CHAPTER VII

1839–41

ENTRY INTO POLITICAL LIFE

In pursuing, however, down to July, 1841, the passages of life which were little more than enlargements of those in which I had passed my former years—passages mainly occupied by the aspects of Nature and the connection of these with the physical sciences—I have passed by some openings which belong to the earlier months of the same year, into which I entered eagerly, finding in them new fields of thought and action, which were soon to absorb my attention more than any other. For two previous years I had come gradually and insensibly to take an increasing interest in politics. The Whig Ministry of Lord Melbourne was rapidly declining in strength and reputation. A strong Conservative reaction had set in after the Reform excitement had passed away, and Sir Robert Peel was organizing the Conservative party with consummate skill and caution. I had no special feeling one way or another on any of the measures of the Whig Government. I simply looked upon that Government as the débris of the party which had been led by Lord Grey, and on Lord Grey as the last survivor of the party led by Charles James Fox, the determined enemy of Mr. Pitt, and who, as I thought, had carried his opposition to flagrantly unpatriotic lengths. In complete ignorance, as we all then were, of that splendid character of the young Queen, which made all such fears ridiculous, I sympathized with Sir Robert Peel in his fear of a female Court almost entirely Whig,

and thought him right in his refusal to take office in 1839 under such conditions. We all know now that he was wrong, but only, perhaps, because now we all know what he could not know then. But although Lord Melbourne, knowing more of the Queen than any other politician then did, was undoubtedly right in supporting the Sovereign in her contention, yet the resumption of office by an administration, otherwise discredited, upon a question, as it was then put, about 'Bedchamber women,' did not tend to increase my respect for the Government.

Such was the state of opinion, or of prejudice, which I took with me when I accompanied my father on his going up to London in 1840 to take his seat in the House of Lords. In that house the eldest sons of peers had a right to hear the debates, standing on the steps of the throne. The House of Commons was much more hospitable than it is now. Peers and peers' eldest sons had four benches assigned to them on the floor of the House, close to the Bar, and on the same level with members of the House. The enjoyment of the great privilege thus afforded was, I may say, my one delight in London. During 1840, 1841, and part of 1842, I was a more constant attendant than many of the members.

The opening of Parliament by the Queen in person was always a magnificent and a touching sight, the remembrance of which is now, alas! almost forgotten, as it has never been seen by the younger generation. The presence of ladies in the House, peeresses and their daughters in magnificent attire, along with the peers in their robes, filled the House to overflowing with brilliancy and beauty; whilst the slender form of the young Queen, seated silently on the throne during a considerable interval, waiting for the arrival of the Commons, was a sight never to be forgotten. Beside her stood her Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, holding the Sword of State, and behind her stood the Duchess of Sutherland, Mistress of the Robes, then

perhaps the most beautiful and stately woman in England, as Lord Melbourne was one of the most dignified and handsome of men. Then, after the 'ugly rush' of the Commons to the Bar, came that silver voice, which charmed all ears, in the reading of the Royal Speech. Every word was distinctly heard to the farthest corner of the House. The prettiest woman I saw in the House—after the Duchess of Sutherland—was Lady Wilhelmina Stanhope, who became Lady Dalmeny, and was the mother of the present Lord Rosebery. She was afterwards Duchess of Cleveland.

In the House of Lords at that time there was no speaker of any great eminence except Lord Lyndhurst. It was his habit in those years to sum up the feeble work of the Government during each session by a speech near its close, and those speeches, with their great power of scorn, were among the contributory causes by which Lord Melbourne's administration was being steadily undermined. But my father never stayed in London so late in the season, and at that time I never heard Lord Lyndhurst speak. Dr. Blomfield, Bishop of London, was indeed an admirable speaker, but never spoke on secular affairs, and I heard him only once. It was delightful speaking, not from any fire, or poetry, or enthusiasm, but from a charming voice, from sentences in uninterrupted flow of the most perfect grammatical construction, and from a fine intonation. They were the speeches of a highly cultivated man, clear, judicial in tone, and persuasive. It is said that on the first occasion on which he spoke in the House, Lord Melbourne listened for a few minutes, and then rushed out of the House to bring back one of his colleagues, who had left it to write letters in the robing-room, calling out: 'I say, I say, come here, come here! We've got the devil of a Bishop!'

