CHAPTER LXXIII

CANONIZED

Sir Robert Peel has resigned office, but he was by no means obliterated. Indeed, as an independent statesman, he continued to be a force in Parliament:

Bowood, December 12, 1846: . . . Peel told him [Lord Hardwicke] that when he went to the Queen to take leave of her on quitting office, he said he had a request to make to her which she must beforehand promise him to grant, that he must not be denied. She said she should be glad to comply with any request of his if she could. He then said that the request he had to make to her was that he would never again at any time or under any circumstances ask him to enter her service. He did not say what her Majesty's answer was.

February 15, 1847: . . . He said, after begging her never to ask him to take office again, that he could not help remembering that Mr. Pitt, Mr. Fox, and Mr. Canning had all died in office, and victims of office; that he did not dread death, and this recollection would not deter him; but when he recollected also that Lord Castlereagh and Lord Liverpool had also died in office, the one a maniac, and the other an idiot, that recollection did appal him, and he trembled at the idea of encountering such a fate as theirs.

February 8, 1847: . . . Aberdeen declared that Peel would never take office; it had been suggested to him that the country was in such a state that he might be called for by a great public cry. Peel replied, "Let them call, but I will not respond."

June 20, 1847: . . . [Said Graham] "he will not retire from public life to please any man; he does not want to be the head of a party, still less to return to office, but he will continue to take that part in public affairs which he considers best for the public service, reserving to himself the faculty of acting according to circumstances in any political contingency."

July 13, 1847: . . . If the country was polled, nineteen out of twenty would vote for Peel's being Minister; the Queen would be enchanted to have him back; but Peel has no party, and can have none unless circumstances and necessities make one for him. The great Tory party is acephalous.

According to Aberdeen:

London, September 15, 1849: . . . Peel thought of nothing but the progress and development of his Free Trade measures; that the present Government [of Lord John Russell] could and would carry them out, and therefore he strenuously supported them, being perfectly conscious that he had no party, and consequently no power.

It was "a disagreeable prospect for those of his adherents who followed his fortunes to the last and are now left high and dry":

February 28, 1850: . . . There is a considerably prevailing opinion of the diminished vigour as well as of the diminished influence of Peel. His speech the other night was laboured and heavy, and not judicious. Then the House was much struck by the unusual spectacle of Peel and Graham both rising to speak together, and both persisting to await the Speaker's call instead of Graham's giving way to Peel, as he would have done formerly. It was probably the first time Peel ever rose in the House of Commons to speak, and had to give way to another speaker. The House called for the one as much as for the other, and Graham made incomparably the best speech of the two.

If Peel refused to attack Palmerston it was because, fearing a return of Protection, "nothing would induce him to weaken the present [Whig] Government."

Peel had always been pursued by Tory abuse. Arbuthnot, the Duke's mouthpiece, declared (1830) that he was "so jealous that he could not endure that anybody should do anything but himself." Indeed (September 18, 1852) "it is very certain that the Duke disliked him and had a bad opinion of him."

October 26, 1832: . . . His [Peel's] ambition, selfishness, caution, and reserve, are not all that they complain of. His stinginess is not less remarkable. When the Charles Street Society was

formed, a great deal of money was subscribed to advance the objects of the party. Peel never gave a farthing, and from the time it became a question of subscribing, he ceased to go there.

It was (June 20, 1847) "difficult to feel entire confidence in a man who is not really high-minded and true." He would "never again be considered a great Minister." And Lord George Bentinck accused him (June 14, 1846) of having "hunted Mr. Canning to death."

That the Great Free Trader "ought not to die a natural death" was the considered opinion of Lord Alvanley. And Destiny bowed to the Rake's Decree.

It happened (January 26, 1843) that "in Scotland, Peel constantly travelled either with the Queen or with Aberdeen." His Secretary, Edward Drummond, "continued to go about in his [Peel's] carriage." And writes Greville, "I well remember his telling me this, and laughing at the idea of his having been taken for a great man."

A certain Daniel Macnaghten saw Drummond in Peel's carriage:

January 24, 1843: . . . It was just as I was starting for the Grove that I heard of the assassination of Edward Drummond, one of the most unaccountable crimes that ever was committed, for he was as good and inoffensive a man as ever lived, who could have had no enemy, and who was not conspicuous enough to have become the object of hatred or vengeance to any class of persons, being merely the officer of Sir Robert Peel, and never saying or doing anything but in his name, or as directed by him.

Drummond died and it was then remembered that—

January 26, 1843: . . . for many days before the murder he [Macnaghten] was prowling about the purlieus of Downing Street, and the Duke of Buccleuch told me that the day he was expected in town, and when his servants were looking out for him, they observed this man, though it was a rainy day, loitering about near his gate, which is close to Peel's house. If therefore he saw, as he must have done, Drummond constantly passing between Peel's house and Downing Street, and recognized in him the same person he had seen in the carriage in Scotland,

and whom he believed to be Peel, he would think himself so sure of his man as to make it unnecessary to ask any questions, and the very consciousness of his own intentions might make him afraid to do so. This appears to afford a probable solution of the mystery.

Macnaghten's own confession corroborated the explanation. However, Lord Alvanley's prayer was answered:

London, July 1, 1850: The day before yesterday Sir Robert Peel had a fall from his horse, and hurt himself seriously. Last night he was in imminent danger. His accident has excited the greatest interest, and his doors are beset with enquirers of all parties without distinction. He was in high spirits that day, for he was pleased with the division which saved the Government, and with his own speech, which for his purpose was very dexterous and successful.

