

Parliament was called for January 20, 1778, but business was delayed by the absence of Lord George Germaine, whose wife had died of measles during the recess. On an early date, Fox asked for Burgoyne's instructions to be laid before the House, with no more result than to throw a few Tories into a rage. Lord North, on being asked what the army's American quarters were like, replied sweetly that he would be a great deal more comfortable there than in the House of Commons. *The Morning Post*, "a new and most infamous newspaper," in Walpole's words, that had been founded in November, 1776, tried unsuccessfully to involve Charles in a duel with Colonel Luttrell, who had an unfortunate habit of becoming inarticulate when roused to great passion, as he frequently was by Fox. He had the good grace, when the newspaper accused his tormentor of cowardice in not issuing a challenge, to explain that he was no party to this transparent design. On February 2 Fox rose to make a speech that lasted two hours and forty minutes. He was to move "That no more of the Old Corps be sent out of the Kingdom." A great crowd assembled at the

doors of the House, and was refused admittance, the Duchess of Devonshire being conspicuous among a large number of ladies so denied. The speech, "framed with astonishing memory and method," condemned the war in the now familiar terms, and then in a masterly survey of its course showed how grossly it had been mismanaged, "even on the principles of those who undertook it." Fox added nothing to the argument on this occasion, but he explored the full range of the opposition case in an effort that gathered up many separate complaints into one sustained and coherent challenge. As he sat down there was a pause in expectation of the ministerial reply. Outside a large crowd still waited, knowing that something momentous was going forward within. Nobody rose from the Treasury Bench. An amazed shuffle went through the House and beyond it as moment after moment passed and Fox's clear and, on this occasion, unimpassioned reasoning remained unanswered. North and his friends had realised that it was unanswerable. They decided to run no risk of making bad worse, and to rely upon their ample majority to pull them through the crisis. With an ungainly pretence that the indictment to which they had listened for nearly three hours was unworthy of notice, they called for a division. They got their majority, but to their consternation the minority vote was a hundred and sixty-five against their own two hundred and fifty-nine. The next day Charles wrote to Fitzpatrick, who was now in America, "We had several Tories with us, and I really think it was a great day for us. The Ministry . . . did not say one word, which scandalised even their own friends. . . . The fact is, that it is such a cause as no man can defend well, and therefore nobody likes to attempt it." He added that while he believed that the opposition would continue to increase their influence by vote, he still had no hope of overthrowing the ministry.

On February 17 North produced his promised Plan for Conciliation. Walpole notes the date in his journal as "A day for ever memorable as one of the most ignominious in the English annals." North's speech was an evasive but none the less humiliating confession of defeat. He proposed to introduce two Bills; one abrogating all right to American taxation, the other providing for a settlement of the colonies by treaty with Congress, which was to be considered as "a legal body" whose "acts and concessions would bind all America." He was grotesquely pleased to say that even "a renunciation of independence would not be insisted on till the treaty had received final ratification by the King and parliament." As he spoke, the House preserved an unbroken and gloomy silence. It was suddenly clear that the whole American undertaking had been a dismal and disgraceful failure. What North still refused to recognise was that not only the war, but America, was lost. Fox, in announcing his support of North's proposals, warned him that they were likely to prove too late, and then confounded the minister by asking whether he was aware that ten days before a treaty had been signed between France and the United States. North was not aware of it. He had blindfolded the country for six weeks at Christmas, and had allowed the state to sink thus deeper into the morass. He was not even informed of this vital circumstance; Franklin had in fact signed a treaty of Peace and Commerce in Paris on February 6. And now nothing was left to the administration but an absurd affectation that all was still very well and hopeful. The King and his ministers had always desired peace, and now peace was in sight. Well might Walpole say of North that his impudence was his only honesty.

There is no doubt that North at this moment was sincere in his repeatedly expressed wishes to resign, and that he remained in office only at the King's urgent request.

