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King George III

Introduction to the Opening Events and Causes
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In 1760 occurred the death of the second of the Hanoverian sovereigns of England; and his grandson, a youth of twenty-two years, ascended the throne as George III. The young sovereign was received with universal applause throughout the empire, including America. Fair and promising were his prospects for a long and successful reign. For two generations England had been governed by Parliament, and Parliament had been in the hands of a few great Whig families. The first two Georges had little to do in the management of the empire, but the third was not long in his high station before he determined to take the reins of government into his own hands -- to obey the frequent mandate of his mother, "George, be king!"

The times were specially favorable for his purpose. The Old Whigs, who had retained their power in large part by the open purchase of seats in Parliament, were fast losing the confidence of the people. For two hundred years there had been no redistribution of seats, and many old towns, known as "rotten boroughs," which had dwindled to almost nothing, were still represented, while growing cities like Manchester and Leeds had no representation in Parliament. The Tory party, after a long exile from power, owing to its adherence to the pretending Stuarts, was now rapidly gaining ground. George III took advantage of these conditions, and, putting himself at the head of the Tories, soon became the real master in English politics. The vast power of patronage, amounting to many million pounds a year, which had been wielded by the Whigs for many years, was soon in the hands of the king, and in the purchase of seats in the Commons for his favorites he outdid the Whigs in the worst days of their corruption.

It was a sad day for the British Empire when King George became its political master. He was a man of narrow intellect, and lacked every element of the greatness of statesmanship. "He had a smaller mind," says the British historian, Green, "than any English king before him save James II." He showered favors on his obsequious followers,

while men of independent character whom he could not bend to his will became the objects of his hatred. Pitt he pronounced a "trumpeter of sedition"; Burke and Camden were the objects of his wrath. He had not the capacity to shield his natural littleness by surrounding himself with great men, as many a mediocre sovereign has done. He despised Grenville for his independence and got rid of him as soon as he could. He recalled Chatham to the premiership because he could not help doing so, but he rejoiced that the old Commoner was broken with age and infirmity, and even expressed a wish that he would die. At length, in 1770, the king, having become supreme in the government, chose as his chief minister a man that he could mold as the potter molds his clay, a man of many noble impulses, but of the class who believed that the king could do no wrong.[1] This man, whose "lazy good nature and Tory principles" led him to defer to the king's judgment rather than to his own, was kept at the head of the government, even against his own will, for twelve years -- until the Revolution had been accomplished and America was free. Yet withal, King George has his redeeming traits: he was a man of prodigious industry, he was devoid of hypocrisy, and he led a moral life in the midst of a corrupt court.

At the door of George III must be laid the American Revolution. What the future might have unfolded had not this union been broken when it was must be relegated to the field of conjecture; but that this union was severed between the "beautiful mother and the more beautiful daughter" in the last half of the eighteenth century was chiefly the work of George III. He had little to do, perhaps, with the beginnings -- with the enforcement of the navigation laws and the writs of assistance of 1761. But after the colonies had once offended him by defying British authority, he pursued them with the same vindictive spirit which he exhibited toward Pitt and other statesmen that he could not control -- he determined to humble them at all hazards. He opposed the repeal of the Stamp Act, but his power was not yet great enough to prevent it. When the English merchants made an outcry against the Townshend duties, on account of their loss of trade, it was the king, as stated above, who retained the duty on tea and thus kept alive the embers until they burst forth into the flame of war.

The Americans now refused to purchase tea from England; they smuggled it from Holland. The English then, by an ingenious trick, made their tea cheaper in America than it was in England, or than that smuggled from Holland. They did this by removing the duty always paid at an English port by the tea merchant on his way from the Orient to America. But the colonists still refused to buy the tea. The principle was at stake, -- the right of Parliament to tax them at all, -- and they were as determined as the English king. Tea-laden ships reached Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston late in the autumn of 1773. Excited meetings of citizens were held in all these cities. In Charleston the tea was landed, only to rot in storage; the Philadelphians refused to permit the ships to land.

