CHAPTER LI

STROLLING IN EXCELSIS

THE contrast between Victoria, as Princess, and Victoria, as Queen, was thus startling. "It is difficult," wrote Greville, on March 25, 1838, "to attribute to timidity that command over herself and passive obedience which she showed in her whole conduct up to the moment when she learnt that she was Queen. . . . As if inspired with the genius and the spirit of Sixtus V, she cast aside all filial dependence (on her mother) and at once asserted her dignity and her will."

June 29, 1837: . . . The Duchess of Kent never appears at Kensington, where the Queen occupies a separate range of apartments, and her influence is very silently exercised, if at all.

The alienation of the Queen from her mother developed into a quarrel. Victoria's "manner to the Duchess" might be "irreproachable"; indeed, "they appear to be on cordial and affectionate terms."

August 30, 1837: . . . But those who have means of knowing what passes within the Palace, do not think that much affection exists under these external demonstrations. She sees hardly anything of the Duchess, who never goes to her without previously asking leave, and when the Queen gets messages or notes from her Mother, she frequently sends verbal answers that she is engaged and cannot receive her.

"How is it possible," asked the Queen of Melbourne, "that I can have any confidence in my Mother when I know that whatever I say to her is repeated immediately afterwards to that man?" The answer of Sir John Conroy was that "whenever the Duchess had endeavoured to talk to the Queen about him, she had desired the subject might not be mentioned." In fact, said Sir John, "the Queen was entirely under the influence of Madame de Lehzen and Stockmar—the Duchess of Kent had none whatever."

"The Palace," we read, "is again the scene of squabbling of which Conroy is the cause and the belligerents are the mother and daughter." And the Duchess of Kent—"her health and spirits broken"—found it impossible to hide her resentment:

July 30, 1837: Madame de Lieven . . . had . . . an interview with the Duchess of Kent, who (she told me) it was plain to see is overwhelmed with vexation and disappointment. Her daughter behaves to her with kindness and attention, but has rendered herself quite independent of the Duchess, who painfully feels her own insignificance. . . . The Duchess said to Madame de Lieven "*qu'il n'y avait plus d'avenir pour elle, qu'elle n'était plus rien*"; that for eighteen years this child had been the sole object of her life, of all her thoughts and hopes, and now she was taken from her, and there was an end of all for which she had lived heretofore. Madame de Lieven said that she ought to be the happiest of human beings, to see the elevation of this child, her prodigious success, and the praise and admiration of which she was universally the object; that it was a triumph and a glory which ought to be sufficient for her—to which she only shook her head with a melancholy smile, and gave her to understand that all this would not do, and that the accomplishment of her wishes had only made her to the last degree unhappy. King William is revenged, he little anticipated how or by what instrumentality, and if his ghost is an ill-natured and vindictive shade, it may rejoice in the sight of this bitter disappointment of his enemy. In the midst of all her propriety of manner and conduct, the young Queen begins to exhibit slight signs of a peremptory disposition, and it is impossible not to suspect that, as she gains confidence, and as her character begins to develop, she will evince a strong will of her own. In all trifling matters connected with her Court and her palace, she already enacts the part of Queen and mistress as if it had long been familiar to her.

Victoria, says Greville, "has neither a particle of affection nor of respect for her mother, and is so thoughtless or so careless of consequences, that she deserves no better than that the Duchess should quit the Palace, and take up her abode elsewhere."

August 30, 1837: . . . Madame de Lehzen is the only person who is constantly with her. When any of the Ministers come to

see her, the Baroness retires at one door as they enter at the other, and the audience over, she returns to the Queen. It has been remarked that when applications are made to her Majesty, she seldom or never gives an immediate answer, but says she will consider of it, and it is supposed that she does this because she consults Melbourne about everything, and waits to have her answer suggested by him. He says, however, that such is her habit even with him, and that when he talks to her upon any subject upon which an opinion is expected from her, she tells him she will think it over, and let him know her sentiments the next day.

