

CHAP.

XLI.

1812.

*March.
Speech of
Earl Grey.*

tainly," he said, " he was not prepared to affirm that it was expedient to recal our troops immediately home, but certainly he did not wish to proceed in that expensive mode of warfare without having some military authority as to the result of it. He thought, and most decidedly, that a reduction of our expenditure was called for by reflections of the most urgent and powerful kind, . . . but if any thing like a certainty of success could be shown in the schemes that were devised, then all his hesitations would be removed, and he should consider even the most extensive scale of foreign operations as recommended by the principles of economy itself. He felt warmly the justice of that cause which we were maintaining in the Peninsula. No cause related in the annals of mankind ever rested more entirely on sentiments of the most honourable feeling, or was more connected (if circumstances were favourable) with principles of national advantage. The spectacle exhibited was the most interesting that could engage the sympathies or the attention of the world; and it was impossible not to wish to afford assistance to the noble struggle of a free people, against the most unparalleled treachery, the most atrocious violence, that ever stained or degraded the ambition of despotic power. But those principles upon which the prosecution of that war could be defended must be reduced to a mere speculative theory, unless supported by adequate exertions from the Spanish people and the Spanish government. Without that necessary cooperation, all our efforts must prove useless. The success of our arms during the last two years had been called complete: he could coincide in no such declaration, knowing, as every other man knew, that the defence of Portugal must be impracticable after Spain should be entirely subdued. We had unquestionably achieved much, and in the capture of Ciudad Rodrigo he concurred in the admiration justly due to the great commander who conducted that important enterprise. But

when he looked to another part of that kingdom, and saw Badajoz in possession of the enemy, .. when he looked to Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia, .. he was at a loss to discover what new prospects of success had dawned upon the Spaniards. Those conquests opened to the enemy a free communication between all their divisions, and they would soon be enabled by that circumstance to bring the whole weight of their united forces against the British. He did think, too, that ministers had been culpably negligent in not having exerted in that quarter the means actually in their power, by employing a considerable naval force for the purpose of lending our allies more effectual succour. Such a system, if properly conducted, would in all probability have enabled the Catalans to expel their invaders. Where then were the symptoms of this boasted success? Lord Wellington, at the head of 62,000 as effective men as were ever led into the field, had been compelled to remain on the defensive! With a force greater than that commanded by the Duke of Marlborough at the most splendid era of our military history, Lord Wellington had found himself limited to the pursuit of a defensive system!"

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Lord Boringdon's motion met with little support, and the tidings of Lord Wellington's success at Badajoz contributed to confirm the confidence which the great majority of the public felt in the existing administration. The fall of that fortress was so decisive a proof of British enterprise and courage, that Buonaparte would not allow it to be mentioned in the French newspapers; and under his vigilant despotism the French people could know nothing more of public affairs than he thought proper to communicate. At this time he was preparing for an expedition upon a greater scale than any which he had before undertaken, and to a greater distance than he had yet advanced in his career of conquest. An overture for peace to the British

*Overture
from the
French go-
vernment.*

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government, upon grounds which he knew to be inadmissible, served now, as on former occasions, for a prelude to this new drama of his ambition. His Majesty the Emperor, the Duc de Bassano said in a communication to Lord Castlereagh, "being constantly actuated by sentiments friendly to moderation and peace, and moved by the awful circumstances in which the world is at present placed, is pleased again to make a solemn and sincere attempt for putting an end to the miseries of war. Many changes have taken place in Europe during the last ten years, which have been the necessary consequence of the war between France and England, and many more changes will be effected by the same cause. The particular character which the war has assumed may add to the extent and duration of these results. Exclusive and arbitrary principles cannot be combated but by an opposition without measure or end; and the system of preservation and resistance must have the same character of universality, perseverance, and vigour. This might have been prevented if the peace of Amiens had been observed." Having referred then to the overtures which Buonaparte had made in the years 1805, 1808 and 1810, the French minister proceeded thus: . . . "I will express myself, sir, in a manner which your excellency will find conformable to the sincerity of the step that I am authorized to take; and nothing will better evince the sincerity and sublimity of it than the precise terms of the language which I have been instructed to use. What motives should induce me to envelope myself in formalities suitable to weakness, which alone can find its interest in deceit? . . . The affairs of the Peninsula and of the Two Sicilies are the points of difference which appear least to admit of being adjusted. . . I am authorized to propose an arrangement of them on the following basis: . . . The integrity of Spain shall be guaranteed. France shall renounce all intention of extending her dominions

