CHAPTER LXII

AN HOUR OF IMMORTALITY

The Tories were out and the Whigs were in again. And with Melbourne still a Whig, did not that matter to the Queen? Alas, for Melbourne, things had changed. There was now a Prince Albert and, in any event, Melbourne was older.

Sometimes visions of office flitted across his wayward imagination:

Sunday, February 25, 1844: . . . I dined at Palmerston's yesterday; . . . Melbourne said an odd thing which showed that he has not abandoned all idea of taking office again, though I hardly think he would if it came to the point. It was this, "There is not much chance of the House of Commons coming to a vote against Government; but still such a thing is possible, and I was kept awake half the night thinking, suppose such a thing did occur, and I was sent for to Windsor, what advice I should give the Queen"— "it kept me long awake," he repeated, "and I determined that I would advise her not to let Mr. O'Connell be brought up for judgment." It was very strange, and everybody looked amazed.

But the Queen had now no illusions:

December 13, 1845, Saturday: . . . She wrote to Melbourne, and told him she had sent for Lord John [Russell], knowing that the state of his health would not admit of his assisting her. He wrote back word that a voyage from Southampton to Cowes would be as bad for him as to cross the Atlantic.

November 29, 1848: . . . On the promotion of Lord John Russell's government, he [Melbourne] was mortified at not being invited to take a share in it. It was evident that he was conscious of, and bitterly felt, the decay of his own powers, and the insignificance to which he was reduced. He would, if he could, have disguised this from himself and others, but it preyed on his mind, and made him very unhappy, and often

apparently morose. Sometimes his feelings would find vent in these lines from the "Samson Agonistes," which he would repeat with a sad memory of the past, and sense of the present:

> So much I feel my general spirit droop,
> My hopes all flat, Nature within me seems
> In all her functions weary of herself,
> My race of glory run, and race of shame,
> And I shall shortly be with them that rest.

Broadlands, August 21, 1845: . . . Melbourne by way of being very well, but there are only gleams left of his former self. He seems to bear on his face a perpetual consciousness of his glory obscured, and looks grave and stern, while he sits for hours in silence. At times he talks in the way he used, but though in the same strain, more feebly, always candid as usual.

It was thus for Lord John Russell that the Queen sent. If he would form a government (December 13, 1845) so she told him, "Peel had given her every assurance of his support."

The question for the Whigs was upon what "support" from the Tories they could rely.

Saturday, December 13, 1845: . . . They will have no appearance of intrigue or underhand dealing, but an open, frank proceeding which may enable them to see the exact condition in which they stand.

"Confound the fellow, what a cold feeler and cautious stepper he is!"—this had been (April 24, 1839) one of Greville's explosions against Peel. In dealing with the Whigs, Peel (1839) once said to Stanley, "Why, I must go down to the House of Commons with two speeches."

The correspondence between the Whigs "meeting at Lord John's" and Peel, was conducted through the Queen. As the Whigs considered it:

December 19, 1845: . . . Lord John [Russell], who had stood with folded arms and let this go on for some time in silence, said, "If you wish to know my opinion, I think we ought to take the Government." He did not enter into any argument, but thus pronounced his opinion, and at last it was put to the vote. Ten were for taking, five were for declining: Lord Lans-

downe, the Duke of Bedford, Clarendon, and two others whom I do not yet know, were against; all the others for. On the whole, I think they did right.

December 20, 1845: No novel or play ever presented such vicissitudes and events as this political drama which has been for ten days acted before the public. . . . The Government is really like a halfpenny whirling in the air, with John Russell's head on one side and Peel's on the other.

The decisive question was whether that *enfant terrible* of diplomacy, Lord Palmerston, was again to be trusted at the Foreign Office:

Saturday, December 13, 1845: . . . The Queen spoke to Lord John immediately about Lord Palmerston, and expressed great alarm at the idea of his returning to the Foreign Office, and her earnest desire that he would take the Colonial Office instead, and that Lord John would propose it to him. She had already talked to Aberdeen about it, who told her she must make up her mind to Palmerston's returning to the Foreign Office, as he would certainly take nothing else.

In her misgivings, the Queen did not stand alone. The heir to Earl Grey was Lord Howick and he also wanted to know "particularly who was to have the Foreign Office." Lord John Russell (December 20, 1845) "told him 'Palmerston.'" And "then said Howick, 'I will not be in the Cabinet.'" And after "forty minutes" with Lord John Russell "he stalked (or rather limped) out."

