

CHAP.  
XXIX.

1810.

*February.*

ministry. Where was the address, the ability, the knowledge, the public spirit, that were the soul of success in such a cause? He found them shifting from object to object, and hanging their hope on every weak and bending support, that failed them in the first moment of pressure. He thought, that for defence no government could be too free; by that he meant too democratic; the words might not be synonymous, but it was in such governments that men felt of what they were capable. There was then the full stretch of all the powers. There was a great struggle, a great allay of the baser passions; but there rose from them a spirit vigorous, subtilized, and pure; there was the triumph of all the vehement principles of the nation; the rapid intelligence, the bold decision, the daring courage, the stern love of country. In was in the hour of struggle that men started up among the ranks of the people; those bright shapes of valour and virtue that gave a new life to the people; those surpassing forms of dignity and splendour that suddenly rose up, as if by miracle, among the host, rushed to the front of the battle, and, as in the days of old, by their sole appearance turned the victory. But where was the symptom of a love for free government in the conduct of the ministry? The government of Portugal had been absolutely in their hands; had they disburthened it of its obstructions to freedom? had they pointed its aspect towards democracy? Then as if the cause had been rendered desperate because the British ministry had not introduced democratic principles into the governments of Spain and Portugal, he supported the opinion of his party, and maintained that it would be criminal to force a nation to a defence which might draw down ruin on them. But if we were to withdraw from the contest, it was possible for us to do so without degrading the country by any base avidity for little gains, by seizing upon any of those little pieces of plunder, which were so tempting, and apt to



overpower our resistance to the temptation. We might leave the country of our ally with the spirit of friendship and the purity of honour. It was of great moment to us, in even that meanest and lowest view of policy, to leave the people of the Peninsula our friends; but we must be actuated by a higher principle, and be regretted and revered by those whom we were forced to abandon. He could not expect this from his majesty's ministers, and therefore could not think their hands fit to wield the resources, or sustain the character of the British empire." Lord Holland therefore voted for the amendment, the object of which was, that the cause of the Peninsula should be given up as hopeless.

The debate was not less interesting in the Lower House, when Mr. Perceval moved for a sum not exceeding 980,000*l.* for the defence of Portugal; "a vote," he said, "so consistent with the feelings which the house had professed on former occasions, that he should not have expected any opposition to it. He reminded the house how those who opposed it had been always of opinion that it was impossible for Spain to hold out so long; that if she succeeded at all, she must succeed at once; but that she could never maintain a protracted contest against the disciplined armies and enormous resources of France. This was their declared and recorded opinion; but what was the fact? Spain had continued the struggle. France might occupy the country with an army, but her power would be confined within the limits of her military posts, and it would require nearly as large an army to keep possession of it as to make the conquest. There never had existed a military power capable of subduing a population possessing the mind, and heart, and soul of the Spaniards. The very victories of their enemies would teach them discipline, and infuse into them a spirit which would ultimately be the ruin of their oppressors. Under these circumstances, would it be wise to abandon Portugal? The last Austrian

CHAP.  
XXIX.

1810.

March.

March 9.

Mr. Perceval.



CHAP.  
XXIX.

1810.

*March.*

war had arisen in great measure out of the contest in the Peninsula ; and during the progress of that war, however calamitous the result had proved, it would be in the recollection of the house, that one other day's successful resistance of the French by the Austrians might have overthrown the accumulated power of the enemy. Such events might again take place, for no man could anticipate, in the present state of the world, what might arise in the course of a short time ; but be that as it might, as long as the contest was, or could be, maintained in the Peninsula, the best policy of this country was to support it."

