

THE POLITICAL DUEL BETWEEN NICHOLAS, THE
CZAR OF RUSSIA, AND LORD STRATFORD
DE REDCLIFFE, THE GREAT
ENGLISH AMBASSADOR.

BY CYRUS HAMLIN.

THAT strong personal feeling existed between the two was never in question. Count Nesselrode, so long the Czar's Prime Minister, declared it originated in a quarrel between the two at the Congress of Vienna in 1815; that Canning treated Nicholas with hauteur and want of due respect and consideration. But in point of fact they were not even introduced to each other, and after the Congress they never saw each other again. Sir Stratford was then twenty-nine and had been in diplomatic life from the age of twenty-one. His success already foreshadowed his distinguished career. Nicholas was a youth of nineteen, of splendid personal appearance and bearing, of undisguised vanity, the conscious heir to the greatest empire of earth. It was enough to awaken jealousy and dislike that Canning was already authority on all Eastern questions in which Russia had a vital interest. It would seem that each of these eminent men from that time forth regarded the other with prophetic insight as destined to exert a malign influence upon the interests of Europe. Canning commenced his diplomatic education in the British Embassy at Constantinople in 1808, and when, a year later, the Ambassador, Mr. Adair, retired, the duties of the embassy remained in his hands for two years as minister plenipotentiary, his age twenty-two, twenty-three, and the manner in which at that early age he discharged his responsible duties, attracted the attention of the Foreign Office.

In 1824, he was again sent as Ambassador to Turkey and on a special mission to St. Petersburg. The Czar, Alexander, was still living, and he treated the Ambassador with marked reserve, but there was nothing that could be complained of. After Nicholas came to the throne Sir Stratford was appointed Ambassador to St. Petersburg. The Czar refused to receive him as a "*persona non grata*." It was an imperial decision and no reason was assigned. The English government was indignant, as Canning had always treated Russian interests and Russian diplomats with great consideration. Palmerston pronounced it an "outrageous piece of arrogance." No other appointment was made, and the Czar had to withdraw his Ambassador and leave only a *Chargé d' Affaires*, as England had done. For three years Canning held the title and received the pay of Ambassador to St. Petersburg, after which he was sent to Madrid and the two great Empires resumed their diplomatic relations. Canning declined a permanent mission at Madrid and was for a few years member of Parliament, where he kept an eye upon Russia's doings in the East. Ponsonby was English Ambassador at Constantinople. He was of the highest nobility, of vast wealth, of princely magnificence and bearing, but having no other qualification whatever for his high office.

Russia prosecuted her plans with her usual craft and success, hiding her hand except to men of Canning's insight. Mohammed Ali, the Pasha of Egypt, was in open and successful rebellion, the Sultan had lost his fleet by treason, and his army at the battle of Medjid and his own life by disease in his palace. Russia's opportunity seemed to have come suddenly for taking possession, but she was not ready, and the so-called "Great Powers," England, France, and Austria, united to save the old, shattered empire and to bring things into shape again. There was even a transient effort at reform. The young Sultan, Abdul Medjid, called around him a set of young ministers. His father,

Mahmoud, had destroyed the janissaries and introduced certain reforms, and he, for a time, seemed determined to walk in the same line. In 1839, the year of his advent to the throne, he issued the celebrated Charter of Reform, called the Hatti Scheriff of Gulhané. For a time it gave the subject Christians or rayahs great relief and hope. But a reaction came and the old Turkish party, which has always been Russia's right hand in Turkey, practically suppressed the Charter and carried things with a high hand.

England became alarmed at the disintegration of the empire and the progress of Nicholas into all its affairs. In 1841 Ponsonby was recalled and Sir Stratford Canning was sent in his place. He arrived at the beginning of 1842. His reputation in the settlement of the affairs of Greece made his coming a matter of general rejoicing to the Christian subjects. Nicholas recalled his Ambassador, M. De Boutineff, and sent an abler man, Titov, to counteract Canning's influence. The Czar's plans were ripening fast, and the indefatigable and astute Canning, with possibly a British fleet at his back, might well cause Nicholas some alarm.