He was too weak a man to resist George's stubborn will, and at the same time his pliability made him far too valuable an implement for the King to sacrifice. To find another minister of a like unfailing good humour and docility would be impossible, and the King knew it. Moreover, there existed between the two men a real personal attachment, which lends a touch of human warmth to their long and discreditable connection. "What you mention of my kindness is agreeable to me," the King had written in November, 1775, "and indeed honourable to you, as the affectionate regard I have for you arises from the very handsome conduct you have held when others shamefully deserted my service." Again, in March, 1776, "You will never find any occasion of providing for your children that I shall not be more happy if possible than yourself to provide for them. It has not been my fate in general to be well served; by you I have, and therefore cannot forget it." And yet again, in September, 1777, "You have at times dropped to me that you have been in debt ever since your first settling in life. . . . I therefore must insist that you will now state to me whether 12 or £15000 will not set your affairs in order . . . nay, if £20000 is necessary I am resolved you shall have no other person concerned in freeing them but myself. . . . You know me very ill if you do not think that of all the letters I have ever wrote to you this one gives me the most pleasure, and I want no other return but you being convinced that I love you as well as a man of worth as I esteem you as a minister." And when Fox now, in March, 1778, taunted North again with his constant and never realised desire for resignation, he did not know that a few weeks before (January 31) the King had written, "I should have been greatly hurt at the inclination expressed by you to retire, had I not known that, however you may now and then be inclined to despond, yet that you have too much personal affec-

tion for me, and sense of honour, to allow such a thought to take any hold on your mind." And North, writing that he felt "both his mind and body grow every day more infirm and unable to struggle with the hardships of these arduous times,"* stayed on.

The state of the ministry was desperate. The American-French treaty, which asserted the independence of the states as a principal object, was virtually a declaration of war between France and England. North's conciliatory Bills—three of them eventually—conceived in panic, fell still-born upon the world. The Americans would discuss nothing so long as British forces remained in their dominions. The French treaty emboldened the attitude, as Fox had predicted. The only course that could have given North a chance of facing the world with credit was the recall of all troops. But this was beyond his comprehension. Fox rose from oratorical height to height in his insistence. He was tireless in repetition, determined that the issue should escape no one for lack of emphasis. Under this persuasion, the popular voice began to call for Chatham; for a French war, who but he should be the man? The King was stung to a fury not quite unheroic: "No consideration in life shall make me stoop to Opposition. I am still ready to accept any of them that will come to the assistance of my present efficient Ministers; but whilst ten men in the kingdom will stand by me, I will not give myself into bondage. My dear Lord, I will rather risk my crown than do what I think personally disgraceful . . . it is impossible that the nation shall not stand by me; if they will not, they shall have another King."

* *Correspondence of King George the Third*, edited by Sir John Fortescue, vol. iv., p. 55.

IV

The position of all parties at home and of the national fortunes abroad was now chaotic. North was perpetually on the point of resigning, and perpetually yielding to royal persuasion—he was to retain office for another four years against his own judgment, prosecuting a war in which he no longer found any sort of hope. Not allowed to lay down a power which every day became a plainer mockery, he urged that at least it should be supported by coalition with some of the opposition leaders if terms could be devised. The King went so far, with much misgiving and, as he elaborately explained, purely in deference to North's anxiety, as to assent to the principle, provided always that North himself stayed at the Treasury. But, whatever happened, George was still determined that he would not recognise American independence. Almost anything else he was prepared to do, but not that; which meant that he might as well have been prepared to do nothing. In this he was of a mind with at least one minority element, that led by Chatham, who continued to pronounce liberal sentiments that were nullified by this strange reservation. Protracted negotiations were carried on between the court and the various groups in opposition, groups that were themselves discordant. The increased minority of which Charles had been so proud was subject to violent fluctuations, and on one occasion when it fell again to under fifty, he tore up a motion of censure that he was to propose, and walked out of the House in disgust. The court overtures were made to men who had no concerted intelligence as a party, and North was left unconsolated. During these fruitless approaches, on April 7, Chatham fell senseless on the floor of the House in an apoplectic seizure from which he did not recover. On the next day the King enquired of

North, "May not the political exit of Lord Chatham incline you to remain at the head of my affairs?" So much, and no more. That Chatham was dying did not engage the royal attention, and when he did die, on May 11, and national honours were voted on the same day in the Commons without a dissentient voice, this curious monarch wrote, "I am rather surprised the House of Commons have unanimously voted an Address for a public funeral and a monument in Westminster Abbey for Lord Chatham; but I trust it is worded as a testimony of gratitude for his rousing the nation at the beginning of the last war, and his conduct whilst at that period he held the Seals of Secretary of State, or this compliment, if payed to his general conduct, is rather an offensive measure to me personally." Of the funeral, in June, the court took no notice. On Chatham's death, his followers turned to the leadership of the Earl of Shelburne, with whom Charles Fox's career was beginning to come into contact. For the time the cleavage in the opposition was represented by the divergent views and temperaments of Shelburne and Rockingham.