*Sir J. Newport.*

To this Sir John Newport replied, " if any question could provoke opposition, it must be that which would make them continue efforts in a cause which every one but the ministers considered hopeless. As for the recorded opinion of parliament, parliament was pledged to support the Spaniards while they were true to themselves ; but that they had been true to themselves he denied." Then assuming that the French must necessarily drive us out of Portugal, he asked what was to be done with the 30,000 Portugueze soldiers ? " Were they to be brought to this country, and added to the already enormous foreign army in its service ? or were they to be sent to Brazil ? or to be left fully equipped, and ready to add to the military force of Buonaparte ?" In the course of his speech Sir John Newport endeavoured to show that the Portugueze levies had not been expedited

*Mr. Villiers*

as they ought to have been. Mr. Villiers, who had been our minister in Portugal, made answer, " that the government there was administered with great vigour : large supplies of money had been raised to meet the public exigencies ; the old military constitution of the country had been restored ; the finances were ably administered and well collected ; and the war department conducted with energy and ability. If Spain," he said, " had done its duty equally with Portugal, in supporting the efforts of Great



Britain, its cause would already have triumphed, and there would not now have been a Frenchman upon the Spanish territory.”

Mr. Curwen said, “ that as the Portuguese people had suffered a French army to overrun their country without any resistance, he was not for placing much reliance upon the Portuguese troops. If the enemy could point out what he would wish that we should undertake, his first wish would be that we should attempt to defend Portugal. Buonaparte,” he said, “ could not receive more cheering hopes of ultimate success, than he would derive from learning that the present ministers were to continue in office, and that the House of Commons still persisted in placing a blind confidence in them, and enabling them to enter upon measures which, in their inevitable result, could not fail to answer all his purposes. The vote of the house this night, if it should decide against attempting the defence of Portugal, would be more important than if we were to take half the French army prisoners.”

Mr. Leslie Foster then rose, and his speech, in the spirit which it breathed, and the knowledge which it displayed, formed a singular contrast to the harangues of the opposition. “ The present proposition of his majesty,” said he, “ is partly connected with his past conduct towards the Peninsula ; it is but a continuance and extension of the same spirit of British resistance. It is now, however, open to the reprehension of two classes of politicians ; those who think we never ought to have committed ourselves for the salvation of Portugal and Spain ; and those who, having approved of that committal while the event appeared doubtful, think that the overwhelming power of France has at length brought this tragedy so nearly to a close, that nothing is left for us, but to escape if possible from being sharers in its catastrophe. Hope, they contend, has vanished ; there is no longer room for prediction ; history has already re-

CHAP.  
XXIX.

1810.

March.

Mr. Cur-  
wen.

Mr. Leslie  
Foster.



CHAP. corded, in letters of blood, the fate that awaits our perseverance.  
 XXIX. To me the aspect of the Peninsula appears an enigma, which it  
 1810. is no reflection on any ministers not perfectly to have under-  
March. stood; a revolution bursting out at a period the least expected,  
 exhibiting events in its progress the most singularly contra-  
 dictory, and pregnant with results which I still think no man  
 living can foresee. If, on the one hand, we are referred to the  
 apathy of Galicia during the retreat of Sir John Moore, . . if we  
 are desired to remember Ocaña and Tudela, and all the other  
 defeats which the Spaniards have endured, and endured without  
 despondency, . . must we not in candour remember that there was  
 a battle of Baylen? Are we to shut our eyes to the extraordinary  
 phenomenon, that in Catalonia, the very next province to France,  
 the French, at this hour, appear to be as often the besieged as the  
 besiegers? and can we forget Zaragoza and Gerona? But above  
 all, shall we not do justice to that singular obstinacy, to give it  
 no more glorious a character, which has sustained their spirit  
 under two hundred defeats, and which, in every period of the  
 history of Spain, has formed its distinguishing characteristic?  
 The expulsion of the Moors was the fruit of seven centuries of  
 fighting uninterrupted, and of 3600 battles, in many of which  
 the Spaniards had been defeated. In the beaten but persevering  
 Spaniards of these days we may trace the descendants of those  
 warriors, as easily as we recognize the sons of the conquerors of  
 Cressy and of Agincourt in the English who fought at Talavera.  
 We may trace the same fortitude and patience, the same enthu-  
 siastic superstition, the same persevering insensibility of failure,  
 and, I will add, the same absolute indifference as to liberty, con-  
 stitution, or cortes, that distinguished the expellers of the Moors.  
 Because we feel that freedom is the first of blessings, it is too  
 much to say that other nations are to be raised in arms by no  
 other motives than its influence. History should have taught



