PALMERSTON AND THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

"En fait d'histoire contemporaine il n'y a de vrai que ce qu'on n'écrit point."
VAN DE WEYER.

PALMERSTON AND THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

THE men who guided the larger destinies of Europe during the "storm-years" 1848 and 1849, were scarcely equal to the tasks which they were called upon, voluntarily or involuntarily, to accomplish; for these years do not merely bisect the century, they are its watershed. On the far side lie benevolent despotism and the state-system; on this side, democracy and nationalities. The period from the Congress of Vienna to the Civic Guard of Pius IX and the Hungarian Diet of 1847 is, in a very real sense, the fine flower of the eighteenth century. Territorial frontiers may have been shifted somewhat, old institutions rebaptised; but the spirit is the same: Joseph II would never have dared to do all that the Congresses did, and Guizot always speaks like a minister of Louis XV. The first French Revolution was only perceptible through the completeness of the reaction; so efficaciously had the body politic been purged that, outwardly at any rate, it appeared more immune from the revolutionary taint than it had in 1788. Then, with incredible swiftness, the house of reaction collapsed, and long flames of

rebellion shot across Europe from the Atlantic to Bessarabia, from Posen to the shores of Sicily, almost outrunning the telegraph which announced their approach. And this, to use an outworn term, is the "foundation" of modern Europe. The actors, with a few exceptions (and these chiefly south of the Alps), are not cast in a heroic mould: Viennese schoolboys, preferring a *Katzenmusik* by night to carefully pruned lectures on political science at more seasonable hours; older, but scarcely more erudite, students, proclaiming the divine right of a people whose history and culture they had just manufactured; the degenerate '48 breed of *sansculottes*, and Magyar *honveds*, magnifying some slight skirmish between outposts into a Cannae or Waterloo. This is one of the reasons why the European Revolution of 1848 will never be so well known as the French Revolution of sixty years earlier, although the judgment passed by the cautious Springer upon the March-days of Vienna holds good for the greater part of Europe, in spite of the fact that he was speaking of Austria only:

> We may take various views about the vitality of the new Austria which they tried to set up on the ruins of the old; but there can be no conflict of opinion that in the March-days the old Austria fell completely, justly, and for ever, and that all who have held power since 1848, without distinction, take their stand upon the Revolution[1].

[1] "Ueber die Lebensfähigkeit des neuen Oesterreich, welches auf den Trümmern des alten zu errichten versucht wurde, kann man verschiedener Ansicht sein; dass aber in den Märztagen *das alte Oesterreich vollständig, mit Recht und für immer zu Grunde ging, alle Machthaber seit* 1848 *ohne Unter-*

During such momentous times, Palmerston, alone of those who were at the head of affairs, realised fully what the contemporary phenomena meant, whence they were derived, and to what profitable ends they might be utilised; he alone perceived that after the *Völkerfrühling* the political harvesting would not be as those that had gone before. This is not chauvinistic over-estimation; Palmerston is indeed the outstanding figure of 1848–9, a giant among his fellows, not because his proportions are in truth gigantic when measured by the tape of world-history, but because the Ficquelmonts and Drouyn de Lhuys are so very dwarfish. The space which divides him from Pitt, the disciple from the master, is the whole distance between the high-water mark of common-sense and the snow-line of genius. But the times were crying out for a little undiluted common-sense, which, as Lamartine discovered, may well be more fitted than genius to cope with revolution. Genius would never have made such gross miscalculations about the future as did Palmerston; but it would doubtless have dealt less vigorously with the present: short-sightedness is a virtue in some crises.

Palmerston, then, was not a great man; but he was the right man. Sir Stratford Canning, had he had any gifts of oratory, would have made a better Foreign Secretary; Schwarzenberg and Czar Nicholas were his equals as statesmen, while Lamartine and

schied auf die Revolution als ihre Basis fussen, darüber herrscht kein Zwiespalt der Meinungen." Springer, *Geschichte Oesterreichs seit dem Wiener Frieden*, vol. II. pp. 194–6, and footnote. (Leipzig, 1865.)

Mazzini were incomparably greater as men. And, if Palmerston judged the phenomena of his time accurately, and proceeded to take the steps he actually took, he was indebted to his country's geographical position no less than to his own innate commonsense. Not seldom has the Channel proved itself more potent than the personal element as a maker of history, and but for it many a Downing Street transgressor might have died repentant. Palmerston was on the right side of the Channel for the *rôle* he chose to play during the Revolution; and, standing outside the universal ferment, he got a better view of it. It is a comfortable pastime to read the *Mene Tekel* on a neighbour's wall, to "rain homilies" at Vienna and point the moral of governmental misdeeds in Athens, when one has nothing worse to face at home than potato famines in Ireland and Chartist signatories who have only a parchment existence. For his interference abroad Palmerston has been censured everywhere; at home, he frightened his colleagues and was found intolerable in exalted circles, while subsequent historians, such as Spencer Walpole and Sir Theodore Martin, cannot condemn too plainly his insolence and effrontery. Abroad, of course, he is still Lord *Feuerbrand*, and the European "umpire." In the English universities we are apologetic and indignant by turns, when speaking of the English Foreign Secretary who appointed himself tutor in *Weltpolitik* and lecturer in international ethics. The accusation is on the whole unjust, and the worst that can be said of Palmerston is that he was no