July 6, 1850: The death of Sir Robert Peel, which took place on Tuesday night, has absorbed every other subject of interest. The suddenness of such an accident took the world by surprise, and in consequence of the mystery in which great people's illnesses are always shrouded, the majority of the public were not aware of his danger till they heard of his death. The sympathy, the feeling, and the regret which have been displayed on every side and in all quarters, are to the last degree striking. Every imaginable honour has been lavished on his memory. The Sovereign, both Houses of Parliament, the press and the people, from the highest to the lowest, have all joined in acts of homage to his character, and in magnifying the loss which the nation has sustained. When we remember that Peel was an object of bitter hatred to one great party, that he was never liked by the other party, and that he had no popular and ingratiating qualities, and very few intimate friends, it is surprising to see the warm and universal feeling which his death has elicited. It is a prodigious testimony to the greatness of his capacity, to the profound conviction of his public usefulness and importance, and of the purity of the motives by which his public conduct has been guided. . . . The Duke of Wellington pronounced in the House of Lords a few nights ago a panegyric on his love of truth, and declared that during his long connection with him he had never known him to deviate from the strictest veracity.

This praise would be undeserved if he had ever been guilty of any underhand, clandestine, and insincere conduct in political matters, and it leaves me to suspect that resentment and disappointment may have caused an unfair and unwarrantable interpretation to be put upon his motives and his behaviour on some important occasions. . . . He scarcely lived at all in society; he was reserved but cordial in his manner, had few intimate friends, and it may be doubted whether there was any one person, except his wife, to whom he was in the habit of disclosing his thoughts, feelings, and intentions with entire frankness and freedom. In his private relations he was not merely irreproachable, but good, kind, and amiable. The remarkable decorum of his life, the domestic harmony and happiness he enjoyed, and the simplicity of his habits and demeanour, he attributed largely without doubt to the estimation in which he was held. He was easy of access, courteous and patient, and those who approached him generally left him gratified by his affability and edified and astonished at the extensive and accurate knowledge, as well as the sound practical sense and judgment, which he displayed on all subjects. It was by the continual exhibition of these qualities that he gained such a mastery over the public mind, and such prodigious influence in the House of Commons. . . . His father was a Tory, imbued with all the old Tory prejudices, one of those followers of Mr. Pitt who could not comprehend and never embraced his liberal sentiments, and who clung to the bigoted and narrow-minded opinions of Addington and George III. It is no wonder then that Peel was originally an anti-Catholic, and probably at first, and for a long time, he was an undoubting believer in that creed. The death of Perceval left the Protestant party without a head, and not long after his entrance into public life, and while the convictions of his youth were still unshaken, he became their elected chief. For about fourteen years he continued to fight their battle in opposition to a host of able men, and in spite of a course of events which might have satisfied a far less sagacious man that this contest must end in defeat, and that the obstinate prolongation of it would inevitably render that defeat more dangerous and disastrous. . . . I do not see how he can be acquitted of insincerity save at the expense of his sagacity and foresight. His mind was not enthralled by the old-fashioned and obsolete maxims which

were so deeply rooted in the minds of Eldon and Perceval; his spirit was more congenial to that of Pitt. . . . Peel is a great loss to the Queen, who felt a security in knowing that he was at hand in any case of danger or difficulty, and that she could always rely upon his devotion to her person and upon the good counsel he would give her. But his relations with the Court at different periods are amongst the most curious passages of his political history. In 1838, when the Bedchamber quarrel prevented his forming a government, there was probably no man in her dominions whom the Queen so cordially detested as Sir Robert Peel. Two years afterward he became her Prime Minister, and in a very short time he found means to remove all her former prejudice against him, and to establish himself high in her favour. His influence continued to increase during the whole period of his administration. And when he resigned in 1846 the Queen evinced a personal regard for him scarcely inferior to that which she had manifested to Lord Melbourne, while her political reliance on him was infinitely greater. To have produced such a total change of sentiment is no small proof of the tact and adroitness of Peel; but it was an immense object to him to ingratiate himself with his Royal Mistress; he spared no pains for that end, and his success was complete.

He appears to have suffered dreadful pain during the three days which elapsed between his accident and his death. He was sensible but scarcely ever spoke. He had arranged all his affairs so carefully that he had no dispositions to make or orders to give. Sir Benjamin Brodie says that he never saw any human frame so susceptible of pain, for his moral and physical organization was one of exquisite sensibility. He was naturally a man of violent passions, over which he had learnt to exercise an habitual restraint by vigorous efforts of reason and self-control.

The hereditary principle is, perhaps, rather a toss-up. One of Peel's sons became a great Speaker of the House of Commons. Another merely inherited his father's title.

January 13, 1857: . . . All the world is occupied with Sir Robert's speech or lecture as he terms it at Birmingham when he gave an account meant to be witty of his *séjour* in Russia and its incidents. Nothing ever was so blackguard, vulgar, and grossly unbecoming. It was received with shouts of applause by

a congenial Brummagem audience and by deep disapprobation in every decent society and by all reasonable people. Besides its folly and impertinence it was a tissue of lies. This man is a disgrace to the name he bears, and everybody cries out that he ought to be dismissed from his office, and asks if he will be permitted to remain. I have not the least idea Palmerston will turn him out, for he is a favourite of Palmerston's, an *ame damnée*, and he will probably laugh off his delinquency and throw his shield over him.

"Clarendon told me the Queen is deeply offended with Sir Robert Peel. . . . I don't think Palmerston could venture to sustain him against her just indignation."