us, that there is another spirit prompting men to war, and which once poured all Europe forth in the Crusades ; and however we may pronounce on the motives of our ancestors, the fact we cannot deny, that the greatest spectacle of embattled nations ever exhibited on the theatre of war was under governments and systems which indeed were not worth the defending. I believe we may consider the inhabitants of the Peninsula, first, as a multitude of hardy and patient peasantry, buried in ignorance and superstition, and accustomed from their cradles, by the traditions and the songs of their ancestors, to consider the sword as the natural companion of the cross ; and almost inseparably to connect in idea the defence of their religion with the slaughter of their enemies ; and with these predispositions goaded into madness by ecclesiastics, as ignorant almost as their flocks ; but without an idea or a wish for freedom ; with *Fernando Settimo* in their mouths, as a watch-word, and fighting, if you will, for the continuance of the Inquisition. And with these qualifications it is my most firm conviction, that they would have overwhelmed all the armies of France, but that it was their misfortune to be cursed with a nobility in all respects the opposite of the peasantry, differing from them, not merely in their moral qualities, but even in their physical appearance ; a nobility of various degrees of worthlessness, but with a few brilliant exceptions, generally proportioned to the rank of their nobility ; and further cursed by a government (I speak not of their kings but of the Junta) both in its form and in its substance the most abominable that ever repressed or betrayed the energies of a nation ; hence desperate from repeated treason, destitute of confidence, not in themselves but in their commanders, unable to stand before the French in battle, but still more unable to abstain from fighting. One rare and unquestionable feature they presented, . . . a nation that would fight with France ; and certain I am, that if we had not tried the

CHAP.  
XXIX.

1810.

*March.*



CHAP. experiment of fighting by their side, these very men, who now  
XXIX. most loudly condemn the course we have pursued, would be  
1810. calling for the impeachment of these ministers, who had neg-  
*March.* lected such glorious opportunities; who, in the crisis of the  
fate of France, had shrunk from the only field where there was  
a prospect of contending with success; who had coldly refused  
our aid to the only allies who were ever worthy of British co-  
operation. It is too much a habit to call for the fruits of our  
battles, tacitly assuming that nothing but the absolute and com-  
plete attainment of our object can justify having fought them. I  
never can agree to measure the justification of a battle by the  
mere fruits of victory! yet even on this ground I must contend,  
that never were there laurels the more opposite of barren, than  
those which have been reaped by our countrymen in Spain.  
We, indeed, wanted not to be convinced that our army, like our  
navy, equalled in science, and exceeded in courage, that of any  
other nation in the world: but if we have any anxiety for our  
character with other armies, if reputation is strength, and if the  
reputation of a nation, as well as of an individual, consists not  
in the estimation in which it holds itself, but in the estimation in  
which it is held by others, is a false vanity that causes us to shut  
our eyes and ears to the opinions of other nations. Spain at least  
had been convinced by the exertions of her government, misre-  
presenting our failure at Buenos Ayres, and other scenes of our  
misfortunes, that Great Britain, omnipotent by sea, was even  
ridiculous on land. So much so, that when the army of General  
Spencer was landed near Cadiz, than which a finer army never  
left the English shore, it was the wonder as well as the pity of  
the Spaniards, that such noble-looking soldiers should be so ab-  
solutely incapable of fighting. The 'beautiful' army was even  
the emphatic denomination by which the British forces were  
distinguished; and when Sir John Moore was known to be at