A personal reminiscence may throw some light upon Sir Stratford's character. Soon after his arrival, the American missionaries, five in number, asked for an interview. The persecution of those known as Evangelicals had become intolerable, and they wished to state the facts and ask for his benevolent interference in their behalf. He appointed the next day, at an early hour, and he received us with the dignity natural to him and with some reserve of manner. His wonderful eye seemed to search into the character of those men who were disturbing the public peace of the immobile Oriental world. The statement of facts had been carefully prepared, and nothing was stated which could not be easily substantiated, and a copy was given him. He listened attentively, and then remarked that the limits of

official duty might sometimes prevent his doing all that he could wish to do; but any case of oppression or wrong he should consider as something claiming his attention. The difference of faith or race or language would not be regarded. If he could do anything to mitigate persecution he would do it because the persecuted were his fellow-men, and not because they were Protestants. This was the character of his whole official life, and it was this great personality that Nicholas could not match, and its mighty influence in the East could not be suppressed.

The Czar evidently hoped that Constantinople would soon be his. The Danubean provinces were ready to revolt. Crete was disturbed, the Greeks were meditating trouble about their boundaries, and the Turks, not seeing the hand of Russia in it all, were exasperated to greater severity. Canning boldly, but with great skill, took the part of the Christian subjects of the Sultan. Any case of oppression or wrong he brought to the attention of the proper officer and then carried it up, if need be, to the Grand Vizir, or even the Sultan himself. He called into life again the Hatti Scheriff of Gulhané, and the party of reform among the Turks again took heart. They saw clearly that the very existence of the Empire depended upon satisfying the rayahs. The Christians and Jews soon perceived that their real friend was England, not Russia. Nicholas could not repress his indignation, and he made every possible effort to discredit this diplomatic English plotter, who would, if followed, disturb the peace of Europe. But the indefatigable "plotter" secured some reforms in the Turkish administration which were of permanent value. One was the reform of the village "medjliss" or council. The old Roman government imprinted this form of village government upon Asia Minor. The Turks at the conquest found it a convenient mode of keeping the "rayahs" contented and in order, but gradually it became wholly a Moslem council. Canning

succeeded in getting it so organized that every race and religion of a village should be represented in the council by its head man or chief. This lifted the subject people, whether Christians or Jews, into respectability and into some degree of power. This reform displeased the Czar but pleased the people, and it came to stay.

In 1843, an event occurred which placed the two embassies, English and Russian, in striking contrast. An Armenian, Hovakim, became a Mussulman and then repented and returned to his Christian faith. He was tried and executed with flagrant indignities. Canning endeavored to unite all the embassies in a positive demand for the abrogation of that law. Russia refused, either as foreseeing defeat, or in order to secure it, and thus humiliate Canning. The French Ambassador, as instructed by Guizot, united cordially. The Porte replied it was a divine law, and man could not revoke it. Canning boldly denied that it was in the Koran or that the only passage quoted by the *imam* could bear that construction. He won the cause, to the astonishment of both the Christian and the Moslem world, and the Sultan, the Calif, the successor of Mohammed, gave his imperial word that the "renegade" who is a Christian shall not be executed. It was published through all the Empire in all its languages. The Russian Embassy fell in public estimation, but it was not a defeat to which the Emperor could refer. The public feeling of the world was overpowering in favor of Canning's course and achievement. In 1846, another conflict engaged the Emperor. He determined to efface the Protestant movement in Turkey. He considered it entirely English. He let the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin understand that he looked to him to put forth his ecclesiastical power to save his people. This led to the great anathema, which then deprived the anathematized of all civil rights. Canning went personally to the Sultan to tell him that those men and women were faithful and innocent subjects and were persecuted

for believing what the Queen 'of Great Britain believed, and what he, the Ambassador, believed. He could not do that and enjoy the friendship of Great Britain. In the end he obtained a firman of organization of Protestant believers into a legalized Church. The Russian newspapers reported that Canning had converted the Sultan and was going to make him join the Episcopal Church of England; but all effort to counteract his influence was abortive.