beyond the Pyrenees. The present dynasty shall be declared independent, and Spain shall be governed by a national constitution of her Cortes. The independence and integrity of Portugal shall also be guaranteed, and the house of Braganza shall have the sovereign authority. The kingdom of Naples shall remain in possession of the present monarch, and the kingdom of Sicily shall be guaranteed to the present family of Sicily. As a consequence of these stipulations, Spain, Portugal and Sicily shall be evacuated by the French and English land and naval forces. With respect to the other subjects of discussion, they may be negotiated upon this basis, that each power shall retain that of which the other could not deprive it by war. Such, Sir, are the grounds of conciliation offered by his Majesty to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. His Majesty, the Emperor and King, in taking this step, does not look either to the advantages or losses which this empire may derive from the war, if it should be prolonged; he is influenced simply by considerations of the interests of humanity, and the peace of his people. And if this fourth attempt, like those which have preceded it, should not be attended with success, France will at least have the consolation of thinking that whatever blood may yet flow, will be justly imputable to England alone."

This overture was answered as it deserved; Lord Castlereagh was instructed, before he entered into any explanations, to ascertain the precise meaning attached by the French government to its proposal concerning the actual dynasty and government of Spain. "If," said he, "as his Royal Highness fears, the meaning of this proposition is, that the royal authority of Spain and the government established by the Cortes shall be recognised as residing in the brother of the head of the French government, and the Cortes formed under his authority, not in the legitimate

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Lord Castlereagh's reply.

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 XLI. assembly of the Cortes, now invested with the power of the
 1812. government in that kingdom, in his name and by his authority,
 April. I am commanded frankly and explicitly to declare, that the
 obligations of good faith do not permit his Royal Highness to
 receive a proposition for peace founded on such a basis. But
 if the expressions apply to the actual government of Spain,
 which exercises the sovereign authority in the name of Fer-
 dinand VII., upon an assurance of your Excellency to that
 effect, the Prince Regent will feel himself disposed to enter
 into a full explanation upon the basis which has been trans-
 mitted ; it being his most earnest wish to contribute, in concert
 with his allies, to the repose of Europe ; and to bring about
 a peace which may be at once honourable not only for Great
 Britain and France, but also for those states which are in amity
 with each of these powers. Having made known, without re-
 serve, the sentiments of the Prince Regent with respect to a
 point on which it is necessary to have a full understanding pre-
 vious to any ulterior discussion, I shall adhere to the instruc-
 tions of his Royal Highness, by avoiding all superfluous com-
 ment and recriminations on the accessory objects of your letter.
 I might, advantageously for the justification of the conduct
 observed by Great Britain at the different periods alluded to by
 your Excellency, refer to the correspondence which then took
 place, and to the judgement which the world has long since
 formed of it. As to the particular character the war has
 unhappily assumed, and the arbitrary principles which your
 Excellency conceives to have marked its progress, denying as I
 do, that these evils are attributable to the British government,
 I at the same time can assure your Excellency, that it sincerely
 deplores their existence, as uselessly aggravating the calamities
 of war ; and that its most anxious desire, whether at peace or at

war with France, is to have the relations of the two countries restored to the liberal principles usually acted upon in former times.”

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Mr. Perceval murdered.

No answer was attempted to this unanswerable reply; and the signal success of the British arms since the commencement of the year had so far raised the public spirit, that no attempt was made in Parliament to ground upon the failure of these overtures any accusation against the ministers for wantonly prolonging the war. With a great majority in both Houses, and a still greater in the nation, with the confidence also of the Prince Regent, which was now no longer doubtful, the administration seemed, for the first time since the king's malady, to be firmly established, when Mr. Perceval was shot through the heart, in the lobby of the House of Commons, by a madman. The murderer was a person who, having failed in some mercantile speculations at Archangel, and having been thrown into prison there, imagined himself wronged by the Russian government, and by the British government, because it had not taken up his cause, concerning which he had molested both governments with repeated and groundless memorials; for the business was entirely of a private nature, in which they could not interfere. He made no attempt to escape. “My name,” he said, “is Bellingham; it is a private injury; it was a denial of justice on the part of government. I know what I have done. They have driven me to despair by telling me at the public offices that I might do my worst. I have obeyed them: I have been watching more than a fortnight for a favourable opportunity; I have done my worst, and I rejoice in the deed!” He had no personal enmity to Mr. Perceval, with whom, as it happened, he had not at any time communicated; and he would rather have had Lord Levison Gower for his victim, who, having been ambassador in Russia, ought, according to his opinion, to have interfered.