length on his march, that the beautiful army, the '*hermoso exercito*,' was actually advancing, was a subject of Spanish surprise, at least as much as of Spanish exultation; but when that army had commenced its retreat, old impressions were revived with tenfold force, '*hermoso*' was no longer the epithet bestowed on it, but one which it is impossible for me to repeat. Nor let it be said that Coruña was a full vindication of its fame! We indeed know that British heroism never shone more conspicuous than on that day; but the ray of glory which illuminated that last scene of our retreat, was but feebly reflected through the rest of Spain from that distant part of the Peninsula. The French returned in triumph to Madrid, and boasted that they had driven us into the sea; . . . it was certain we were no longer on the land; . . . and under such circumstances it is not surprising that Spain should have declined to have given to us all the credit which we really deserved. Some gentlemen, I see, are of opinion that it is no great matter what the Spaniards thought about us; but are we equally indifferent to the opinions of the French? Let us not too hastily conclude that they did full justice to our merits. We are told, indeed, that at Maida and in Egypt we had set that point at rest. Of Maida, I shall only say, that within the last month it has been, for the first time, mentioned in any newspaper of France, and that I believe nine-tenths of the French soldiers have never heard either of the battle, or of the existence of such a place; and as to Egypt, their opinion is universally that which General Regnier, in his most able, but untrue representation, of those events, has laboured to impress, namely, that the treachery of Menou, and the detestation in which the army held the service in Egypt, and their anxiety to return to France, were the real causes of their expulsion; and that an overwhelming force of ninety thousand men, of English, Turks, and Indians, which he says, and which they believe, we

CHAP.  
XXIX.  
1810.  
March.



CHAP.

XXIX.

1810.

March.

brought against them, furnished a decent excuse for their surrender. Let us remember too, that it was after these proofs of British military excellence, that Buonaparte, on the heights of Boulogne, parcelled out in promise to his soldiers the estates of the '*nation boutiquiere*:' let us remember also our own opinions in those days, how general engagements were to be avoided; . . . how a system of bush-fighting was to be adopted in Kent; . . . and our hopes that England might be saved after London might be lost, . . . or what inundations we should make to protect it. Such language was then termed '*caution*:' but on the proud eminence on which we are now placed, we may afford to acknowledge there was in it some mixture of distrust in the good old bayonet of Britain. Where are the promises of Buonaparte now? The very ridicule of such assertions would render it impossible for him to repeat them. It is these guilty ministers who have taught to him, and what I think of much more consequence, have taught to England, another style of conversation. They have fairly tried that point, so carefully avoided by their predecessors; they have brought our armies to a meeting with the finest armies of France; and have added more to our strength, as well as to our glory, by fighting in Spain, than their predecessors by abstaining from it in Poland. . . . Such is the view which I take of what is past: With respect to the second point, whether the time is indeed come, when our further assistance can only be destruction to ourselves, without being serviceable to our allies, a very little time must show us that; and if there are indeed good grounds of hope, any premature expression of our despondency will certainly extinguish them. The Junta is at length demolished. The French are again dispersed over every part of the Peninsula; the people are still every where in arms. Let us not damp that spirit which may effect much, and which must effect something, . . . which must at least give long employment to the



forces of our enemy. If, indeed, it depended solely upon us, whether our allies should continue that sacrifice of blood which they have so profusely shed, I should not think us justifiable in purchasing our quiet at such a price: but convinced as I am, that whether we stand by them, or forsake them, those gallant nations will still continue to bleed at every pore, our assistance assumes a new character; and independent of the advantages to be derived to ourselves, . . . independent of 200,000 Frenchmen already fallen, . . . independent of not less than 300,000 more required even to preserve existence in the Peninsula, . . . independent of Brazil and South America, for ever severed from our enemies, . . . and independent of the fleets of the Peninsula, I trust, rescued from their grasp, . . . independent of these gains to ourselves, there is another feeling binding upon a nation, as well as upon an individual, not to forsake our friend because he is in his greatest danger! . . . Still, however, I acknowledge a limit there must be, beyond which we cannot go, and whenever we can agree in declaring that

*Funditus occidimus neque habet Fortuna regressum,*

then, indeed, the first laws of self-preservation will call on us to discontinue the contest. But surely Great Britain will not utter such a sentiment until her allies shall be disposed to join in it. They do not despair, and I will never despair of them so long as they do not despair of themselves, . . . so long as I should leave it in their power to say to us at a future day, ‘Whence these chains? . . . If you had stood firm a little longer, . . . if you had not so soon fainted, . . . we should not at this day be in the power of our enemies!’”

General Ferguson was the first person who rose after Mr. Leslie Foster had concluded this able and manly speech. “He had been in Portugal,” he said, and “he did not think there were

*General  
Ferguson.*