These happenings within the Court affected politics outside. At Victoria's accession, Lord Melbourne was still Prime Minister. But King William, having tried to dismiss him and failed, much preferred the Tories, who as a result were "in great consternation" over the King's illness. They foresaw that a change of Sovereign must be an "advantage" to the Whigs. And "nobody can deny," writes Greville on June 25, 1837, "the truth of this. Hitherto, the Government have been working against the stream, inasmuch as they had the influence of the Crown (that is the King) running dead against them; the tide has now turned in their favour, and to a certain degree they will be able to convert the Tory principle to their own advantage."

Obviously the young Queen needed good counsel. Her uncle, the King of the Belgians, was a possibility.

Over the King of the Belgians, Sir Robert Peel, with whom, in the Park, Greville "talked . . . about the beginning of the new reign," was cautious:

July 16, 1837: . . . Peel said that he concluded King Leopold would be her great adviser. If Leopold is prudent, however, he will not hurry over here at the very first moment, which would look like an impatience to establish his influence, and if he does, the first result will be every sort of jealousy and discord between him and the Duchess of Kent.

England had a fear of European entanglements.

The way was thus clear for the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne.

November 29, 1848: . . . It was upon the accession of the Queen that his post suddenly grew into one of immense importance and interest, for he found himself placed in the most curious and delicate position which any statesman ever occupied. Victoria was transferred at once from the nursery to the throne —ignorant, inexperienced, and without one human being about her on whom she could rely for counsel and aid. She found in her Prime Minister and constitutional adviser a man of mature age, who instantly captivated her feelings and her fancy by his deferential solicitude, and by a shrewd, sagacious, and entertaining conversation, which were equally new and delightful to her. She at once cast herself with implicit confidence upon Melbourne, and, from the first day of her reign, their relations assumed a peculiar character, and were marked by an intimacy which he never abused; on the contrary, he only availed himself of his great influence to impress upon her mind sound maxims of constitutional government, and truths of every description that it behoved her to learn. It is impossible to imagine anything more interesting than the situation which had thus devolved upon him, or one more calculated to excite all the latent sensibility of his nature. His loyal devotion soon warmed into a parental affection, which she repaid by unbounded manifestations of confidence and regard. He set himself wisely, and with perfect disinterestedness, to form her mind and character, and to cure the defects and eradicate the prejudices from which the mistakes and faults of her education had not left her entirely free. In all that Melbourne said or did, he appears to have been guided by a regard to justice and truth. He never scrupled to tell her what none other would have dared to say; and in the midst of that atmosphere of flattery and deceit which kings and queens are almost always destined to breathe, and by which their minds are so often perverted, he never scrupled to declare boldly and frankly his real opinions, strange as they sometimes sounded, and unpalatable as they often were, and to wage war with her prejudices and false impressions with regard to people or things whenever he saw that she was led astray by them. He acted in all things an affectionate, conscientious, and patriotic part, endeavouring to make her happy as a woman and popular as a queen.

This richness of talk was rendered more piquant by the

quaintness and oddity of his manner, and an ease and naturalness proceeding in no small degree from habits of self-indulgence and freedom, a license for which was conceded to him by common consent, even by the Queen herself, who, partly from regard for him, and partly from being amused at his ways, permitted him to say and do whatever he pleased in her presence. He was often paradoxical, and often coarse, terse, epigrammatic, acute, droll, with fits of silence and abstraction, from which he would suddenly break out with a vehemence and vigour which amused those who were accustomed to him, and filled with indescribable astonishment those who were not.

August 30, 1837: . . . No man is more formed to ingratiate himself with her than Melbourne. He treats her with unbounded consideration and respect, he consults her tastes and her wishes, and he puts her at her ease by his frank and natural manners, while he amuses her by the quaint, queer, epigrammatic turn of his mind, and his varied knowledge upon all subjects. It is not therefore surprising that she should be well content with her present government, and that during the process of the elections she should have testified great interest in the success of the Whig candidates. Her reliance upon Melbourne's advice extends at present to subjects quite beside his constitutional functions, for the other day somebody asked her permission to dedicate some novel to her, when she said she did not like to grant the permission without knowing the contents of the work, and she desired Melbourne to read the book and let her know if it was fit that she should accept the dedication. Melbourne read the first volume, but found it so dull that he would not read any more, and sent her word that she had better refuse, which she accordingly did.

