LITERATURE.

The Life of Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe, K.G., G.C.V.O., by Stanley Lane-Pool. (Longmans.)

(First Notice.)

In treating with more than the normal biographer’s ability the life of a man famous throughout Europe in his day, and not yet forgotten, who in his lifetime was to be congratulated upon the skilful and successful mediocritas of his last two large volumes. The basis consists of the memoirs (in pioe) an autobiography begun about the diplomatist’s eightieth birthday, and continued till his eighty-second. The superstructure (in bourgeois) consists of extracts from F. O. despatches, numbering some 15,000; of private correspondence with family, friends, and colleagues; and of personal details contributed by survivors now veterans, with an occasional note in breviary, the whole bearing chiefly upon diplomatic work. Each page carries a marginal date of the composition, together with the age of the autobiographer, and a numeral reference to the document or paper. In his running commentary the editor has subordinated, with much sobriety and no little art, his own style to the somewhat ambiguous “rounded periods” and the “finished, often too stately, language of the autobiographer. This is evidently not ideal biography; but, as documents pour sevrer, the work has its own special merit, and the keynote is struck in the opening sentence:

“The same stand side by side in Westminster Church (E. C.) they represent George Canning, the minister; his wife, Miss Charles, Earl Camden, first viceregy of India; and his cousin, Stratford Canning, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe.”

The diplomatist’s mother, a woman worthy of a remarkable son, was Mohistabel Patrick, the daughter of a well-to-do Dublin merchant; and to this blood we must attribute a Hibernian pugnacity of disposition, backed and strengthened by the “bottom” of the sturdy old Canyges, burghers of Bristol. The future ambassador dated his birth from November 4, 1786, and he came into the world with a silver spoon in his mouth, as the popular saying has it. His cousin, “the great Canning” (for so the ambassador called him to the last), was rising at the Treasury. Both, indeed, and other notables were warm friends of the widow, who, bravely but unsuccessful, carried on the banking business; and “Straight,” after the slavery of a preparatory school at Hackney, was sent as King’s scholar at Eton. Here it took him ten years to pass through the various grades till he became “captain.” He did not disdain athletics; he laid in a fair stock of classics for quotation—then the dreamy fashion of Englishmen; he fixed and formulated his views on “the deaf and ignorant speed of steam”; and, though somewhat parlous, puritanical, and priggish, he made sundry life-long friendships. He also wrote a proselegy (1818), and cultivated an English style, which began with being Johnsonian and Gradonian and gradually became a notable echo of Gibbon (61-68), often injured, moreover, by too scrupulous correction.

From King’s College, Cambridge—where the youth had nothing to do with a rickety burgher, or a horse-drawn specimen, while yet in his nonage, precise-writer at the Foreign Office, and then second Secretary to Copenhagen. His undergraduate life and his Downing Street clerkship were finally killed by his appointment as Foreign Secretary’s first stantinopie mission. Here fortune began to open upon him the budget of her favours. The Turk of the ancient régimes, who is roundly abused (i. 42) as “proud, ignorant, crafty, jealous, cruel, craving, bullying, chary of his finances,” was well pleased with a man, but inclined peacewards, because Engleland began to prove herself victorious in the Peninsula. So the Treaty of the Dardanelles was signed (Jan. 5, 1809), and the Secretary of Embassy, at the ripe age of twenty-two, in the style of Lord Nelson’s “On his Imperial Majesty the sultan’s mission.” There fortune began to open upon him the budget of her favours.

To this unprecedented success, as the biographer candidly admits (i. 80), must be attributed much of the ambassador’s domineering spirit, impetuousness, arrogance, and impatience of contradiction. Instead of toiling up the steep, and learning patience and savoir faire, he had sprung at once to the summit; and even this did not satisfy him. He had no “predictions for diplomacy”—the only walk of life for which he was fitted. His youthful conceit prized for the social and intellectual pleasures of London; for the clever anti-Jacobin’s career of home-office; for the House of Commons, in which he ever figured as a mere mediocrity; and for literature, whereby as a penny-a-liner he would have revelled. And this radical mistake of his own powers, which the elder Canning, his senior by sixteen years, was far too clever to incur or to encourage, lasted him to the last. I have heard him express the opinion (p. 80) that he “used to have political ideas,” even during the latter days of the Crimean War. He also complained bitterly of insubordinate and over-leisure at the “vile hole, the infame trous —Stamboul; and apparently it never entered his mind that any knowledge of Rome would have bred familiarity with classical Greek, that Italian would have aided Latin, and that Turkish, Persian, and Arabic should have added much to his local influence. But the sad of the day was to spoil rooms of paper and to do as English as possible by virtue of ignoring the world abroad. And but did Olave declare that he had been as far as Russia with the Czar and that his fellow officials he would have given as egregiously cheated by Hindu chicanes?

