

THE PICTURESQUENESS OF THE PEERS.

BY ALFRED F. ROBBINS.



THE ROYAL ASSENT.



THAT there are various lights in which the House of Lords, as an institution, can be regarded, is being made sufficiently evident just now to every student of politics or reader of a newspaper. But there is one which, standing outside partisan discussion, is worthy of note amid all the blare of the contending battalions, and that is the picturesque. The idea—popular among children, and not altogether unknown to those of larger growth—that a peer is always to be distinguished from his fellow-man by his coronet and robe is, of course, illusory. These trappings of state are

donned only on rare occasions; but despite the fact that the occupants of the House of Lords wear the sober black of the ordinary citizen, and have even been seen in the Gilded Chamber in something close akin to hoddengray, there is a picturesque element attached to their proceedings which time has done little to lessen, and the interest of which it has even increased.

Nothing in these days can approach, of course, the aspect the House of Lords must have presented in earlier times when bishops and mitred abbots sat among the mail-clad peers, and when the possibilities of turbulence were such that, as the hasty word was apt to be

followed by the heavy blow, a royal order had to be issued, directing that no one with horses or arms should repair to the Parliament.

No more is there likely to be witnessed such a scene as that presented by a fourteenth-century archbishop who, when on his way to his place in the House of Lords, there to join "the Magnates in Parliament"—an early English term for the peers which survives in the name of the Hungarian Upper House to-day—he was met at the door of the Great Hall of Westminster by the Steward of the King's Household and the King's Chamberlain, and told that he must answer in the Law Courts for offences alleged against him before he could be allowed to take his seat. One can as little imagine the Marquis of Breadalbane and Lord Carrington staying Archbishop Benson's onward progress in this fashion, as one can expect the repetition in full Parliament, by the Sovereign's command, of the apology once made by an Earl of Arundel to a Duke of Lancaster.

"Sir," said the Earl, in one of the first Parliamentary speeches ever reported, "sith that it seemeth to the King and other Lords, and eke that each here hath been so mickle grieved and displeas'd by my words, it forethinketh, and I beseech you of your grace and lordship to quit me your man-tallant." The sentiment will seem excellent, even to those to whom the sense is obscure; but the scene was one that, for the honour of the peerage, obviously did not bear frequent repetition.



THE EARL OF ANCASTER, JOINT HEREDITARY
LORD GREAT CHAMBERLAIN.

(From a photograph by Walery, Ltd., Regent Street, W.)

In these times, the most striking effect that is witnessed in the House of Lords is when the Sovereign opens Parliament in person. During the greater portion of our history the practice was almost invariable, and the attendant pageantry was always marked. In the spacious days of great Elizabeth, the monarch was accustomed to proceed to Westminster on such occasions with the pomp in which her soul delighted, though occasionally she may have had prickings of conscience—for she was economical to the degree of niggardliness—on the score of cost.

When arrived in the House of Lords, she seated herself in the Chair of Estate (or, as it is commonly called, the Throne), and then, as now, there was a chair to her right and another to her left, which throughout Elizabeth's reign remained vacant, for the former was anciently placed for the King of Scots, when he came to our Parliament, while the latter was for the immediate heir to the Crown.

How closely the procedure then adopted is followed to-day can be judged from the fact that not a single discoverable detail of the ceremony has been altered; and a description of an opening of Parliament by Queen Victoria resembles in all essential particulars that of a similar function by Queen Elizabeth.

When the Queen performs this duty, the peers are robed; and while this gives a prevailing touch of scarlet to the centre of the Chamber, which is added to by the robes of the judges, who are privileged to be present upon such occasions, there is much relief, not, as might be thought, from the lawn sleeves of the bishops, who then are clad not unlike their lay colleagues, but from the dresses of the peeresses. These ladies are permitted, with a gallantry which the House of Lords shows in various ways to visitors of the gentler sex, but from which the sterner assembly "in another place" would shrink with terrified apprehension, to occupy all the seats usually allotted to peers, except the very front ones. "Drawing-room" dress is the rule; and, as if this would not suffice to brighten the scene, the diplomatic representatives of the foreign Powers (mostly in dark blue and gold, but mingled with the severe black-and-white of the United States Ambassador's evening-dress and the flowing robes of the Chinese Minister Extraordinary) are accommodated with seats behind the Bishops' Bench. The great body of the peers meanwhile have to find places where they can, temporary benches being placed for them on the floor of the House, for they cannot even take refuge in the galleries, which such of their lady friends as are not peeresses fill to overflowing. In this respect, indeed, the resemblance to



SIR ALBERT W. WOODS, K.C.M.G., C.B.,
GARTER KING OF ARMS.