September 12, 1838: George Villiers, who came from Windsor on Monday, told me he had been exceedingly struck with Lord Melbourne's manner to the Queen, and hers to him; his, so parental and anxious, but always so respectful and deferential; hers, indicative of such entire confidence, such pleasure in his society. She is continually talking to him; let who will be there, he always sits next to her at dinner, and evidently by arrangement, because he always takes in the lady in waiting, which necessarily places him next her, the etiquette being that the lady in waiting sits next but one to the Queen. It is not un-

natural, and to him it is peculiarly interesting. I have no doubt he is passionately fond of her as he might be of his daughter if he had one, and the more because he is a man with a capacity for loving without having anything in the world to love. It is become his province to educate, instruct, and form the most interesting mind and character in the world. No occupation was ever more engrossing or involved greater responsibility. I have no doubt that Melbourne is both equal to and worthy of the task, and that it is fortunate she has fallen into his hands, and that he discharges this great duty wisely, honourably, and conscientiously. There are, however, or rather may be hereafter, inconveniences in the establishment of such an intimacy, and in a connection of so close and affectionate a nature between the young Queen and her Minister; for whenever the government, which hangs by a thread, shall be broken up, the parting will be painful, and their subsequent relations will not be without embarrassment to themselves, nor fail to be the cause of jealousy in others. It is a great proof of the discretion and purity of his conduct and behaviour that he is admired, respected, and liked by all the Court.

How Melbourne obtained the ascendancy was a secret that, in due course, he endeavoured to impart to Peel, his political opponent and successor. Indeed, Greville was himself the intermediary:

September 4, 1841: . . . In the evening I dined at Stafford House and met Melbourne. After dinner he took me aside and said, "Have you any means of speaking to *these chaps?*" I said, "Yes, I can say anything to them." "Well," he said, "I think there are one or two things Peel ought to be told, and I wish you would tell him. Don't let him suffer any appointment he is going to make to be talked about, and don't let her hear it through anybody but himself; and whenever he does anything, or has anything to propose, let him explain to her clearly his reasons. The Queen is not conceited; she is aware there are many things she cannot understand, and she likes to have them explained to her elementarily, not at length and in detail, but shortly and clearly; neither does she like long audiences, and I never stayed with her a long time. These things he should attend to, and they will make matters go on more smoothly."

I told him I would certainly tell Peel. . . . This morning I called on Peel and told him word for word what Melbourne had said to me. He said, "It was very kind of Lord Melbourne, and I am much obliged to him; but do you mean that this refers to anything that has already occurred?" I said, "Not at all, but to the future." Melbourne, knowing the Queen's mind better than Sir Robert possibly could, wished to tell him these things in order that matters might go on more smoothly. He said that he had hitherto taken care to explain everything to her, and that he should not fail to attend to the advice.

In her chagrin over Melbourne's ascendancy, accentuated as it was by a bitter controversy over her favourite, the Duchess "absented herself" from "the Court circle" and "consulted the Duke [of Wellington] on every occasion," who, "in every step of the affair"—to be described in a moment—"appears uniformly to have given the soundest and honestest advice, and to have kept his eyes steadfastly fixed on the two great objects of saving the character of the Queen, and putting her and her mother upon decently amicable terms." In fact, "against the separation, the Duke strenuously worked, and he continually enforced the expediency of harmony, mutual forbearance and conciliation."

The Duke was thus "urging" the Queen's mother "to resume her place in the Court circle . . . and to adopt a good-humoured and conciliatory tone generally." The Duchess of Kent then said:

"'But what am I to do if Lord Melbourne comes up to me?'

"'Do? Why receive him with civility and cordiality. He is your daughter's Prime Minister, and as such, you are bound to treat him in this manner, and besides, why should you not? What reason can you have for doing otherwise?'

"'Oh, I don't approve of the way in which he comes here.'