The political confusion found an aggravated reflection in the war, which was now entering upon a new phase. If the detail of the American struggle hitherto has been outside our scope, still more so is any attempt to elaborate a progress of which the historian* has said that "from henceforth virtually the area of the conflict became that of the globe itself." The commissioners who were sent out to America realised within a week of arrival the futility of their errand; they were treated with no more than an indulgent courtesy. The King fulminated against France, declared he would lead the army himself, usurped the functions of the War Minister, and would not allow the fleet to sail from Portsmouth until it had undergone his

* J. M. Ludlow.

personal inspection.* He worked incessantly, bravely, and without a gleam of understanding. To have entered upon the American war was a mistake that in the light of history it is difficult to excuse; but to have continued it after the spring of 1778, with no honour left in the cause and no prospect of success in the field, was an act of headlong imbecility. It was not until 1788 that by the records George III. suffered from his second attack of madness—the first had been in 1765—but it is difficult to reconcile this falsetto display of egomania at any time with secure sanity. On far less evidence many men have been committed to miserable confinement, as dangerous lunatics.

V

The autumn session in parliament brought no relief to the ministry, though the King retained his touching faith in the virtue of a majority, which would no doubt furnish

* The following brief notes from the King to Sandwich, hitherto unprinted, are preserved among the Hinchinbrooke papers. Related to the stress of the times, they have their charm:

“QUEEN’S HOUSE. *April 22, 1778.*

“3 m. pt. 9 p.m.

“LORD SANDWICH,

“That everything may be properly arranged at Portsmouth, I have directed my clerk of the Kitchen, Charles Ramus, who is the bearer of this, to go to-morrow to that place, that he may see what articles are necessary to be carried there; I desire you will, therefore, give him a line of introduction to the Commissioner. I have told him to have nothing but plain roast and boiled, and no attempt of a dessert, for that would be carrying many more servants.”

“PORTSMOUTH DOCKYARD. *May 6, 1778.*

“21 m. past 8 p.m.

“LORD SANDWICH,

“I wish you would suggest what is best to be done to-morrow morning; if you have nothing particular, I will take the Queen out in the chaise just to see the face of the country, and in the evening I will row up the harbour to see the vessels in ordinary. . . .”

such men and money as two wars—and the prospect of a third, with Spain—required, and bring all to a happy conclusion. North was as obsequious as ever, but this time even he began to grow a little weary of the royal prattling in the face of inexorable facts. Opposition continued to expose a bankrupt policy with increasing violence, the weight of the attack falling more and more heavily on North himself. Shelburne in the Lords, glancing at certain sinecures recently granted by the King to his minister, referred to emoluments that were formerly the rewards for service, and were now the palliatives of disgrace. Fox took up the same note in the Commons, and in “one of the most severe philippics ever pronounced” dwelt on North’s “accumulation of places, heaped on him in proportion to his miscarriages,” and reduced the first minister of the crown to tears and a pathetic explanation that his offices had all been “the voluntary offer of his Gracious Royal Master, and in consideration of his numerous family.” As North was heir to one fortune and had married another, and as his numerous family consisted of five children, the appeal fell flat. Everyone understood the King’s motives in showering obligations on a minister who had been so accommodating, and who was now so tiresomely bent on resignation. Disturbing as was the candour of these reprimands, the court party had yet more serious warnings of its insecurity. The new year, 1779, which was blown in by a gale of phenomenal fury, opened with preparations for Admiral Keppel’s court-martial at Portsmouth. Of this celebrated trial, which was the outcome of an indecisive action between the British and French fleets off Brest in July, 1778, it is enough to say here that it was instigated by the Sandwich faction for personal reasons, that it became a party issue with the King openly supporting his Admiralty chief, that the Rockingham Whigs bestirred themselves to an activity that surprised Fox

into exclamations of delight, and that, in defiance of a prosecution that did not scruple even to manipulate log-books to its purpose, Keppel was honourably acquitted amid demonstrations of public joy, Sandwich being forced to take refuge in the Horse Guards from an angry mob, and North hiding on the roof of his house until rescued by the soldiery.