(From a photograph by W. & D. Downey, Ebury Street, S.W.)

earlier times is singularly close; for centuries ago it was recorded that on the opening day, owing to "the number of peers being much increased, divers of the Barons do sit upon Forms, placed crossways at the lower end of the House."

Into this great gathering the Queen enters in full state. There are six Heralds to lead the way, those of Chester, Windsor, Lancaster, York, Somerset, and Richmond, accompanied by the four Pursuivants, Portcullis, Rouge Croix, Bluemantle, and Rouge Dragon. The three English Kings-of-Arms, Garter, Clarenceux, and Norroy, clad in their gorgeous tabards, follow; and then come the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, the Lord Great Chamberlain, and the Hereditary Earl Marshal (the Duke of Norfolk). Immediately preceding the Queen are the Hereditary Bearer of the Cap of Maintenance (the Marquis of Winchester, the premier marquis of England) and the Lord Privy Seal, the last clasping with both hands the Sword of State; and when the Sovereign, clad in a robe of imperial purple, has seated herself upon the Throne, the faithful Commons are desired to present themselves to listen to the reading of the royal speech, "in her Majesty's own words," as the Lord Chancellor, without the suspicion of a smile, is careful to announce.

But this spectacle has seldom been seen of recent years, 1886 having been the latest occasion of its presentation; while not since

the death of the Prince Consort has the Queen herself read the Speech, which she had always previously done when there, and in the clear and ringing tones which still mark her utterance, as those present at the inaugural ceremony of the Imperial Institute can testify. The opening of Parliament by commission is a very mild and meagre ceremony compared with the one which has been described, and few visitors, and even fewer peers, trouble themselves to attend. An element of the ludicrous rather than the picturesque, indeed, attaches to the occasion. The Lord Chancellor and four other peers are delegated by the Queen to perform the function; and, arrayed in shapeless scarlet robes slashed with ermine—the number of slashes telling to the initiated their degree in the peerage, as the number of chevrons distinguishes lance-corporal, corporal, and sergeant—and wearing cocked-hats which seldom seem to fit, they sit in a row in front of the Chair of Estate, looking uncomfortable and far from happy. The Clerk of the Parliaments reads the verbose document giving them power to open Parliament in the Queen's name; and as each is mentioned, there is a pause, during which the cocked-hat of the peer referred to is raised with a bow. The same unimpressive ceremony attends a prorogation; but in the latter case it is always preceded by one much more quaint, and that is the giving of the royal



ADMIRAL THE HON. SIR JAMES R. DRUMMOND, G.C.B.
GENTLEMAN USHER OF THE BLACK ROD.

(From a photograph by Thos. Fall, Baker Street, W.)



THE DUKE OF NORFOLK, K.G., HEREDITARY
EARL MARSHAL.

(From a photograph by Watery, Ltd., Regent Street, W.)

assent to such measures as both Houses have passed.

The fashion in which our Constitution has evolved is in no one function more clearly shown than in the process of giving the royal assent. The student of the ponderous tomes known as the "Lords' Journals" will be aware of the mixture of languages their pages contain. In the very first day's record that exists, this referring to the earliest Parliament of Henry VIII., the body of the entry is in Latin, and a portion in Norman-French, while a proxy is noted as endorsed in English. The Latin has by this time disappeared from the "Journals," save at top and bottom, for the day of the sitting is still entered in that tongue, and Mr. Henry Graham signs the daily record not "Clerk of the Parliaments," but "Cler. Parliamentor." The Norman-French lingers in one set of entries alone, and that in regard to the royal assent, which is given in the language of the Conquest, as it has always been since England had a Parliament.

Something of athletic training is required for the leading performers in the ceremony. The Lords Commissioners are seated at one end of the Chamber, and the representatives of the legislative partner, the Commons, are standing, headed by their Speaker, at the other. The Clerk of the Parliaments stands at one side of the table midway, and facing him is the Clerk of the Crown. The latter takes up a Bill, faces the Lords Commissioners

and bows, turns to the Commons and bows, and reads the title: the latter, having performed the same evolutions, announces the royal assent in the words "*La Reyne le veult*," a process which is repeated with every measure on the list, save in the case of Finance and Private Bills. In the case of these last, the formula employed is "*Soit fait comme il est désiré*"—the Queen wills it in the one case, in the other she is content that what is wished shall be done; while to a Money Bill it is said, "*La Reyne remercie ses bon Sujets, accepte leur Bénévolence, et ainsi le veult*." When the Clerk of the Parliaments has turned to the right about some forty times, he must be glad to have only one Finance Bill on his list, or he would be rendered breathless. But he has cause for gratitude in that he is not called upon to use the ancient formula of assent to a Subsidy Bill: "*Le Roy remercie ces Communes de lor boons cuers en faisant lez Graunts, accepte et tout le content en l'enditure avandit especifie graunte et approve avesque l'act et les provisions a cest indenture annexez.*" For phrasing and spelling alike, the "Lords' Journals" must be held responsible.