Lord Melbourne himself was no speaker. I never heard him say more than a few sentences, which he always did say, however, with a very fine voice and

in a very dignified manner. Essentially a man of the world, very shrewd, well read and accomplished in many ways, he seemed to be without enthusiasm of any kind — an excellent head of a party which was dying of inertia. He is said, I believe truly, to have played a great part in his loyal devotion to his young Sovereign—a devotion not dictated by any mere party interests, but by a conscientious desire that the Queen should know thoroughly the powers and duties assigned to her in the ancient Constitution of her country; and in whatever degree this teaching may have guided a naturally strong and most truthful character in the first starting of a splendid reign, Lord Melbourne deserves the thanks of a grateful people.

In recalling my first introduction into the scenes of Parliamentary life, I am more than ever struck with the evidence that proves how entirely memory depends upon attention. I have naturally a singularly bad memory for faces. All those of men or of women with whom I have had no more than the accidental meetings or the conventional conversations of society are so speedily obliterated from my recollection that it has been a very frequent awkwardness, and even inconvenience, in my life. Yet there are some faces which I then saw for the first time, and which I never knew in later life, which are, nevertheless, so vividly impressed on my memory that their every attitude and expression recur to me with all the distinctness of actual vision. They were not all men of great distinction even then, and many of them are almost wholly forgotten now. One of those was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Howley. He had a pale face small and pinched, with all the appearance of delicate health. But there was such a mixture of meekness, gentleness, and humility in the expression, that I thought it a most attractive countenance, and it still hangs in the picture-gallery of my mind as the face of one of the most venerable men I have ever seen.

There was another face in the House of Lords at

that time which riveted all my attention. It was that of the then Lord Holland, of whom I had never heard at all, known only as owner and host in that beautiful house in Kensington which had become the headquarters of all that remained of the old Whig party, and where he entertained most of the best political and literary society in London during many years of an enlightened and cheering hospitality. But what attracted my attention was his extraordinary likeness to his uncle, Charles James Fox, as depicted in all the portraits of the time. There was the same regularly oval outline, the same dark, bushy eyebrows, the same good-humoured and genial expression, and the same portly form.

Of the Duke of Wellington and Lord Aberdeen I need say nothing here, because I cannot disentangle my recollections of them in 1840 from those of my later years. But there is one other face in the House of Lords at that time which holds as distinct a place in my memory as any other, and that is the face, manner, and voice of the late Lord Fitzwilliam. He enjoyed at that time the distinction of being the only peer who advocated free trade in corn and the abolition of the Corn Laws. He was continually presenting petitions on the subject, and continually making speeches upon them, so much so that he went by the name of the 'Corncrake.' He was a good-looking old man, with a fine voice and an excellent manner, so much so that someone told Lord Granville that when he heard Lord Fitzwilliam begin a speech he was always a little reminded of the manner and voice of Mr. Pitt—an impression, however, which was as speedily dispelled, for he was an inconsecutive speaker, and never produced any effect upon the House. Still, it is to the honour of that Lord Fitzwilliam, who was one of the largest land-owners in England, that he should have so long preceded his party in the policy which both parties were so soon compelled by circumstances to adopt.

Passing to the House of Commons, which I attended much more frequently, from the greater activity of political life which was evident there, I soon came to the conclusion that there was no oratory at all in the sense in which I understood the word, except in the speaking of one man—Lord Stanley. As one of the leaders in the Opposition to the Melbourne Government, he was indeed acting under the leadership of Sir Robert Peel. But as a speaker, and in brilliancy of debate, there was no comparison between the two men. Peel's speeches were heavy artillery, no doubt, but they were heavy in more senses than one. There was no fire, no imagination, no dash—nothing but solid, well-marshalled arguments, with only occasionally a little humour, to which Disraeli gave the name of 'heavy pleasantry.' Stanley's oratory did not, indeed, remind me at all of the stately declamation and the magnificent invective which I had read in the speeches of Mr. Pitt. But the voice was beautiful, the sentences perfect in construction, the delivery easy and graceful. There was fire and fun and raillery, whilst occasionally Stanley rose to passages of great dignity and power. Such was a passage I heard him deliver in reply to a member of the Government who had referred to the example of Sir Robert Walpole as that of a Minister who had remained in office after it was evident that he had lost the confidence of Parliament. Lord Stanley ridiculed and denounced this appeal to the bad example set by a great man in the years of a sad decline. 'And that power,' said Stanley, 'which he had held so long with honour, and which he might have laid down with the applause of all men, he was at last compelled to resign under circumstances of great disparagement, because too late and too reluctantly.'