Under this pressure, new proposals for coalition were made. Rockingham would not consider office with divided authority, a position which Fox urged him to abandon in a notable letter dated January 24, 1779. Referring to their past discussions on the matter, he continues:

“What you considered as a step of the most dangerous tendency to the Whig party, I looked upon as a most favourable opportunity for restoring it to that power and influence which I wish it to have as earnestly as you can do . . . [my opinion is] that power (whether over a people or a king) obtained by gentle means, by the goodwill of the person to be governed, and, above all, by degrees, rather than by a sudden exertion of strength, is in its nature more durable and firm than any advantage that can be obtained by contrary means. I do not say all this in hopes of convincing you, but only in my own justification for entertaining sentiments so opposite to those of the person in the world I most respect. In short, our difference of opinion is quite complete. You think you can best serve the country by continuing in a fruitless opposition; I think it impossible to serve it at all but by coming into power, and go even so far as to think it irreconcilable with the duty of a public man to refuse it, if offered to him in a manner consistent with his private honour, and so as to enable him to form fair hopes of doing essential service. . . . That I am not myself personally over-eager to accept office, I believe

I could easily enough prove, if I were so inclined. But I do beg of you, my dear Lord, to consider how very impracticable it is either for me or for many other parts of the Opposition, to go on together upon the ideas upon which you maintain your refusal. For is it, or is it not, a fair and open declaration that you will never have anything to do with any Ministry that is *not entirely* of your own framing? . . . All I desire is that you will give me explicit answers to two questions; and this I think I have a right to, from the very open conduct I have always held towards you. The first . . . is, Whether you persist in the opinion you had of rejecting, if again proposed, the offer formerly made? . . . If you should persist in rejecting all offers of this sort, my next question is, Supposing an Administration should be formed partly of those who now act in Opposition, and partly of the present people (always understanding the most exceptionable to be removed, particularly North, Sandwich, and Germaine) whether you would give such a Ministry any countenance whatever? By *countenance*, I mean whether any of your friends would take employments with such a Ministry, if they were such as were suitable to them in other respects, and the men with whom they had to act, such as they could have no other objection to than that of coming in contrary to your opinion? . . . All I can say is that I will give you my word of honour not to make any rash or improper use of any answer you may make me. If you decline answering it, I shall not complain, but it is a necessary one for me to ask. I think [your answers] very essential in regulating my future conduct. . . . I will trouble you no more upon this subject, but surely if there was ever a crisis where a country demanded all the efforts of its best men, it is the present, and surely some blame must lie at the doors of those who, from mistrust or suspicion, deprive it of the best assistance it can have. . . .”

From this letter the cordiality of the writer's personal relations with Rockingham is clear, but the phrase "any of your friends," used as it is in a political sense, shows that Charles was writing to the leader of a party to which he did not yet look upon himself as pledged. Charles was answered at great length by the Duke of Richmond, in terms that emphasised this circumstance. The reasons given for Rockingham's refusal to accept court advances were persuasive; the ministry, it was more than suspected, were seeking Whig support merely to save their own tottering credit, and offered no undertakings either of present reform in American policy or of such future measures as would limit the arbitrary conduct of the crown. If it was said that the opposition could secure a cabinet majority in the proposed redistribution of places, then there could be no reason for not asking Rockingham to form his own ministry, with a reservation by treaty of seats for certain members of the old government. But in Richmond's view, which was here expressed as that of the Rockingham party, the King had not the least intention of taking any step that would weaken his own authority; he was consenting to these overtures merely to compose North's anxieties, and would see to it that the admission of no Whig to his counsels should interfere with his personal designs. In short, the Rockinghams were to be bribed into silence. The interpretation was a shrewd one, shrewd, perhaps, beyond the scope of Charles's enthusiasms at the time. In any case, that is what the Rockinghams felt about it, and as it happened theirs was an honour against which bribery was powerless. The King for his part was glad enough to have escaped again the danger of so odious a connection, and to see North convinced of the futility of all such approaches. Richmond, at the end of his letter, turned from his general survey of the situation to Charles's own position, using words of weighty significance:

