

THE BOOK TABLE: DEVOTED TO BOOKS AND THEIR MAKERS

A LESSON FOR THE PRESENT FROM THE PAST

WITH some characteristic exaggerations, legitimate in fiction, Charles Dickens thus describes, in the opening chapter of the "Tale of Two Cities," the curiously contrasted opinions and passions of the English people in the sixty years which included the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

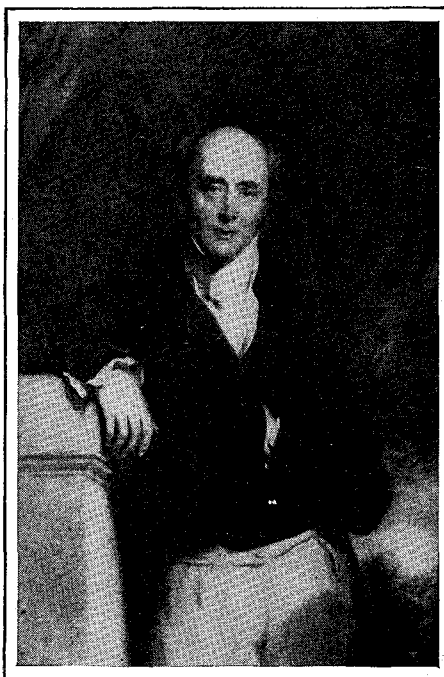
There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lord of the State preserves of loaves and fishes that things in general were settled forever.

The challenge of Great Britain by the feeble American colonies in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 startled the peoples of Europe; but the hopes excited by the success of those colonies in 1781 and by the radiant idealism of Rousseau and some of his disciples, were changed into a panic by the excesses of the French Revolution, the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the massacres which followed, and the execution of the King and his wife in 1793. If this was the fruit of liberty, the English people wanted none of it. The American Revolutionists had possessed the confidence and the support of English Liberals. Burke, Chatham, and Fox fought in Parliament the same campaign for freedom that Washington and Greene and Putnam fought on the battlefields of America. But the crimes of the French Revolutionists dismayed English Liberals and heartened their Tory opponents. Fear is less intelligent and often more cruel than hate; and hate and fear combined to halt for forty years the progress in England toward political and industrial freedom. It is of the three-cornered struggle in England between Radicals, Reformers, and Reactionaries that Mr. Trevelyan writes in "Lord Grey of the Reform Bill."¹ The Radicals would have welcomed the transformation of England from a monarchy into a republic; the Reformers wished to preserve the ancient framework of the British Constitution but to correct age-long and inherited abuses; the Reactionaries regarded all abuses as sacred because they were ancient and all progress for reform as treasonable.

None are so deaf as those who will not hear, and those whose unearned privileges and undeserved powers depend upon corruption are rarely eager for reform. "We had," says Mr. Trevelyan, "when the reforming century opened, a press and platform silenced; an Opposition sulking out of Parliament; suspicion of the 'lower orders' as the potential enemies of the

State, instead of that frank trust of the people that has belonged to all the great periods of English history; the poor in town and country sinking to the lowest depth of dependence and of want; Ireland an epitome of the evils that misgovernment can inflict on mankind; our military fame diminished; our one triumph and safety the 'storm-beaten ships' that have never failed England in her need."

Roman Catholics and Dissenters were debarred from holding public office, great or small, municipal or national. The popularity of the no-Popery cry, and the excesses of the mob which it inspired, Dickens by his "Barnaby Rudge" has made familiar to readers of fiction. But mobs are rarely discriminating; in the same era Dissenting chapels and the private houses of Dis-



Courtesy of Longmans, Green & Co.

CHARLES, SECOND EARL GREY

From the picture by Sir Thomas Lawrence

senters were destroyed by mobs, "with every appearance of connivance on the part of the magistrates." The Sinn Fein movement of to-day is an inheritance from the righteous indignation of the Irish of 1800 at the injustice which race and religious prejudice inflicted on the Irish then. Freedom of the press existed only in name. The battle which Lord Erskine fought, against great odds, to preserve the rights of the press in spite of the unconcealed hostility of the judiciary is one of the dramatic features of that dramatic epoch. The right of public meeting and association was by law abolished. By what were popularly known as the "Gagging Acts" it was made illegal for more than fifty persons to assemble for any purpose not approved by the magistrate, and high treason to speak or write against the Constitution. The Tory argument for these laws was put in a significant sentence by the Bishop of Rochester, who said "he did not know what the mass of the people in any country had to do with the laws but to obey them."

Not only Radicals, Roman Catholics, and Dissenters suffered from the policy of repression. "Pitt systematically impris-

oned large numbers of reformers for years together without trial, treating them like convicts, and feeding them on bread and water." Lord Erskine declared that if the jury found Hardy guilty of treason on the evidence furnished by the prosecution "he himself and the rest of the Whigs must all fly to America without delay;" and Lord Grey in Parliament declared that "he would rather live under Nero or Caligula than in contemporary France, but that those who were most violent in their declamations against the proceedings in France were the most servile in their imitation of them." The Reactionaries were as hostile to free labor as to free speech. Trade unions were prohibited by laws which forbade all agreements between workmen to advance their wages or modify their hours of work, and "the slave trade, once threatened and hard pressed, now thrived exceedingly; to descend upon its horrors was the sign of a Jacobin."