The whole passage was so finely conceived and so finely spoken that a Whig peer who was sitting next me, Lord Monteagle, exclaimed involuntarily, 'That is a beautiful sentence.' Stanley's previous contests with

O'Connell, which had been among the excitements of Parliamentary debate in previous years, had not yet entirely ceased, and on one occasion, in 1840, I heard a speech from the great Irish agitator. His enormous bulk habited in a long Irish coat, his bullet-shaped head, his brown wig, and his somewhat coarse but powerful face, are all so indelibly imprinted on my memory that I seem to see him as he rose, and as I walked out behind him amid a crowd of members, when one of the divisions had been taken. His voice was magnificent—a great element in all oratory, but of special value and effect in that kind of oratory which belongs to great demagogues. It was a powerful bass, but flexible and full of the richest tones. The only thing he said which has dwelt on my memory was an example of that love of personal allusion in which mobs delight, and which, when practised by a master, is not without its effect in cultivated assemblies. In speaking of Peel's attacks upon the Government, he treated them as all inspired by the real leader of the Tory party—the Duke of Wellington. 'And now,' he said, waving his great arm as if it held a sword, 'the order has gone forth from Apsley House, "Up, guards, and at them!"' His strong Irish brogue undoubtedly added to the effectiveness of a splendid organ, by which every syllable and every letter of his words was pronounced with a skilled deliberation and distinctness, and with modulations of voice which were most expressive.

Engrossing as those scenes were to me at the moment, I passed from them with delight to the very different contests of the engineer with the violence of the ocean which I have related above; and soon after our return from Tiree I had the great interest of being introduced for the first time to that parliament of science which Murchison and Sedgwick and Lyell had successfully established in the annual meetings of the British Association. In 1840 it met in Glasgow. We were invited for the occasion to Hamilton Palace,

where a large and miscellaneous party was assembled for it. My father was much interested in his return to a house which had been much of a home to him in his boyhood and youth, when the dukedom was held by a stepbrother to whom he was much attached. On that brother's death without heirs, the dukedom had passed to a distant cousin, and the heir of that line in 1840 was a man then well advanced in years, with whom my father was never on intimate, although always on friendly, terms. He had married a beautiful and charming woman, daughter of the famous Mr. Beckford, author of 'Vathek,' and had devoted himself mainly, not to public life, but to the collection of beautiful and costly furniture and pictures for his magnificent palace at Hamilton. He was famous for his courteous but somewhat affected mannerism, and for a very peculiar habit of dressing in long coats with a very high collar, and also of wearing small combs in his hair, which were by no means well concealed. He received my father with the most effusive kindness, and the company assembled in his house was full of interest to me, who had hitherto seen nothing of what is called society.

Among the guests, the most interesting man to me was old Lord Harrowby, one of the leading members of the Cabinet, all of whom were the intended victims of Thistlewood's conspiracy. It was at his house in Grosvenor Square that the Cabinet dinner was to have been held, and it was to him, when riding in the Park, that the design had been betrayed. I found afterwards that Lord Harrowby had the character of being a very formidable person, with a sharp, snappish manner. No characteristics could be more absolutely different from those which I experienced at Hamilton. Boys of seventeen, especially if they are shy, as I was then, are extremely sensitive to manner, and I certainly should have given him a wide berth had I observed the least indication of such traits. But, on the contrary, I found old Lord

Harrowby most gentle and courteous in his manners, and most genial in his conversation, so much so that I was greatly charmed by him. We never crossed each other's paths again, although I became intimate with his cultured and amiable son, then Lord Sandon.