It is curious that both Greville and the Queen, though suspicious of Palmerston, were even more critical just then of Howick:

December 20, 1845: . . . It seems to me pusillanimous and discreditable to suffer Howick to break up the Government they had consented to form, upon a purely personal question unmixed with any political one. So far from considering it a misfortune, and his secession a loss, it ought to be considered a great gain, for with such a temper and disposition as his, it is evident that if it would be difficult to go on without him, it would be much more difficult to go on with him.

December 21, 1845: . . . And she [the Queen] expressed her

indignation at Howick's conduct in the affair and said that she had felt sure it was Howick who had caused the difficulty the first moment she heard of it, for she had just been reading over all Melbourne's letters to her during his administration and she found in them repeated complaints of Howick's behaviour. While he was in office, every difficulty that occurred was attributable to him.

An inference is here possible. The Whigs had allowed Earl Grey to be ousted from office. Lord Howick as Early Grey's son is making the score even.

Some observers thought that Lord John Russell was suffering from "some domestic anxiety" which had "unstrung his nerves." Had he not "pulled out of his pocket a letter" and "burst into tears"?

December 23, 1845: . . . Le Marchant, wishing to extract sweet from bitter, said, "Well, after all, it may do us good. It will show that the Whigs are not so greedy after office, and it will wipe out the recollection of those two years when we stayed in too long." Macaulay replied, "I don't know that at all, it may only increase the blame. We stayed in when we ought to have gone out, and now we stay out when we ought to have gone in."

The question was whether the Tories would let Peel return to Downing Street. As Greville put it (December 16, 1845), Peel intended "to *betray* the country into good measures."

The Prime Minister was accused of "every sort of baseness, falsehood, and treachery." Melbourne himself joined the hue and cry:

January 13, 1846: . . . There has been a curious scene with Melbourne at Windsor, which was told me by Jocelyn, who was present. It was at dinner, when Melbourne was sitting next to the Queen. Some allusion was made to passing events and to the expected measure, when Melbourne suddenly broke out, "Ma'am, it is a damned dishonest act." The Queen laughed, and tried to quiet him, but he repeated, "I say again it is a very dishonest act," and then he continued a tirade against abolition of Corn Laws, the people not knowing how

to look, and the Queen only laughing. The Court is very strong in favour of Free Trade, and not less in favour of Peel.

January 26, 1848: . . . Lady Beauvale gave me an account of the scene at dinner at Windsor when Melbourne broke out against Peel (about the Corn Laws). She was sitting next Melbourne, who was between her and the Queen; he said pretty much what I have somewhere else stated, and he would go on though it was evidently disagreeable to the Queen, and embarrassing to everybody else. At last the Queen said to him, "Lord Melbourne, I must beg you not to say anything more on this subject now; I shall be very glad to discuss it with you at any other time," and then he held his tongue. It is however an amiable trait in her, that while she is austere to almost everybody else, she has never varied in her attachment to him, and to him everything has always been permitted; he might say and do what he liked. Now she constantly writes to him, never forgets his birthday.

After all, the end was approaching:

November 29, 1848: Lord Melbourne died on Friday night at Brocket, without suffering pain, but having had a succession of epileptic fits the whole day, most painful and distressing to his family collected about him.

Peel was now in a political pillory:

March 21, 1846: . . . George Bentinck made a speech of two hours and a quarter. From never having spoken, he never now does anything else, and he is completely overdoing it, and, like a beggar set on horseback, riding to the devil.

March 29, 1846: . . . No Prime Minister was ever treated as Peel was by them that night, when he rose to speak. The Marquis of Granby rose at the same time, and for five minutes they would not hear Peel, and tried to force their man on the House, and to make the Prime Minister sit down. The Speaker alone decided it, and called on Peel. When he said he knew they could turn him out, they all cheered *savagely*.

London, December 24, 1845: . . . The Duke of Wellington said that it was no longer a question of Corn Laws, but a question of government: whether the Queen should be without a government, or be placed in the alternative of a government of

Lord Grey and Mr. Cobden and a government of Sir Robert Peel; and the Duke of Buccleuch also said that in such circumstances he would not desert the Queen's service.