There was no provision for public education. The Tories protested against teaching the poor as a dangerous innovation. Society, they thought, could be preserved only by keeping the body of the people dependent on "their betters." England owes to Robert Raikes, the founder of Sunday schools for the poor, and to the eccentric Lord Brougham a great debt for their wholly independent services in awakening the governing class to the public peril involved in public ignorance. The governed class, deprived of all political representation and denied all peaceful agitation, expressed their dangerous and growing resentment in mobs, and were often driven by irremediable poverty into crime. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was born in 1829, only three years before the Reform Bill was passed. But its passage had only prepared the way for reform, and the life in Nottingham with which William Booth in his boyhood would have been familiar his biographer thus describes:

He would have heard on every side of him breathless tales of murder and garrotings, descriptions of surging drunken crowds watching the hanging of criminals; he would have seen the maddened rioters when they tore down the iron railings in front of his father's house to use them as weapons against the soldiers and special constables; he did see, and on many occasions, bodies of men and women charging through the streets to sack bakers' shops, returning with their arms full of loaves; he was the witness again and again of such misery and destitution, such haggard want and infuriating deprivation, as filled the streets with angry mobs shouting for food, compelled the authorities to read the Riot Act, and drove thousands of people to seek the relief of the rates.

The institutions of religion afforded to the common people little ground for any hope of better days to come. The clergy of the Church of England with few exceptions bitterly opposed reform to the last. "It was generally expected that Reform of Parliament would, if carried, lead to a revision of all ecclesiastical privileges—Church rates, the Church monopoly of Oxford and Cambridge, perhaps tithes and possibly the Establishment itself." The Dissenters were generally Reformers; but they had no political power and no social influence, and under the "Gagging Acts" were as liable to prosecution for their pulpit teaching as any agitator on the streets. Despair in the hearts of any class, however

¹ Lord Grey of the Reform Bill. Being the Life of Charles, Second Earl Grey. By George Macaulay Trevelyan. With Portraits and Other Illustrations. Longmans, Green & Co., New York.

powerless it may be, is always a peril to the community; the despair of the common people of England in the early part of the nineteenth century is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in the verse of Ebenezer Elliott, the "Corn-Law Rhymers" of Yorkshire:

When wilt Thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
The people, Lord, the people,
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
God save the people; Thine they are,
Thy children, as Thine angels fair.
From vice, oppression, and despair,
God save the people!

Such, very briefly and inadequately sketched, was the condition of England in the half-century of which Mr. Trevelyan writes in his biography of Lord Grey of the Reform Bill. The evils which oppressed her people were intolerable. Permanent submission was unthinkable. A remedy must be found, either in a revolution like that of France, and like that of England in the seventeenth century under Cromwell, or in radical but not revolutionary reforms wrested from a powerful oligarchy unwilling to surrender any of its privileges.

The opposition of the privileged classes to such reforms it is easy to understand. There was much more reason for fearing French revolutionaries and their Chartist sympathizers in England then than there is for fearing the Russian Bolsheviks and their Red sympathizers in America now. There was much more reason to believe that the rising discontent could be suppressed by Government in England then than to imagine that it can be suppressed by Government in America now. There was much more excuse both for revolutionaries and reactionaries then than for either revolutionaries or reactionaries now. The House of Commons was not a representative body. There was no prospect that it would institute any effective reforms unless it became a representative body. Could it be persuaded to lay down its life in order that it might take that life up again purified and regenerated? To this problem Lord Grey devoted himself with resolute hope and unflinching patience. To understand his problem read the following paragraphic summary of a report on the condition of Parliament in 1793, the accuracy of which Mr. Trevelyan tells us was unchallenged:

The tables showed that more than 300 out of the 513 representatives for England and Wales owed their return to individual "proprietors;" half a dozen were put in by the Lords of the Treasury; 88 were absolutely nominated by Peers, and 72 had their election secured by the influence of Peers; 82 were absolutely nominated by individuals below the rank of the peerage, and 57 had their election secured by the influence of such individuals. The proprietors themselves numbered 71 Lords and 91 Commoners. The meager number of 11,075 voters returned a clear majority of the Members for England and Wales; 51 constituencies had less than fifty voters each.

Lord Grey began his campaign by a very modest proposal. It was simply that this report and the petition to the "Friends of the People" which accompanied it be referred to a committee for consideration. The motion was lost. "The Honourable Members very prudently decided by 282 to 41 that it was best not to enquire how they had got into the Honourable House." The argument by which this action was defended was as extraordinary as the action itself. It was tersely presented by a Tory member who maintained that "we ought not to begin first by considering who ought to be electors, and then who

ought to be elected; but we ought to begin by considering who ought to be elected, and then constitute such persons electors as would be likely to produce the best elected."