It was, however, among the men of science that my permanent acquisitions of friendship were made at Hamilton and at Glasgow. With Murchison, Sedgwick, and Lyell I made friendships which lasted till their deaths, as also with Professor J. D. Forbes, who became celebrated for his investigation on glacier motion, and Professor Edward Forbes, one of the foremost naturalists and the most charming lecturer of his time. But the man who is most associated with the meeting in Glasgow as a personality never to be forgotten was Louis Agassiz, the famous Swiss savant, whose visit to this country in 1840 had such an effect that it marks an epoch in the history of British science. Full of the glaciers of his native mountains, his eye was quick to catch the tool-marks of their characteristic work, and those tool-marks he saw in abundance when he went into the Highlands and saw all the exposed rock surfaces, smoothed and polished, but also scratched, and sometimes furrowed, by some heavy agent passing over them. He had no special knowledge of the action of oceanic ice floating in glacial seas, and driven by winds and currents against rising or falling coasts. He, very naturally, thought only of ice in the form in which it was familiar to him. He therefore saw the work of glaciers everywhere, and had no time, and perhaps no opportunity, of distinguishing the places and conditions which were compatible with the existence of glaciers, from those where no such bodies could have found a place. His doctrine took immediate hold of the geologists, until in our time it has become (as I think) a mania. It was, however, sufficiently applicable to constitute a great advance in geological science. It pieced on nicely with the discovery made, long before, by my friend

Smith of Jordanhill, of shells in the clays of the Clyde which only live in Arctic seas. But I am digressing from my own experience in Glasgow, which was merely that of an indelible personal impression. Agassiz was one of those men who carry the light of genius in their face—and not of genius only, but of a noble and most attractive nature. His beautiful countenance is one of the treasured memories of my life. But I never saw him again. I do not recollect how it was that we did not see him at Inveraray. He did go there, and when we returned we found an enthusiastic note from him lying on a table in one of the principal morning-rooms, on which he had noticed a number of scientific books: 'Happy the people whose aristocracy is occupied with such studies as I find here.'

With the opening of the session of 1841 my father returned to London, and I resumed my close attendance on the debates of both Houses of Parliament. Peel's campaign against Lord Melbourne's Government was drawing near to its triumphant close. My impression was fully confirmed that there was then no orator in the House of Lords, and only one in the House of Commons—Lord Stanley. There was, indeed, his brother seceder from the old Whig ranks, Sir James Graham, whose speeches had a marked influence on the House. He was a handsome man, but his voice was not a fine one. His manner was dignified, but it was also inanimate and without variety; his excellence lay rather in the general dexterity of his arguments, and in pithy, somewhat epigrammatic sayings. There was no fire in them, no imagination, but they were weighty, and gave one the impression of a very able and a very sensible man.

It may seem strange to deny the existence of any orator in the House of Lords when Lord Brougham was still, not only alive, but, so far as physical health was concerned, as well and strong as ever. But Lord Brougham in all other respects was then the mere shadow of himself. It was difficult to realize that he

was the same man who had contended on quite equal terms with George Canning. It seemed, somehow, as if he had been quenched—by lack of fire in the surrounding atmosphere. He was perpetually speaking, or rather talking, for I never heard one great speech from him on any subject. And yet he retained all the mechanism of oratory, to a degree I have never seen in any other man. He spoke sentences with the most complicated parentheses, yet always returning with perfect acuracy to the main structure of the sentence, after having marked off the deviation by some appropriate change of tone, or of gesture, or of both. For, indeed, his gestures were marvellous. His nose was flourished in harmony with his fingers, of which he made use more after the example of the gesticulating Italians than of our more staid and sober race. His very thumbs were eloquent. The power of glare which he threw into his small and cold grey eye when he wished to express indignation was wonderful. I think it quite possible that, if he had been even then sent back to the House of Commons and to the handling of great questions of public policy, he might have become again a formidable power. As it was, I never heard from him a single speech of any force, nor a single sentence that was worth remembering. If ever there was a man to whom Disraeli's epithet of an 'extinct volcano' could be applied with literal truth, it was to Lord Brougham.

My dislike of the Whig Government was not lessened by the course the Ministry now took on that great question of public policy which was then rising into pressing importance. During the many years the Whigs had been in office they had never shown any disposition to support the agitation in favour of the repeal of the Corn Laws; and Lord Melbourne had declared in a celebrated speech that the man who would advocate the free import of foreign corn would be 'the maddest man in England.' Freedom of trade had never been one of the party doctrines of the Whigs. They, in