"'Nonsense, all stuff and nonsense, don't tell me of his coming here. He is quite right to come as he does, and if I found any fault, it would be that he is not here enough. Now I'll tell you what I should have done if I had been Minister when the Queen came to the throne. I would have instantly taken up my abode at Kensington Palace, and when she removed to Buckingham Palace, I would have had an apartment there,

and if I could not have had one, I would have taken a lodging as near the Palace as I could find one in order that I might have been every day and every hour in the day at hand to assist and advise her upon every possible occasion, and in every matter in which she might require my advice. Lord Melbourne has done nothing but his duty, and I tell you that, if I had been in his place, I should not only have done the same, but have done more than he has done.'

"'Well,' said she, 'I must say you are a just man, but what must I do if she asks me to shake hands with Lehzen?'

"'Do? Why take her in your arms and kiss her.'

"Here the Duchess burst out laughing in which the Duke joined when he said, 'I don't mean you are to take *Lehzen* in your arms and kiss *her*, but the Queen. She is your daughter and this is the way you must treat her, and be civil to Lord Melbourne, and Lehzen and all the persons in attendance upon her.'"

On the behaviour of Lord Melbourne, Greville adds this note:

December 15, 1838: The Duke of Wellington says that Melbourne is quite right to go and stay at the Castle as much as he does, and that it is very fit he should instruct the young Queen in the business of government, but he disapproves of his being always at her side, even contrary to the rules of etiquette; for as a Prime Minister has no precedence, he ought not to be placed in the post of honour to the exclusion of those of higher rank than himself.

By the practice of that period, now discontinued, the death of the Sovereign, or as it is called the demise of the Crown, was followed by a dissolution of Parliament and a General Election. Victoria had no sooner ascended the throne, therefore, than she had to preside over an appeal to the country. And though she was Queen of the nation, it seemed as if, with her immediate partiality to Lord Melbourne, she belonged to a party.

July 9, 1837: . . . We continue to hear of the young Queen's admirable behaviour, but all other subjects are swallowed up in the interest of the approaching elections. There will be more contests than ever were known, and it is amusing to see both parties endeavouring to avail themselves of the Queen's

name, the Tories affecting to consider her as a prisoner in the hands of the Whigs, and the Whigs boasting of the cordiality and warmth of her sentiments in their favour. The Whigs have the best of this, as they have some evidence to show in support of their assertions, and the probability really is that she is well enough contented with them, as they naturally take care she should be.

The Whigs benefited by "the popularity of a new reign" and the Tories "do not deny that the King's death has been a heavy blow to them as a party." And yet the elections weakened Melbourne. At the polls, "the Radicals" (July 28th) were "reduced in numbers" and were especially "disappointed at the result of the borough contests, having lost many when they had no idea there was any danger." On a final reckoning, "the whippers in"—a hunting term abbreviated to whips—allowed Melbourne 348 supporters in the House to 310 Conservatives, or a majority of 38 only. The Whigs (August 8th) were "equally astonished and dismayed" at this evidence that a broader franchise does not always mean a progressive triumph.

The Government of the Queen was thus unstable. Divisions ran close and it was trying for the nerves of majesty:

July 28, 1837: . . . Everything that could be said in praise of the Queen, of her manners, conduct, conversation, and character, having been exhausted, we now hear no more of her. It is an interesting speculation to conjecture how soon she will begin to think and to act for herself upon higher matters, as she has at once done on all minor points connected with her domestic arrangements. It is generally believed that she is perfectly independent of any influence in these things, and while in all political concerns she has put herself implicitly in Melbourne's hands, in all others she is her own mistress.

August 30, 1837: All that I hear of the young Queen leads to the conclusion that she will some day play a conspicuous part, and that she has a great deal of character. It is clear enough that she had long been silently preparing herself, and had been prepared by those around her (and very properly) for the situation to which she was destined. The impressions she has made continue to be favourable, and particularly upon Melbourne, who has a thousand times greater opportunities of

knowing what her disposition and her capacity are than any other person, and who is not a man to be easily captivated or dazzled by any superficial accomplishments or mere graces of manner, or even by personal favour. Melbourne thinks highly of her sense, discretion, and good feeling; but what seem to distinguish her above everything are caution and prudence, the former to a degree which is almost unnatural in one so young, and unpleasing, because it suppresses the youthful impulses which are so graceful and attractive.