A more direct conflict with the Czar was approaching. As the up-shot of the Hungarian revolution of 1848, about two hundred patriots made their escape to Turkey, among whom were Kossuth, Bem, Dembinski, Zemoiskie, etc., the most distinguished leaders of the revolution. They were hospitably received in Turkey. An immediate demand for their rendition was made by Austria and Russia. The Grand Vizir advised the refugees to Islamize and they would be safe. The Sultan would lose his throne should he give up a single "believer" into the hands of the Ghiaours. A few submitted, but at the cry of Kossuth nearly all remained faithful in view of certain death if given up. Canning entered the lists and put forth all his power for their salvation. Both emperors were enraged and an Austrian war vessel brought Prince Michael Ridzivil with an ultimatum from the Czar, but returned with a categorical refusal. The Austrian and Russian embassies were withdrawn and war seemed inevitable; but the young Sultan declared he would lose his throne rather than give up one who had fled to him for protection. The whole world applauded the Sultan, and as England and France showed signs of supporting him, the two emperors had to yield and resume diplomatic relations. A long persecution of the refugees was continued by them, but the Turks, led by Sir Stratford, baffled all their plans without giving any occasion for war. It was Canning's greatest victory over the Czar. As it was wholly in the cause of humanity,

he became everywhere known as "The Great Elchi" (Ambassador). He continued his persevering efforts for the reform of the Turkish administration, but in 1852, after ten years of heroic effort, he retired for rest, having been promised, as was reported, the foreign office. Russia was glad of his departure from Constantinople and began to develop with more boldness her plans against Turkey. But Nicholas could not endure him as Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and privately the English government was given to understand that peace would not be maintained with Lord Stratford De Redcliffe in that office. He had been raised to the peerage with that title for his past distinguished services.

In the meantime, Lord Cowley, whom the government regarded as next to Canning in ability, gave the ministers very precise information of the Czar's movements, which indicated the design of breaking up the Empire and seizing Constantinople. Cowley was immediately sent to Paris and Lord Stratford returned to Constantinople as the only man capable of meeting and foiling the designs of the Czar. His reception was something extraordinary. The Sultan's day of doom had come, unless a deliverer should appear from without, and Canning was hailed as such. Menschikoff had come down in great splendor and insolence to brow-beat and force the Ottoman government to yield impossible demands or become responsible for the conflict that would follow. He was surprised at the sudden appearance of the "Great Elchi," who at once took command. He had his own government and France and Austria, as well as Turkey and Russia, to manage. He met Menschikoff with a courtesy and moderation that amazed and disconcerted him. Almost every demand was yielded, except the Sultan's sovereignty in his own dominions; and Menschikoff departed a discredited diplomat. In the diplomatic war, in which the courts of England, France, Austria, Turkey, and Russia were hotly engaged, often

contradicting each other, two men knew what they were about, and each was at the helm with a strong and steady hand. The Czar had one object, to take possession of Constantinople; and Canning had one, to prevent him. The Czar was conscious of his own strength, but Canning would marshal Europe against him. The Russian Emperor would not believe this. Nesselrode, who was regarded as more than half an Englishman, educated in England, a member of the Anglican Church, and quite a pious man, had assured him again and again that England would only bluster; she was a great commercial company and would expend her millions only for three to four per cent. interest. His rage was terrible when he found that Canning would bring against him England, France, and Italy to support the Turks.