It is only by long practice that the ceremony of giving the royal assent can be carried out with the sonorous dignity with which it is invested by its present chief performer, whose predecessor at the commencement of the reign was so staggered by the change of sex in the monarch that he stumbled in sad fashion when acting for the first time under the Queen. Ten days of the new régime had not accustomed him to the idea; and while to some of the forty measures earliest sanctioned by her Majesty the Clerk of the Parliaments duly said "*La Reyne le veult*," to others he exclaimed "*Le Roy le veult*," as he and those before him had been accustomed to do for over 120 years.

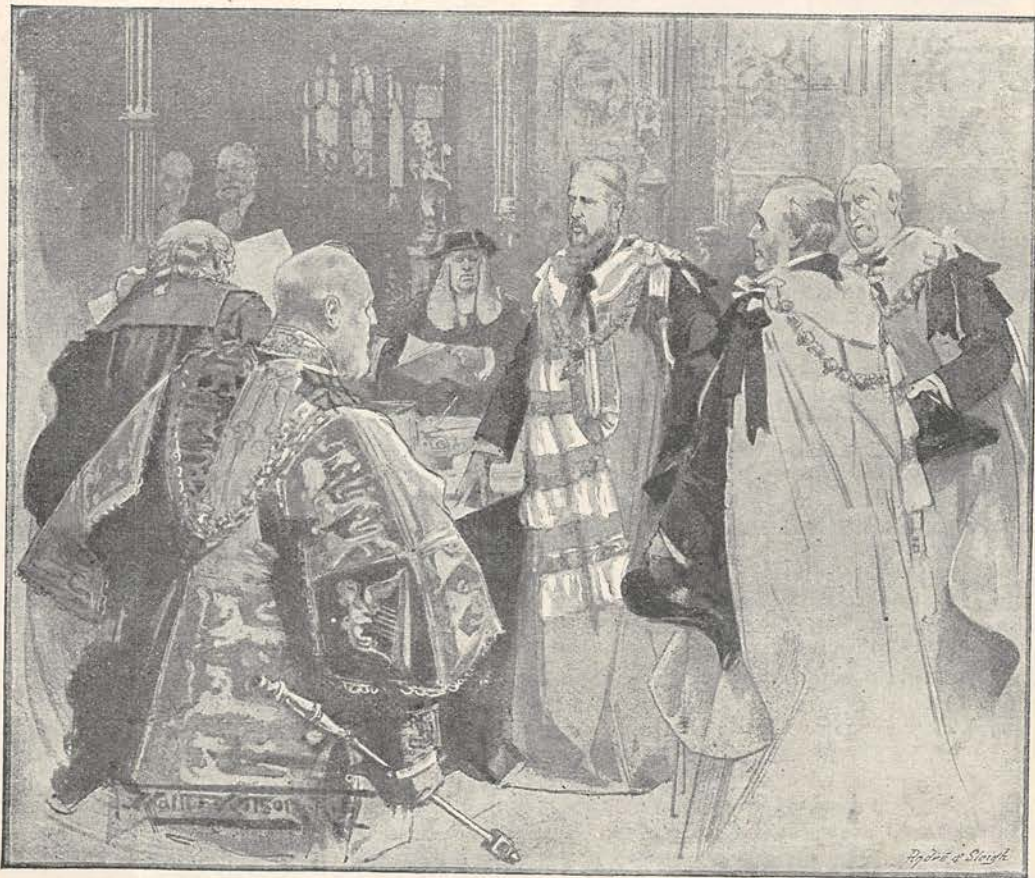
Not for nearly two centuries has the Clerk of the Parliaments been directed to utter the euphemistic formula by which the royal assent is refused. The right was frequently exercised by Elizabeth, who was accustomed to use the words "*La Reyne s'avisera*" with a freedom now imitated only by Presidents of the United States. Charles II., not long after the Restoration and as if to show with emphasis that the King had come by his own again, vetoed three Bills in a single day, the most important of which seems to have been one "for Confirmation of the Office of Register of Sales and Pawns made to Retailing Brokers in London and Westminster and Places adjacent." Having done enough for honour, the Merry Monarch used the right only once again, and upon a solitary Bill, during the

twenty and more years of his reign; but William of Orange improved upon his example, and five times declined to endorse measures passed by his Parliament.