March 9, 1838: . . . The Queen was very nervous at the possibility there seemed to be that the Ministers might be beaten, for Lord John Russell had told her that he could not count upon a majority of more than fifteen, and she looked yesterday as cheerful as anybody else around her.

The sentiment of loyalty toward her Majesty, at any rate, on the race course, was correct rather than enthusiastic:

June 16, 1838: At Hillingdon, for Ascot races, from Tuesday to Friday. A great concourse of people on Thursday; the Queen tolerably received; some shouting, not a great deal, and a few hats taken off. This mark of respect has quite gone out of use, and neither her station nor her sex procures it; we are not the nearer a revolution for this, but it is ugly. All the world went on to the Royal Stand, and her Majesty was very gracious and civil, speaking to everybody.

Brougham, too, as a Radical who had been denied office, was vocal:

December 19, 1838: . . . He has put forth a pamphlet in the shape of a letter to the Queen, which he half acknowledges, and of which nobody doubts that he is the author, as in fact nobody can who is acquainted with the man or his writings. It makes a prodigious noise in the world and is read with avidity, but, though marked with all his cleverness, it is a discreditable production. The tone of it is detestable, the object mischievous, though by no means definite or clear. After stripping it of all its invectives and ribaldry, there is no proposition which can be extracted from it except that of giving universal suffrage, for, although he does not say so, his argument cannot be arrested short of such a consummation. It is a bitter, brilliant,

wayward satire and philippic, and, as Johnson said of Junius, "if you extract from its wit the vivacity of impudence and withdraw from its efficacy the sympathetic favour of plebeian malignity, if you leave it only its merit, I know not what will be its praise." It is, however, marvellously characteristic of the man, and illustrative of the state of his mind.

As in a game of chess, there was thus a desire on the part of all factions to capture the Queen:

"Brunow [the Russian Ambassador] said to Arbuthnot the other day, 'There is one thing here which I can't comprehend. Yours is a free and ours a despotic government, the Emperor [of Russia] can do anything he pleases, but his Ministers give him their opinions upon anything with perfect freedom, advise him to do or not to do anything as circumstances may require, and he always listens to, and generally follows their advice. But here, your Ministers don't dare say a word to your Queen, who is hardly more than a child, but leave her to follow her own fancies without any sort of control.'"

Deeply devoted to Melbourne, the Queen was involved in the varying fortunes of the Government:

March 25, 1839: . . . While we have a Cabinet in which there is not one man who inspires confidence, and in which, with the exception perhaps of John Russell (who is broken in health and spirits), there is not one deserving to be called a statesman, to this Cabinet is committed the awful task of solving the many difficult questions of domestic, colonial, and foreign policy which surround and press upon us; while the Duke of Wellington and Peel are compelled "to stand like ciphers in the great account." The great characteristic of the present time is indifference: nobody appears to care for anything; nobody cares for the Queen, her popularity has sunk to zero, and loyalty is a dead letter; nobody cares for the Government, or for any man or set of men. If there was such a thing as a strong public opinion alive to national interests, intent upon national objects, and deeply sensible to the necessity of calling to the national councils all the wisdom and experience that the crisis demands, its voice would be heard, the two parties would cease to hold each other at bay, there would be either a great change or a fusion in some reasonable spirit of compromise and we should see a Govern-

ment with some energy, independence and power, and this is what we want. But Melbourne seems to hold office for no other purpose but that of dining at Buckingham House, and he is content to rub on from day to day, letting all things take their chance.

September 26, 1840: . . . Melbourne's mind seems so emasculated by living with the Queen and her Ladies, and he is so tenderly solicitous about her health and everything by which it can possibly be affected, that he seems reduced to the level of a twaddling old woman, and to be fitter to preside over the nursery than over the Treasury.