“ I have only one more subject to mention, and that is your stating that those who think differently from us as to entering into this negotiation may not think themselves justified in refusing to accept of office where they may hope to do some good . . . that although they may wish for a *total* change as the *best thing*, they may not think themselves bound, when they see that impossible, to reject the second best, and leave things at the *worst*. If this reasoning applies to yourself, and circumstanced as things are, you feel inclined to take employment with the present people (after a few changes are made) I can only say that your conduct must be entirely guided by your own opinions, and I do assure you that I shall not impute your change to any improper desire for the emoluments of office. But as I certainly differ from you as to the wisdom of such a step, I cannot admit that it is real reason which governs you. I must therefore believe your opinions arise from a mistaken idea that they are right, which I think your want of patience in the present difficult situation, and the natural eagerness of your temper, leads you to believe. I can only offer you my opinions . . . from a real anxiety for your welfare, that such a step will be far from being for your interest. I am sure you will pardon the sincerity of so near a relation. You have many of those social virtues which command the love of friends. You have abilities in abundance; and your conduct of late years has done much to regain that public confidence which is so necessary to a public man. By a steady perseverance you may accomplish so essential an object. Once more pardon the effusion of a sincere heart. . . .”

This communication, honourable alike to Charles and his kinsman, nevertheless harped on the, “want of patience” and the “eagerness of temper” that had been the burden of Burke’s complaint. There is, however, no

reason to suppose that in this instance Charles was in any danger of being carried off his feet, or even beyond the depth of orthodox Whig prudence. That he seriously thought of taking office independently of the recognised opposition leaders is highly improbable, but he put his question bluntly in order to test the realities of the formal Whig mind. He sincerely thought Rockingham to be misguided, but he did not seriously think his own unsupported opinion to be of more value than that of men far older and more experienced than himself. Having applied his test, he dropped the subject, as he had promised, and he took no further steps to secure the offer that North was willing and even eager to make. The close of this correspondence, indeed, virtually marks Charles's entry into formal association with the Rockingham party. The spring debates of 1779 saw him the acknowledged leader of the opposition in the House of Commons. In June of this year, the Countess of Ossory, writing that for herself she is sick of politics, adds that others would be too "if there were not a Charles Fox in the world to spirit them up." Writing to the King on May 29, 1779, Charles Jenkinson, then Secretary at War, leader of the King's Friends, and afterwards Lord Liverpool, in a report of gossip that he has gathered about opposition designs, makes the astonishing statement that in the disposal of offices under any coalition, "Mr. Charles Fox must have a Place, but He would be content with one of Profit only without any Share of Business."* Mr. Jenkinson was a singularly ill-informed spy.

VI

Early in March Fox moved a vote of censure on the Admiralty for neglect and duplicity. In a powerful speech, directed openly at Sandwich, he showed with his

* Fortescue, vol. iv., p. 345.

usual mastery of detail that the First Lord had given the House false information as to the strength of the fleet before the action off Brest, that he was himself misinformed as to the strength of the enemy, and that he had culpably exposed Keppel to danger of destruction from which nothing could have saved him had the French taken their opportunity. Fox announced that if his motion were carried, he should proceed to another demanding Sandwich's removal from office, which in turn might be followed by impeachment. So convincing was his argument, and so vulnerable in fact was Sandwich's administration of the navy at that time, that as his indictment proceeded ministers became seriously apprehensive of defeat. North joined in the defence with unaccustomed vigour, and argued gravely that the motion was not against a department but against the government as a whole. His appeal to the personal loyalty of his followers was timely, and saved the division by no wider a margin than two hundred and four votes to a hundred and seventy. Highly encouraged by the event, Fox let it be known that he should bring his motion forward again in another form, which he did five days later. In the meantime Sandwich, not concealing his fears for his reputation and even his personal security, spared no effort to call up every possible vote, and on this occasion the government majority rose to seventy-two. Fox's pertinacity was not to be denied, and six weeks again later he moved for the Earl's removal, but by this time the court wires had been dexterously pulled, and Sandwich secured his verdict by a majority only three short of a hundred.

But the official vindication did not rob the attack of its effect. These Admiralty speeches, together with others made by Fox during the same session on the general conduct of the war, induced a growing dissatisfaction in the public mind. "We have lost America. We have lost twenty-five thousand men. We have spent upwards of