A practice which was palpably growing was, however, to die at its height, and March 11th, 1708, is the day to be associated with its last use—1707, the date usually given, being an error founded upon forgetfulness that at that period the year began with Lady Day. Bald is the record that is left of a scene which, if repeated in these times, would prove thrilling. Anne was then the monarch; and having come to the House of Lords, "Her Majesty, being seated on Her Royal Throne, adorned with Her Crown and Regal Ornaments, attended with Her Officers of State (the Peers being in their Robes), commanded the Deputy Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod to let the Commons know—"It is Her Majesty's Pleasure that they attend Her presently, in the House of Peers." The Commons arrived, and there having been read by the Clerk of the Crown the titles of eight measures (which,

among other things, suspended the *Habeas Corpus* Act and repealed a Jacobean statute "for the well-garbling of spices"), "to these Bills the Clerk of the Parliaments pronounced the Royal Assent, severally, in these Words, "*La Raine le veult.*" The next on the list was "An Act for settling the Militia of that part of Great Britain called Scotland," and the official record merely adds, "*La Raine se avisera.*"

This was in the earliest year of the first Parliament of Great Britain; and it is curious to note that in the closing year of the latest Parliament of England it had been ineffectually sought to substitute an English formula for the old French one, which, as it happened, was to be employed in refusal only once again. The Lords in 1707 directed the judges to "forthwith prepare, and bring in, a Bill for the endorsing Bills, and giving the Royal Assent to all Acts of Parliament, in the English tongue." The command was obeyed; the measure rapidly passed the Lords, and was unanimously accorded a second reading



INTRODUCTION OF THE DUKE OF DEVONSHIRE.

in the Commons ; but it is as unfortunate for a measure as for a man when all speak well of it, and, as this one aroused no antagonism, it evoked no warm friendship. An early



HENRY J. L. GRAHAM, ESQ.,
CLERK OF PARLIAMENTS.

(From a photograph by J. Thomson, Grosvenor Street, W.)

prorogation killed it ; and in 1895, as in 1706, the French tongue continues to be used by an English monarch in the most important royal function, and this despite the fact that, just half-way between, the archaic pretence that our Sovereign reigns over France was quietly dropped into the limbo of the has-been.

Midway between the ceremonies of opening and closing Parliament may be considered that of the introduction of a newly-created peer. When the favoured person has received his patent, he is formally brought into the Chamber, appropriately robed, preceded by Sir Albert Woods as Garter King-of-Arms, and accompanied by two peers as sponsors. If he is a simple Baron, he is led to what is known as the Barons' Bench, on which he seats himself, and then rises and bows to the Lord Chancellor, who removes the cocked hat he has assumed for the occasion, and bows in return. But if he is a viscount, he has to make a further peregrination to the Viscounts' Bench ; while if he is an earl, marquis, or duke, the marchings and counter-marchings, bowings and obeisances, are more and more still.

At one time the distinction between the benches upon which the various grades of the peerage are presumed to sit was a tangible one ; but it is now adhered to only at the

introduction of a new peer—and then merely in form—and at the opening of Parliament by the Sovereign. One important exception, however, is to be noted, and that is that the Lords Spiritual continue to sit alone, and mark themselves off from their colleagues by a distinctive costume. The benches immediately to the right of the Chair of Estate, and nearer the Throne than those of the Ministers of the day, are occupied, as they have ever been, by the prelates. As lately as the first Parliament of Elizabeth the Abbot of Westminster sat with the Lords Spiritual ; and when he vanished from the roll of the peerage, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York were accustomed for a period to occupy a whole front bench to themselves, the bishops sitting upon two forms behind them, those of London, Durham, and Winchester having the most prominent positions, and the remaining prelates ranging in the order of their consecration. The same strictness of precedence is not observed to-day, for, during debates which touch questions critical to the Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London may be seen side by side in eager consultation, with a prelate close at hand who comes from a see of which Henry VIII. never heard.

The bishops, clad in lawn, but deprived of much of their picturesqueness by their abandonment of the wigs which became them so well—and the wearing of which George III. considered essential to the orthodox soundness of the episcopate—make a striking feature in a Chamber which admirably lends itself to illustration. The gilded ornament shows well above the red benches : the woosack, lingering emblem of the time when the prosperity of England depended upon the length and quality of the fleece, is a marked feature before the empty Throne ; and the cross-benches, which have no counterpart in the Commons, have created that psychological condition, unexamined as yet by philosophers, but the cause of much trouble to successive Prime Ministers, "the cross-bench mind." Upon the occasion of a great debate, when the steps of the Throne are occupied by Privy Councillors and the eldest sons of peers, and when the pen allotted to members of the House of Commons at the opposite end is crowded ; when the galleries are graced with the presence of ladies, whom the peers are not so ungallant as to shut in a cage ; when the benches are filled, the lights are high, and the discussion is animated, the Gilded Chamber presents a spectacle not to be forgotten. The individual lord, without robe or coronet, may not be striking, but there is no question about the picturesqueness of the collected peers.