diplomat in the nicer shades of the term. "In diplomacy," said de Tocqueville, "you must always write, even when you know nothing and wish to say nothing"; and he might have added that in nine cases out of ten you must take good care that you do not say anything. That was not Palmerston's way, and, except in rare moments of supremely correct behaviour, he usually did say something very unambiguously. Poor Lord Ponsonby, our ambassador at Vienna, the friend of Metternich and disciple of Talleyrand, told Lord John Russell that "he had received from Palmerston letters which are not to be submitted to by any man[1]"; and Palmerston was usually more brusque and less polite with foreign Courts than with his own servants, in spite of the watchful eye and ready pencil of Queen Victoria. To be impolite and insulting in diplomacy is a mistake; but it was Palmerston's only mistake. Impartial readers must admit that the kings and princes whom Palmerston called fools and knaves were not far from being such. A large section of the country—including the Queen and the Prince Consort—complained in 1849–50 that his *brusquerie* and habit of straight talking had left us without an ally in Europe. Palmerston replied that right and justice were stronger than troops of armed men[2], and his admirers may assert that the alliances were worthless, especially at the price at which they were to be purchased.

[1] Spencer Walpole, *Life of Lord John Russell*, vol. II. p. 48 footnote.

[2] Speech of July 21st, 1849, Debate on Russian Invasion of Hungary, House of Commons. Hansard, CVII. pp. 786–817.

Palmerston, it has been said, judged the movements of 1848 at their proper value. He did not fall into panic fear at what was happening, and many of his despatches are filled with the undisguised note of jubilation of a prophet justified in his prophesying at the last. He knew that the end of social order had not come in England, and, in spite of barricades and fugitive royalty, believed that the same was true of Europe. There was probably only one man, apart from himself, on whose judgment he placed any reliance, and that man strongly corroborated this belief. Before he took up his fifth residence in Constantinople in 1848, Sir Stratford Canning had been sent as itinerant ambassador to most of the Courts which lay between Ostend and the Golden Horn. He saw shivering burghers relieve the guard with white-gloved students in a deserted Berlin, and witnessed nocturnal disturbances at Vienna; and yet he wrote home his firm belief that Central Europe was sound at heart. What was true of Germany was true of the rest of Europe; and, if there was trouble ahead, it was the fault not of the peoples, but of the Courts. Napoleon had been finally overthrown, not by princes and statesmen, but by the citizen, the student and the artisan; not by diplomacy, but by the nascent force of nationality. And what had been the reward for the generation which lay between Waterloo and the Smoke-riots at Milan? There had been no reward: the novel sensation of a national self-consciousness, and all the hundred forms of a better life that it meant, had

been protocolled out of existence at Troppau and Carlsbad. Not only had the doors of government been banged in the face of the citizen and artisan who had fought at Leipzig, but a despotism more brutal, and a delation more searching, than any that characterised the empire of Napoleon, intruded upon the innermost recesses of their private life. "Do you think," asked the Prince of Prussia, afterwards King and Kaiser Wilhelm, "that if the nations had known in 1813 that of all their struggling no reality, but only the remembrance, would remain—do you think anybody would have made sacrifices so great?" All the time social conditions were improving; inventors were never more active; banks were multiplying in great and small cities; commercial companies were being floated everywhere. The excluded classes were now something more than illiterate, half-starved peasants; they were travelled, prosperous, and had some sort of education. Whatever they might think at the Hofburg, humanity no longer began with barons. Such a state of things could not last for ever; apathy became discontent, discontent grew into disorder, and unless the Governments yielded, disorder would convert itself into revolution. In England the Government had yielded as early as 1832, and, in addition to the Reform Bill, there was a widely-read Press, and, for the artisans, some trades-union activity. Institutions which had been so beneficial in England would have similar salutary effects if applied to the European Continent—that is the whole statement of Palmerston's position, both before and after the outbreak.

He once told the Master of Trinity that no man ought to be doctored against his will: half his official life was spent in doctoring governments against their will. The student of the Foreign Office records for the later 'forties grows weary, in spite of Palmerston's crisp logic and sharply-etched metaphors, of the eternal prescription to the ailing but recalcitrant foreigner: "If you would but turn constitutional and copy our institutions, you might be as happy and prosperous, and sleep as soundly in your bed, as we in England." The advice was perfectly sound, and, had it been taken and acted upon in the spirit in which it was given, much disaster would certainly have been avoided. It is quite obvious from the *Memoirs* of Metternich that he, too, diagnosed the disease correctly and knew the remedy that should be applied. It would have been as well for his reputation had he never disclosed the fact. Thus Palmerston was no revolutionary, but honestly believed that political institutions which had proved themselves of sterling worth in the United Kingdom might with advantage be imported into Europe, and that, in any case, the old forms of government, as they had been fashioned under the auspices of the Holy Alliance, were no longer possible.

But however liberal and humane he might be, however frankly his sympathies might be enlisted on the side of oppressed nationalities, Palmerston was still Foreign Secretary, and in that capacity his chief duty was the maintenance of the Balance of Power. It might happen that humane considerations and the maintenance of the Balance of Power did not