thirty millions by this accursed American war. Who has been the cause of its miscarriage? Is not that the question? Who led us into this war? Ministers. What were our motives for entering into and prosecuting it hitherto? The repeated assurances of ministers that the war was practicable; that the means for insuring success were adequate; that the issue would be correspondent"—as week by week Charles assailed his opponents in words of such incisive challenge, reply became more and more constrained and shuffling, and ministers would sometimes leave the House uneasily contemplating a bare majority of twenty. Even the King grew restive; on February 12 we find: "I am sorry Lord North takes so much to heart the division of this day: I am convinced this country will never regain a proper tone unless Ministers . . . will not mind being now and then in a minority." But on March 4: "Lord North cannot be surprised at my indignation at the number of persons who so shamefully avoided attending yesterday, which made the majority so much less than it ought to have been," and a list of defaulters is required. The King's letters to North from this date become increasingly peremptory, brushing aside the minister's repeated requests to be relieved from office with undisguised impatience, and rigorously applying the whip to a jaded and very unwilling horse. An occasional success in America, a fugitive spark in the steadily deepening gloom, was sufficient to support George's obstinacy, but it deceived no one else. Inspired by a new national spirit, the United States even during the progress of the war were opening up and settling vast new territories; volunteer associations in Ireland were sending in angry demands for the redresses of grievances to which nobody could pay a moment's attention; and in June Spain declared war against England. And on this last event the astonishing King could write: "The different papers from America show

very clearly that, had not Spain now thrown off the mask, we should soon have found the colonies sue for pardon to the mother-country," and again, a few days later: "The enclosed papers confirm me in an opinion long entertained that America, unless this summer supported by a Bourbon fleet, must sue for peace . . . I can never agree to healing over an uncured wound—it must be probed to the bottom . . . yet after that I would shew that the parent's heart is still affectionate to the penitent child." And, even more sublimely, before he would admit any man to office, he would "expect to see it signed under his hand that he is resolved to keep the empire entire, and that no troops shall consequently be withdrawn from [America] nor independence ever allowed." A country that could survive such a ruler has not for nothing acquired a gallant reputation for blundering through.

Those voluble patriots to whom we owe the term "Little Englanders" have, as we have seen, always seen in Charles Fox an object peculiarly suited to their fussy indignations. Mr. C. L. Fletcher, for example, in his *Introductory History of England*, writing of the French Revolutionary period, says: "As he had rejoiced over Saratoga and Yorktown, so Fox rejoiced at every British reverse and every French triumph until the Peace of Amiens." A very disloyal, ill-conditioned fellow, in fact, with a settled grudge against his own country and an unnatural affection for anyone who should declare himself to be her enemy. This fevered view has no foundation in fact. Fox thought that the American war was a wicked undertaking, and he opposed it with an utter disregard of his own interests. He thought that the French Revolution, in spite of its horrible excesses, was necessary to the emancipation of a people, and again he braved storms of obloquy rather than consent to a policy that should frustrate it. That in either course he was

dishonouring his English name is a delusion that Bonapartes must not expect us all to share. And for the rest, the events of this summer of 1779 are plainly significant. Inflexible in his denunciations of the American war, Fox nevertheless kept a clear reckoning between that undertaking and the conflict with France and Spain. He rightly held the one to have arisen from the other, and he charged the ministry with full responsibility for this dismal consequence of the original act of unscrupulous folly. But while he believed that the Americans were splendidly resisting a tyrannous crown, he believed that France and Spain were basely using this country's embarrassments for their own interests, and he never for a moment confused our right to oppress our American colonists with our right to defy the threats of our opportunist neighbours. Any measure brought forward by the government for defence against these he supported with the full weight of his authority. When North in June introduced a Bill for doubling the Militia, Fox urged the minister to greater exertions than were proposed. He understood that five or six ships that could be sailed against the Bourbon fleets were nearly ready—let “every ship-carpenter, every labourer in the dock-yards, every man in the Kingdom, capable of holding an adze or driving a peg” be instantly employed in their completion. “God knows,” he added, speaking of the Militia, “that this is a moment of great public danger, and every means of every sort, which are in the least likely to enable us to resist our enemies, are proper to be adopted, and shall have my hearty support.”

VII

Charles spent his summer vacation among friends in England, and during part of the time found himself on the south coast when fears of an invasion were acute.