alliance with the whole manufacturing and commercial classes, had opposed every endeavour of Mr. Pitt to relax the system of Protection, even as against Ireland. Now, in the utter decadence of their power, and for want of anything else to fill their sails, they suddenly announced the new policy of making some important concession to the Anti-Corn Law League. How far any of them had even begun to experience that change of opinion which a few years later overtook Sir Robert Peel, it would be difficult to determine. Certain it is that no symptoms of conversion, on the merits of the question, had appeared in them, till, under the stress and temptation of a crisis in their party interests, their course was suddenly changed. And, indeed, on the merits they were ignorant and divided. The only Whig writer and politician who had enjoyed a great reputation as a political economist, Ricardo, had always held and taught that a cheap price of corn would insure a low rate of wages. Low wages would enable manufacturers to lower the cost of production, and to increase their profits. This doctrine was firmly believed in by all parties. Of course it afforded no prospect of advantage to the working classes from the repeal of the Corn Laws, whilst that measure was held to threaten ruin to all the classes engaged in agriculture. Cobden's doctrine was entirely new—that wages did not depend on the price of food, but on the demand for labour, which would be greatly stimulated by free imports. The Whigs of 1841 had not grasped this new doctrine. There is a story told of Lord Melbourne at that time, which, whether literally true or not—although I believe it to be quite true—at least puts in a telling form the condition of the Whig view upon the merits. After a long discussion in a Cabinet at which it was decided to embark on a reform of the Corn Laws, the members had broken up, and were making their way in some excitement out of Downing Street, when Lord Melbourne followed them to the head of the stairs, and shouted out: 'Stop,

stop! Tell me what it is agreed that we shall say: whether cheap corn is to lower wages or to raise them—it don't much matter which, but at least we should all say the same thing.' The story goes that this appeal of the Prime Minister was received with shouts of merriment. It was an address characteristic at once of Lord Melbourne's devil-may-care manner and of his penetrating common-sense sagacity. So transparent a political manœuvre, when it fails, does always a great deal more than fail. It is very apt to produce, or to intensify, a violent reaction. In some minds it provokes indignation and disgust; in others it excites contempt. In the present case it did both. The constituencies were generally as ignorant and indifferent on the merits of the Free Trade controversy as the Whig leaders themselves had been, but they had become thoroughly tired of the party, and were not to be deceived by the mere playing of a trump-card.

My father left London and posted home through the whole length of England, where everyone was under the excitement of an approaching General Election—an excitement in which I had come to share intensely. And when, after reaching home in September, 1841, a majority for Sir Robert Peel of ninety-one was declared, I rejoiced in the result. Besides the early preconception which had led me to identify the Whigs of 1832-1841 with the Whigs of 1784-1806, who had been the envenomed enemies of Mr. Pitt, I had a special horror of the last electioneering move. It was not that I had thought my way to any reasoned conclusions on the issues raised by the Corn Law controversy. I had never read a line of formal political economy; but, partly no doubt by nature, and partly as the effect of early training, not only in the physical sciences, but in spiritual things, I had a supreme regard for the integrity of the mind in all forms of intellectual conviction, and I was specially revolted by the spectacle of men sacrificing any truth to electioneering

tactics. This feeling has remained with me through life, intensified by more flagrant examples than any I had then known.

I had not at that time observed one mitigating fact which a longer observation of the world has impressed upon me. That fact is that a large number of our opinions on almost all subjects are held on the insecure tenure of nothing but authority and tradition. We may hold them without doubt, but only because without examination. Then, when these are assailed by arguments which are entirely new to us, and when these arguments are really sound, they force an entrance wherever extraneous conditions are favourable to attention. Self-interests or party interests are among the most powerful of these extraneous conditions, but changed convictions may be a reality none the less. The merit of reaching these new convictions may be less when they are the result of such conditions, but they may be genuine and sincere. This is undoubtedly the explanation of the great change which came over the manufacturing and commercial classes on a Protective fiscal system. For generations they had insisted upon it in their own interests. When it came to be consistently applied to another industry than their own, they gradually awoke to the evils it entailed, and at last attacked it in that form with all the passion of a new conviction. A Whig of that day declared in a hustings speech that he could not with a good conscience repeat the petition for our daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, and at the same time support the Corn Laws. That Whig had then attained the age of somewhat under forty, and had long been in public life. It did seem strange that, till the interests of his party intervened, he had never drawn this conclusion from so familiar a petition. I thought it at the time a specimen of all that was worst in political conduct. But that Whig became afterwards one of my nearest and dearest relatives—the Earl of Carlisle, long and better known as Lord Morpeth—and I

learnt from the sincerity of his character that I had been mistaken in my judgment of his speech. His political position had no doubt not only awakened his attention, but had given its own impetus to his thoughts in following a certain path. But the fervour of his new convictions was none the less absolutely sincere.