January 13, 1846: . . . When they all shuffled back to their places by the Queen's command, he looked on himself as one of the rank and file, ordered to *fall in*, and he set about doing his duty, and preparing for battle.

With Peel, a Tory Prime Minister, proposing Free Trade, parties were shattered. The agriculturists were, of course, "an unbroken phalanx" for the Corn Laws. But the Whigs swept over to Peel's side:

January 22, 1846: . . . During these last days the Whig and Peelite (for now there are Peelites, as contradistinguished from Tories) whippers-in have been making lists, and they concur in giving Peel a large majority. They reckon Protectionists 200, Peelites 180, and then there are the Whigs and Liberals 200 or 300; but Bessborough, who is very experienced, says these lists are very loose and not to be depended on at all.

January 23, 1846: Went to the House of Commons last night. . . . Peel rose and spoke for about two hours. A very fine speech in a very high tone. He owned to a change of opinion which had been going on for two years; was confirmed by the statistical result of his Free Trade experiment, and urged on to action by the potato failure in November, when he wanted to call Parliament together and open the ports, but was overruled in the Cabinet, where he had only three others with him. His statistical results were very curious. He declared himself indifferent to office, which was too much for him bodily and intellectually, but while he could be of use to the Queen and the country he would stay there. His peroration was fine, in a tone of great excitement, very determined, and full of defiance. He did not get a solitary cheer from the people behind him, except when he said that Stanley had always been against him and never admitted either the danger or the necessity, and then the whole of those benches rang with cheers. He made two mistakes. He went on too long upon his Conservative measures, in a strain calculated to offend those in conjunction with whom he must now fight this battle; and he talked of "a proud aristocracy," which was an unlucky phrase,

though clear from the context that he did not mean anything offensive in it. It certainly was not a speech calculated to lead to a reconciliation between him and the Tories.

January 28, 1846: Last night Peel brought forward his plan, amidst the greatest curiosity and excitement: the House was crammed, and Prince Albert there to mark the confidence of the Court. . . . The Protectionists were generally angry and discontented, none reconciled, and some who had cherished hopes of better things very indignant.

January 29, 1846: . . . The Liberals were full of praise, and Fonblanque said, "I don't hesitate to say it is the grandest scheme any Minister ever propounded to Parliament. I look upon it as greater than the Reform Bill."

February 8, 1846: It is thought that the violence of the Protectionists is somewhat abated, and giving way to despondence. The resignations of seats still continue, but Peel is in high spirits, not at all dejected or dismayed. . . . Meanwhile the Whigs have become perfectly reasonable, and mean to yield anything rather than risk the success of the measure.

At Repeal by stages, extending over three years, Cobden was (January 30th) "very bitter." He and his friends held that "the ports must be opened" and at once.

March 1, 1846: . . . Cobden made an extraordinary speech last night, but one of the ablest I ever read, and it was, I am told, more striking still to hear, because so admirably delivered.

Even among the agriculturalists, time was on the side of the Free Traders:

April 4, 1846: . . . The delay that the Protectionists have contrived to make in the Free Trade measures is proving fatal to their cause, for it is now past a doubt that a great change has been produced over all the country *among the farmers.* They do not care for, do not dread, the repeal of the Corn Laws, but they do most particularly wish to have the question settled. The evidences of this change are not to be mistaken, and many of the Protectionists admit it. They find to their astonishment that there is no depreciation in landed property, that there is no difficulty in letting farms, and that rents are generally rising rather than falling.

The Corn Bill was carried and Peel's work was done:

London, July 4, 1846: . . . Peel fell with great *éclat*, and amidst a sort of halo of popularity; but his speech on the occasion, and a great occasion it was, if he had made the most of it, gave inexpressible offence, and was, I think, very generally condemned. Almost every part of it offended somebody; but his unnecessary panegyric of Cobden, his allusion to the selfish monopolists, and his claptrap about cheap bread in the peroration, exasperated to the last degree his former friends and adherents, were unpalatable to those he has kept, were condemned by all parties indiscriminately, and above all deeply offended the Duke of Wellington. He might have wound up with something much more becoming, dignified, and conciliatory; but his taste, or his temper, or his judgment, were completely in fault, and he marred all the grace and dignity of his final address, and left a bad, when he might so easily have stamped a good, impression.

Some people have thought that Peel's final speech was rather good.