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*May.**Conduct of
the popu-
lace.*

Bellingham was insane on the single point of his own imagined injuries ; but his insanity was of a kind, which for the sake of society, must not be pleaded in bar of justice before an earthly tribunal. The murder was committed on a Monday, and as the sessions had commenced at the Old Bailey, he was brought to trial on the Friday, and executed on the Monday following. On this occasion, it was seen to what a degree seditious journalists, the most nefarious that ever were allowed to make a free press their engine for mischief, had succeeded in corrupting no small portion of the ignorant and deluded multitude. When he was conveyed from the House of Commons to Newgate, in a carriage and under an escort, an attempt was made to rescue him, and the soldiers were hooted. The mob which collected next day in Palace-Yard uttered the most atrocious exclamations. Before it was known that Bellingham was an object of commiseration as well as horror, he was extolled in pot-houses as a friend to the people who had done them good service in killing a prime minister ; exulting anticipations were expressed that this was but the beginning, and that more such examples would follow ; healths were drunk to those members of Parliament, whose language at various times (whatever their intentions may have been) had been mischievous enough to bring upon them the stigma of such popularity : and in certain manufacturing places public rejoicings were made for the murder of a minister, who both in private and in public life was absolutely without reproach. In public life he was without fear also : this kingdom was never blest with a more intrepid nor a more upright minister ; he feared God, and therefore he had no fear of man. There were persons who upon his elevation alluded to the Knight of the Round Table, from whom his family derive their descent, and said that Sir Perceval was not the man who could sit in the “ Siege Perilous.” That seat,

however, he took, and filled it worthily ; and like his ancestor in the romance, he was qualified to do this by the purity as well as by the strength of his character. A sense of religious duty was the key-stone which crowned his virtues and his talents, and kept them firm.

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A grant of £50,000 for the twelve children of Mr. Perceval was voted by Parliament, with a pension of £2,000 to his widow, and to the eldest son, whose reversion was subsequently commuted for one of those sinecures, against which, if they were always thus properly bestowed, no voice would be raised. The loss of the murdered minister was thus repaired to his family, as far as it was reparable ; but how was his place in the cabinet to be supplied ? Overtures were made to Mr. Canning and Marquis Wellesley, as persons who were understood to act in unison, and who in their views of foreign policy differed in no respect from the existing ministers. They were informed that the Prince naturally looked to them, because he was desirous of continuing his administration upon its present basis, and also of strengthening it as much as possible by associating to it such persons in public life as agreed most nearly and generally in the principles upon which public affairs had been conducted. Lord Liverpool, by whom this communication was made, stated that his colleagues wished him to be appointed first Lord of the Treasury, and that their wish was known to the Prince, when his Royal Highness charged him with this negotiation ; he added also, that Lord Castlereagh was to retain his office, and act as leader in the House of Commons.

*Overtures
from the mi-
nistry to M.
Wellesley
and Mr.
Canning.*

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It is probable that Mr. Canning was offended at this latter intimation, though he manifested no such displeasure : it is probable that he thought himself disparaged when that part of the business of the House of Commons for which he could not but be conscious that he was preeminently qualified, was assigned to a

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 XLI. quis Wellesley may also be supposed to have felt a kindred dis-
 1812. appointment; he could number few followers in Parliament,
 May. but he had other friends, who for some time had been en-
 deavouring with more zeal and activity than discretion, to per-
 suade the nation that he was the only statesman capable of con-
 ducting the government at a crisis when the interests of all
 Europe were at stake. But in this, though they appealed to
 his vigorous and splendid administration in India, they alto-
 gether failed. No doubt was entertained of his surpassing
 abilities, nor of his comprehensive views, nor of the energy with
 which he was capable of acting upon them. But that was
 wanting on which the British people in the healthy and
 natural state of public feeling were accustomed to rely; he had
 to a certain degree their admiration, but not their confidence.
 And while his merits as an Indian governor were understood by
 those only who were conversant with Indian affairs, the vil-
 lanous calumnies with which he had been assailed for his con-
 duct in that distant country were more widely known, and were
 moreover fresher in remembrance.

*M. Wel-
 lesley's
 reasons for
 declining
 them.*

He gained no ground in public opinion by his conduct in
 the negotiation. The difference upon the Roman Catholic ques-
 tion between himself and the cabinet which he was invited to
 join, "was of the utmost importance," he said, "and would
 alone compel him to decline the proposition." But that ques-
 tion, though in its consequences more mischievous than any by
 which these kingdoms have been agitated since the Restoration,
 was of no pressing importance at that time, nor could all the arts
 and efforts of those who promoted it induce the nation to think
 it so. He asked also, whether all those persons designated by
 the name of the opposition were to be excluded from the pro-
 posed scheme of administration; "an inquiry which," he said,