The Czar's measures exhibited haste and passion rather than military strategy. His navy rushed into Sinope and destroyed the Turkish squadron anchored there, which provoked the allied fleet to enter the Black Sea and drive the Russian navy into Sevastopol, where it was sunk to close the passage. The Russian army, 60,000 strong, to which reinforcements were poured in, crossed the Danube in order to capture and destroy Silistria and its ten thousand *élite* soldiers of the Ottoman army. It was defended by earthworks which the Russians would march right over. They tried it for thirty-nine days and then beat a hasty retreat, finding that Omer Pasha, the Turkish commander-in-chief, was coming into their rear on the other side of the Danube. The European world laughed at Nicholas for fleeing before the Turks. There was no reason whatever for attributing this disaster to Canning. The Russians were out-generaled and beaten by Omer Pasha. No reinforcements were sent to him and it was generally believed that Canning was quite willing Silistria should fall, because with that signal triumph the Czar might be disposed to treat with the allies for peace.

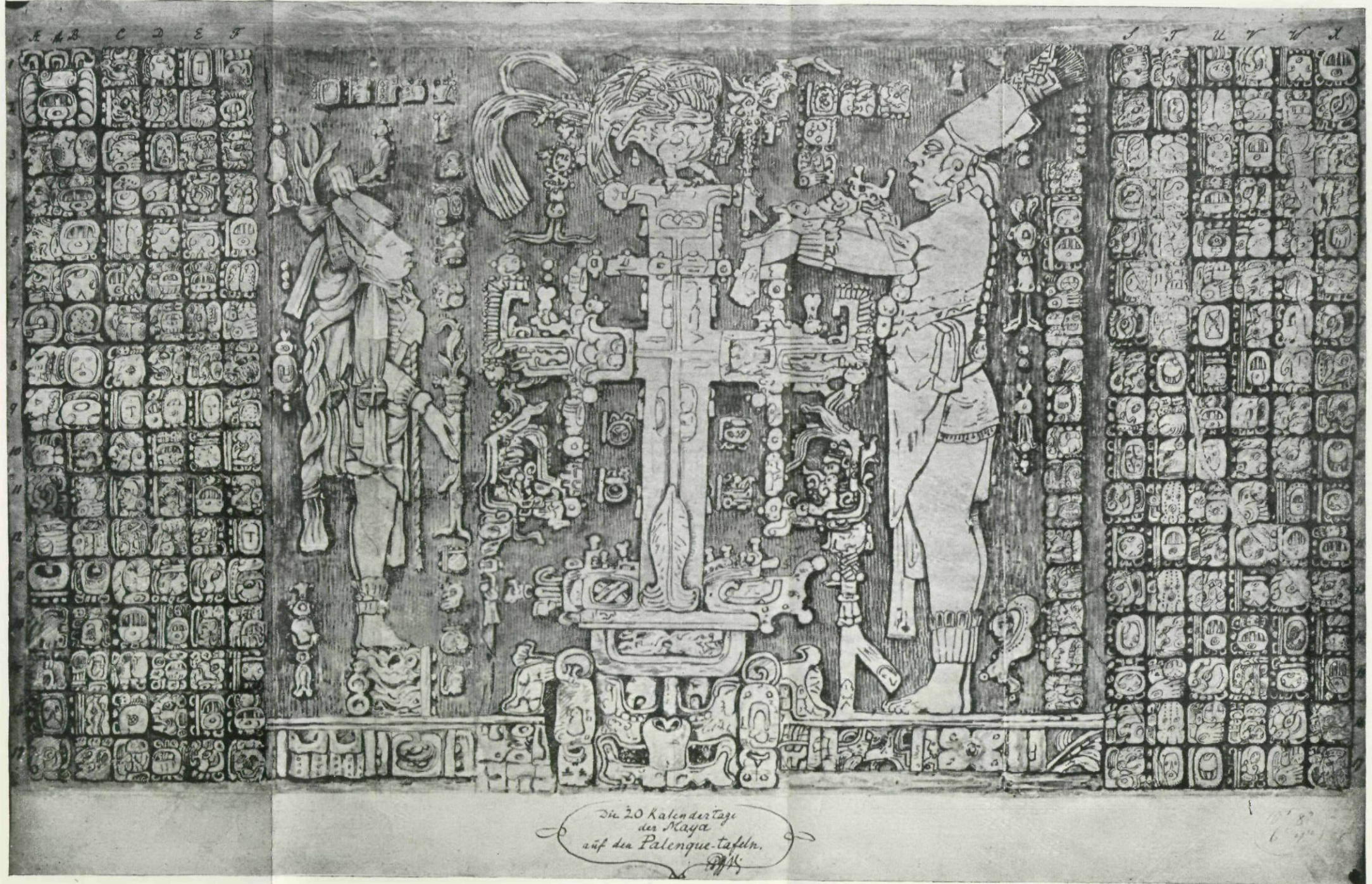
It was at Silistria that Todleben, the great Russian engineer, learned the defensive qualities of earthworks, and his skilful use of them at Sevastopol made them known to the world. Out of defeat came that brilliant defence. The course of the war need not be dwelt upon here. The Czar saw in the winter of 1854-55 that Europe was too much for him, that his scheme would result in disaster and disgrace; his armies and supplies perished in that fateful winter. While moving toward the front, his officers united in depleting the military chest by enormous thefts and falsified accounts. He sank under his labors and chagrin, and died in March, 1855, knowing that his own people had begun to curse him as the author of their calamities. His contest with the great Ambassador had terminated in defeat, but a cup hardly less bitter was pressed to the lips of the conqueror. Louis Napoleon was a traitor to the alliance with England and Turkey and was in secret communication with Russia as to the terms of a settlement. By betraying England and joining Russia he hoped to secure his dynasty.