Three ships lay in the harbor at Boston, but the people kept watch day and night to prevent the landing of the tea. The owner of the vessels was informed by the excited people that he must take back his tea to London; but this he could not do, as the governor refused him permission to sail and two of the king's ships guarded the harbor. Meetings were held nightly in Faneuil Hall, or Old South Church, and at length, on December 16, after every legal method for returning the tea had been exhausted, a body of seven thousand men resolved that it should not he landed; and half a hundred men, in the disguise of Mohawk Indians, after giving a war whoop, ran silently to the harbor, boarded the ships, broke open the tea chests, about three hundred and forty in number, and threw the contents into the sea. The people looked on from the shore, taking the proceedings as a matter of course. Boston slept that night as if nothing had happened. Who these fifty Indian-garbed king-defiers were is not known; but it is known who instigated the mob, who was the mouthpiece of Boston at this moment, and of Massachusetts, of New England, of America -- it was Samuel Adams, the "Palinurus of the Revolution."

England stood aghast at the temerity of her sometime docile colonists. The irate king, with monumental obstinacy and inability to discern the signs of the times, resolved to humble the Americans once for all; nor did his short-sighted Majesty seem to doubt for a moment his ability to do so. Of the colonists he writes, "They will be lions while we are lambs: but if we take the resolute part, they will undoubtedly prove very meek."[2] King George now led his Parliament to pass in quick succession four drastic measures against the people of Massachusetts. First, the Boston Port Bill, which removed the capital from that city to Salem and closed the port of Boston to the commerce of the world; second, the Regulating Act, which annulled the Massachusetts charter and transformed the colony to an absolute despotism; third, an act providing that persons accused of certain crimes in connection with riots be transported to England, or to some place outside of the colony for trial; while the fourth made it legal to quarter troops in any town in Massachusetts. These were soon followed by the Quebec Act, which extended the province of Quebec to include all the territory west of the Alleghanies and north of the Ohio River to the Mississippi -- except what had been granted by royal charter. It is supposed that the act was intended to prevent pioneers from settling in the Ohio country, and to win the favor of the French Catholics.

Two years before these acts were passed (1772), Massachusetts, led by Samuel Adams, had made an important move toward concerted action. "Committees of Correspondence" had been appointed in every town in the colony for the purpose of guarding the interests of liberty. The next year Virginia suggested the forming of a permanent Committee of Correspondence to extend to all the colonies. This was gradually done, and the system was very effective in spreading the doctrine of resistance.

Against the drastic British measures Massachusetts now made an appeal for aid, and through these committees the people were prepared for an immediate response. From Maine to Georgia they made common cause with their brethren of the Bay colony, and South Carolina sounded the keynote in these ringing words, "The whole country must be animated with one great soul, and all Americans must stand by one another, even unto death." Washington offered to arm and equip a thousand men at his own expense and to lead them to the relief of Boston. Thomas Jefferson set forth the view in a pamphlet, the "Summary View," that Parliament had no right to any authority whatever in the colonies. Nearly all the colonies joined in an agreement of non-intercourse with England. As the day approached for the Port Bill to take effect, cattle, grain, and produce from the other colonies began to pour into Boston. The day came, and throughout the country it was generally kept as a day of fasting and prayer; the church bells were tolled, and flags were put at half-mast on the ships in the harbors. Had the English king been able to glance over America on that day, he must have abandoned every thought of punishing a single colony without having to deal with them all; he must have seen that but two courses lay before him -- to recede from his position, or to make war upon a continent.

Footnotes

[1]But after the Revolution we find North allied with the king's opponents. [return]

[2]This was quoted by the king from General Gage. See Knight, Vol. VI, p.58. [return]

Source: "History of the United States of America," by Henry William Elson, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1904. Transcribed by Kathy Leigh.

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