On August 17, 1779, he wrote to Ossory from London that the French and the Spanish fleets were certainly off the Lizard, between the Channel Squadron and Plymouth. Sixty-three enemy ships had been sighted, and the English had but thirty-six. The enemy ships of the line were accompanied by a cloud of frigates, sloops, and fireships. The English fleet, commanded by Sir Charles Hardy, who had received no instructions to prevent this formidable junction, being utterly unable to encounter so prodigious a force, was compelled to retire to the narrow part of the Channel, whilst the flags of France and Spain menaced and insulted the English coasts without molestation or control. Plymouth was, by the unaccountable negligence of the ministers, left so entirely destitute of the means of defence, that the docks and shipping in the harbour might have been destroyed without difficulty. Fortunately this was not known to the confederate commanders.* A few days later Charles was himself at Plymouth, believing that a battle was inevitable, and determined to find out the true position of things at first hand. On August 26 he wrote to Richard Fitzpatrick that the enemy seemed unaccountably to have withdrawn. "If I should think, from what I hear, that there is really any chance of their coming, you will easily imagine that I shall not leave this country so soon as I otherwise intended; but I think, if they do not appear very soon, the whole must be a mistake, or perhaps, after all, designedly false intelligence. I shall be in town on Friday or Saturday, unless there is a probability of more interesting sport here than partridge shooting." The next day he dined on board the *Sir John Ross* with John Jervis, then a captain, from whom he learnt that an attack was unlikely, but writing again to Fitzpatrick, he displayed a temper that should be noted. "The

* W. Belsham. *Memoirs of the Reign of George III.* 2nd ed., 1795.

fleet to-day was a most magnificent sight. It was formed in order that, in case of an attack, they may not be found in the confusion that Johnston was; and faith, when one looks at it and thinks there is a possibility of its coming to action in a day or two, *on se sent ému beaucoup*. If some things were otherwise at home, and the fleet were commanded by Keppel, one should feel very eager indeed; when, even in the present damned state of things, who cannot help feeling something at the sight of it? . . . At all events, if the French should come again, I cannot think they will go away as they did before, and that there must, either at sea or land, be *quelque chose à voir*; in which case I should be very much vexed indeed, to have left this country just before the sight begins." On the next day he sent a further note: "There has been a strong south-west wind all day, but no news or even report at Plymouth."

Back in London Charles found a rumour current that the ministry was to resign, and a letter to Fitzpatrick indicates that he had some belief in it: "I really think there is now a possibility of saving the country, if these foolish people will give up the thing to those who know better. Between this and next campaign there is time for increasing the navy incredibly, or for, what would be much better, making a peace which we should dare to do, and these poor devils dare not." News of a success in America, however, enabled the King to rally his flagging team once more.

Parliament reopened at the end of November, and the King's speech from the Throne achieved a startling distinction by containing not a single reference to the American war. Charles, in a long speech that made his anxiety for energetic measures against the continental powers and his contempt for the ministry equally clear, laid especial stress on this preposterous omission. Is the American war, he asked, "too trifling a subject to chal-

lenge any part of his Majesty's attention . . . ? or is it totally extinct and given to oblivion ? . . . I desire the ministry to speak out, and say whether the American, like the Trojan war, is totally past, and no longer to be remembered in this House." In the course of the speech he severely censured Mr. William Adam, a Scotch member two years younger than himself, who had recently been voting with the opposition and now announced his intention of going over to the ministerial side, his reasons being reduced by Charles to terms of ridicule: "Sir," he was represented as saying to North, "I cannot defend you on the ground of your own conduct, it is so replete with blunders, absurdities and inconsistencies, that all my abilities cannot even palliate them; but I will tell you what I can do to serve you: I will inform the world, that the men who oppose you are, more ignorant, more inconsistent, more infamous, and more disgraceful than yourself."

The speech was delivered on November 25. On the 26th Fox and Adam met in private discussion. On the 27th Adam wrote to Fox saying that after long reflection he was of opinion that his character could be cleared only by the insertion in the press of a statement that Fox meant no personal reflection by the offending passages of his speech. To this Charles replied: "I am very sorry to say that it is utterly inconsistent with my ideas of propriety, to authorise the putting anything into the newspapers relative to a speech which, in my opinion, required no explanation. You, who heard the speech, must know that it did convey no personal reflection upon you, unless you felt yourself in the predicament upon which I animadverted. The account of my speech in the newspapers is certainly unauthorised by me. . . . Neither the conversation which passed at Brooks's, nor this letter are of a secret nature, and if you have any wish to relate the one, or to show the other, you are