It took forty years of agitation to accomplish the destruction of the old Parliament and the construction of a new Parliament. But when the bill finally passed in 1832 it made the purchase or inheritance of seats in the House of Commons forever illegal, and prepared the way for subsequent reforms which increased the number and widened the class of the constituent voters. It began a change in the Constitution of Great Britain more radical than even the Radical of Lord Grey's time had hoped for. Prior to the Reform Bill the King appointed the Ministers who carried on the Imperial Government; now they are selected by the House of Commons. Prior to the Reform Bill England was ruled by its Kings and a small and unscrupulous oligarchy representing the landed aristocracy; it is now governed by the men and women of England. Prior to the Reform Bill the English Government was that of the hereditary landlords. It is now more democratic than that of democratic America.

There is a lesson in this chapter of English history which he who runs may read. The Radicals and the Reactionaries were both ably led. Thomas Paine was a far abler man than Debs, and William Pitt was a far abler man than Sweet. The Reformers won because they understood the English love of justice and refused to pander to English prejudice. They won justice for the Roman Catholics in spite of the Established Church; they won justice for the wage-earners in spite of the English capitalists; they acquired a democratic government for the people in spite of the hostile Parliament; and this they did by steadfastly resisting the Radicals who wished their countrymen to believe that all the experiences of the past had taught nothing and all the traditions of the past were but the relics of an abolished slavery, and who desired to write a brand-new Constitution and create a brand-new civilization for the British Empire.

THE NEW BOOKS

FICTION

Best Psychic Stories (The). Edited by Joseph Lewis French. Introduction by Dorothy Scarborough, Ph.D. Boni & Liveright, New York.

These tales belong to a class that does not quite include the out-and-out ghost story, but does reach out to the supernatural in the indefinable fashion that we nowadays call psychic without bothering to define what psychic means. This is a perfectly fitting field for fiction of the non-realistic kind, for it does not demand belief but imagination. Algernon Blackwood and "Fiona McLeod" were adepts at this form of story, and are here well represented, together with Jack London, W. T. Stead, and others.

Girl on the Hilltop (The). By Kenyon Gambier. The George H. Doran Company, New York.

Beginning with the elopement half a century ago of a cowman's daughter with the younger brother of an English squire, a landowner of the ancient and aristocratic type, the story skips to the arrival in 1914 of an American descendant of this freakish marriage at the gates of his ancestors' estate. He finds two girls, one the lady of the manor, the other a humble cottager, both his cousins. For a long while he maintains silence as to his identity and meets

amusing and queer experiences. After the war (he fights under the British flag) the estate becomes his by descent, and he finds it impossible to refuse it, as he would like to do, because of the law of entail. An amusing tangle of love affairs puzzles the reader. Incidentally the novel gives a realistic picture of the war privations and provocations in remote English villages. The story is built on unusual lines and its originality makes it decidedly readable.

Half Portions. By Edna Ferber. Doubleday, Page & Co., Garden City.

Very human and clear-sighted are these brief stories of men and women. They have the spirit, the humor, and somewhat of the method of O. Henry's work.

Lilult. By Romain Rolland. Boni & Liveright, New York.

A fantastic, cynical farce, satirizing war, social struggles, and hypocritical self-seeking. The heroic and earnest youths seek ideals but are railed at and disillusioned by the irony of Polichinelle.

The Searchers. By John Foster. The George H. Doran Company, New York.

A story of buried treasure, sought for centuries by an Italian secret society which has one half of an ancient parchment telling the secret, while the other part comes into possession of the Scotch gentleman who tells the story. Exciting and cleverly constructed.

BIOGRAPHY

Finding a Way Out. An Autobiography. By Robert Russa Moton. Doubleday, Page & Co., Garden City.

This is an interesting and inspiring account of what one man, without advantages of wealth, position, or culture, has done for himself and the world he lives in by his sane ambition, his unaggressive courage, and his spirit of service. It is especially valuable for the light it throws on the race problem. Major Moton has no envy of the white man. "I would rather," he says, "be a Negro in the United States than anybody else in any other country in the world." He has no resentment against the white race. Returning from a European tour, he writes: "After seeing conditions in southern Europe, especially among the peasant class, my ideas regarding my race changed entirely, and I realized for the first time that the Negro in America, even the most backward Negro farmer, notwithstanding the unfairness and injustice which confront him, lives amidst surroundings much more encouraging and hopeful than is true of certain classes of the white race in Europe." His experiences clearly show that an increasing number of Southern whites sincerely desire to promote the material, intellectual, and moral development of their Negro neighbors. And he encourages no discouragement respecting the final result: "The firm belief of the colored man in the ultimate triumph of right and justice constitutes his largest and most valuable asset." We wish that this volume might find its way into every public library in the United States and into every school and church library in the South.

TRAVEL AND DESCRIPTION

Old Coast Road (The). From Boston to Plymouth. By Agnes Edwards. Illustrated. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.

Massachusetts is fortunate in possessing historic highways of great interest. This book presents in dignified format the story of one of these highways, with many delightful side excursions by the way. The pen-and-ink illustrations are unusually attractive.