The peace of Paris, 1856, sacrificed every important point for which England had fought. Just as the British army had come into a condition to prosecute the war and drive the Russians out of the Crimea, the French withdrew. It did not cripple Russia except for a couple of decades. Louis Napoleon had forced himself to the front and old Lord Palmerston had not power to resist him. Canning still had one hope. He elaborated that state paper known as the Hatti Humayun, and the Sultan accepted it and proposed it to the Peace Congress as the constitution of his empire. Canning was but seventy-two; he had the confidence and even the friendship of the Sultan; with his perfect health and iron constitution he might hope, as England's ambassador, to enforce the reform and see the Ottoman Empire sounder and stronger than it had been for two centuries. But the Council of Paris forbade all

interference with the Ottoman government, and left it wholly independent. This made the charter of freedom an abortion.

In England there was a change of ministry. Lord Stratford De Redcliffe was recalled. Sir Henry Bulwer, a man of most infamous character, after Louis Napoleon's own heart, venal and every way corrupt, was sent as ambassador to Turkey in his place. Never was an eminent servant of the crown so humiliated. The world looked to see Lord Stratford De Redcliffe die of chagrin as Nicholas had done. But he was a Christian philosopher. He said, "All seems lost for the present, but I believe the Danubean Provinces will ultimately block Russia's pathway to Constantinople." He had done much to rouse the Bulgarians and abolish serfdom, and their history has responded to his call. His policy was defeated; his influence lives. He had twenty-four years of peaceful life and died at the age of ninety-two. He had, like Lincoln, an unflinching trust in God. He had done his duty. Some of his last thoughts were given in a little treatise entitled, "Why am I a Christian?" His papers on "The Eastern Question" were written at various times, the last one when he had passed his ninetieth year, giving no signs of decay. In 1884, four years after his death, his statue was placed in Westminster Abbey. The epitaph is from Tennyson:—

Thou third great Canning stand among our best
And noblest, now thy long day's work has ceased,
Here silent in our Minster of the West,
Who wert the voice of England in the East.



Die 20 Kalendertage
der Maya
auf der Palenque-tafeln.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.