at perfect liberty to do so." Adam was unpacified, and on November 28 wrote saying that Charles's refusal to permit the publication of the proposed paragraph entitled him to demand "the only satisfaction that such an injury will admit of." On the following morning, a Monday, the two men met at eight o'clock in Hyde Park, Adam accompanied by Major Humbertson, a soldier who was to lose his life in India, and Charles by his devoted friend Fitzpatrick. A ground of fourteen paces was marked out, and on being asked by Adam to open, Fox replied: "Sir, I have no quarrel with you; do you fire," which Adam thereupon did. Neither he nor the seconds perceived that his bullet had taken effect. Fox fired wide, and Adam was then asked if he was content. He enquired whether Fox would now declare that no personal affront had been intended. Fox, asserting that this was no place for apologies, desired his opponent to go on. Adam fired again, less surely this time. Fox discharged his remaining pistol in the air, and then observed that as the affair was ended he was at liberty to assure Mr. Adam of his honourable regard. Adam returned the compliment suitably, and it was not till then that Charles informed them that he had been wounded by the first shot. On opening his waistcoat they found that it was so, but not alarmingly. He took a week to recover, appearing in the House again on December 6, when *The Annual Register* recorded that the "incident seemed to have produced a renovation, rather than any detraction of his former spirit." The duellists, in the best tradition of romance, later became firm friends, and in Charles's dark days of the French Revolution Adam was one of the few associates of the North coalition period who did not desert him. It may be added that he lived to be eighty-eight, dying in 1839 after a distinguished career at the English court under the regency and as Lord Chief Commissioner in Scotland, the "excellent old man" of

Walter Scott's affection, "one of the most pleasant, kind-hearted, benevolent, and pleasing men I have ever known."

VIII

During the winter of 1779-80, the country simmered with protests against the growing corruption of parliament and the unwarrantable influence of the crown. Shire after shire sent in petitions calling on the Commons to vote no more supplies until reform was granted. An example set by York was followed by Hampshire, Middlesex, Cheshire, Devon, Huntingdon, Essex, Bedford, Dorset, Somerset, and even Welsh counties. In February, 1780, a great meeting in Westminster Hall, attended by Burke and Fox and their supporters, our old friend Wilkes, General Burgoyne of Saratoga, the leading opposition peers, and some three thousand members of the general public, warmly pressed the cause of the county petitions. Charles was placed in the chair, and for the first time showed the power that he could exercise over popular imagination. When at the close of the meeting it was proposed that he should be adopted as the future candidate for Westminster, the hall surged with applause. In the same month, Burke introduced his plan for economical reform, and in the following debates Fox in the now maturing prime of his eloquence drove hard upon a weakening government. On a subsidiary motion North escaped by a majority of only two. When the House at length divided on the first clause of Burke's plan, the opposition came within seven of victory in a House of over four hundred. This was on March 8; on the 13th the ministry suffered an actual reverse, failing by eight votes to save a government department from abolition.*

* The department in question was the Board of Trade, of which Edward Gibbon, who was brought to the House to vote suffering from an acute attack of gout, was a commissioner. The opposition success did not, in fact, take effect, being reversed on a later division.

The King, who a week before had in familiar terms assured North that he "could never suppose this country so far lost to all ideas of self-importance as to be willing to grant America independence," now declared that he could only attribute the strange behaviour of the Commons to loss of reason. His Majesty was very shortly to have his suspicions alarmingly aggravated. On April 6, Charles addressed the Westminster petitioners in their hall, again attacking the arbitrary methods of the King, and demanding annual parliaments. The court, expecting that the crowd would follow him to the House, ordered the Guards to be in readiness; Charles, however, took his seat without disturbance. But astonishment filled the Treasury benches when John Dunning, a member of opposition, had the audacity to open the debate with a motion "That the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished." As the debate proceeded, ministerial astonishment gave way to consternation. The wording of the motion was as radical a challenge as could be devised against the whole court faction, and as midnight approached it was felt that Fox, leading the opposition, was at last about to bring his forces to a triumph about which there could be no equivocation. The ministerial alarm was dramatically justified. The vote was taken, and Dunning's motion was carried by two hundred and thirty-three votes against two hundred and fifteen. North in subsequent debates was able to recover his majority, and Fox for a time feared that this memorable April 6 was hardly even a false dawn. But longer experience would have told him that these capital decisions are not made by Englishmen in a word. The day was, indeed, even more memorable than Charles's finely strung impetuosity could realise. The victory was no less decisive in that its full effect was not immediately apparent. That majority of eighteen, on so direct an issue,

was in fact a pledge that North's overthrow was in sight, and it was the first note in the swan song of arbitrary sovereignty in England. Had Charles not survived this date, his place in our political history would nevertheless have been assured.