Canning’s long career of minister plenipotentiary to the Sublime Porte opened with some minor successes by “not using a cabinet” (p. 87); he called the Bey Esmi (foreign secretary) into abating the nuisance of French privateering, alias piracy, in friendly waters; and the Turk could only complain impatiently that “the business of a conference should not be interrupted by raising the voice, or by showing at one time a ruddy face and at another a yellow one.” This is explained by Sir Henry A. Layard (Early Adventures, ii. 374), when describing his chief some thirty years afterwards: “His thin compressed face never assumed any warm colour; his complexion was so transparent that the least emotion, whether of pleasure or anger, was at once shown by its varying tints, added to which he already displayed “something so evident as the assumption of dignity and self-importance” a self-importance against privateering he was visited by sundry notables, including Byron ("our noble bard," but not an Etonian) and Lady Hester Stanhope, who, with stinging truth, described her host as “full of zeal but full of prejudice” ( both criticisms, which the diplomatist well deserved); “best fitted to be the commander-in-chief at home and ambassador extraordinary abroad to the various societies for the suppression of vice and cultivation of patriotism,” while she charged him with falling into “a greater vulgarity than the deviation at the mention of Buonaparte” (i. 117). The spirited caricature, almost the only amusing passage in the work, so irritated his Excellency that he deconscripted to elaborate explanations; and, by the way, says it is part of the diplomatic ladyship, who had grasped her nettle—the best and only way to treat it—were good friends ever afterwards.

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of Caesar Alexander, with the usual stuff-box; and the first mission, which was one long trysto with France, ended after four years, charge being given over to easy-going Mr. Robert Liston. During the subsequent two years he threw himself into home politics with the countenance of his brilliant cousin. He was constant at Griffin’s, courted Miss Milbanke, and frequented Meine de Staël. He also sided in establishing the Quarterly, which has long since degenerated into an organ for private advertising; he “dallied with the muse”; discovered that “books improve knowledge, but not the mind”—a fair specimen of his pompous commonplace—and printed anonymously “Buonaparte A Poem,” here given in extenso (I. 215). The exordium—

“Chattelns! to whom—nor distant is the day
Art it in fancy dream, nor hope betray—
Attendant still on conquest’s gory path
Just Heaven shall delegate the sword of wrath
May to the measure of this “copy of verity”!

After a visit to France under the Allies, where he saw Le Roi make his entry into Paris, and met his future foe, Nicholas, in 1814 he was made minister plenipotentiary to the powers of Europe. In Switzerland he was utterly off his axis. He had little to do after attending, by order of Lord Castlereagh, the Congress of Vienna. He began by finding the present playground of Europe a “hells of Bismarck and Metternich’s Seven Heavens.” But he hated compulsory residence; his nature was restless and unquiet; with him contentment was the dream and ambition the reality of life; and he soon learned to loathe “rustic diplomacy” and its miss-en-siences. The Hundred Days had made it easy for the Canton to accept the Federal Compact recommended by the Congress, and had stupefied a “grand coalition against Napoleon.” During his leave of absence in England (1816) he married Harriet Balfour; in the course of the next year, buried her and her baby, and the child of Luannan, where the massive monument by Canova is still shorn with pride, one of the few ornaments of a temple to “protestantism” that has a huge barn. After a short residence and touring, Canning turned his back upon Helvetia and returned to England, via Turin, where he thoroughly misunderstood the king. His next mission was to the United States, under promise of a G.C.B. chip if he could “keep those schoolboy Yankee quiet.” After the usual rest of hard work in the London season, he set out (1819) for a post where the only labour was the maintenance of friendly relations and preserving the peace between mother and daughter, and where “such native luxuries as soft crab and cayenne of Indian corn opened a new field to the curious appetite” (I. 298). During his three years at Washington, then “the unassuming gem of a city,” he had business with the Secretary of State, rough old John Quincy Adams, whom he describes as “domineering,” and for whose “irritation” and “sensitive temper” an excuse is found in the climate, by which Mr. Secretary (Memoires, vi. 157) explains it far more sensibly—

“He is a proud, high-tempered Englishtman . . . with a disposition to be overbearing, which I have often been compelled to cheek in its own way. He is, of all the foreign ministers with whom I have been bound to treat, the man who has most tried my temper. As a diplomatic man his chief want is suppleness, and his great virtue is sincerity.”

Canning in the United States could keep his temper; and this fact suggests that its violent outbreaks were mostly calculated, while he confides to reflect for “a tremendous passion occasionally” (I. 246). But while we may excuse an occasional infirmity, we have scant respect for the man who affects it. The envoy, however, had the good sense to own that his “residence in America was a second and rough period of education”; and, after a tour through the States and a glimpse at Canada, he returned to England in 1823.

The far nicer of an American mission was succeeded by an embassy to Constantinople. Here the stage was the establishment of a Greek kingdom at the expense of the Porte—a measure regarded as impracticable by the great cousin. His second visit was a failure, for which the blame was laid upon Russia. Other work was to be found for him in the shape of a mission to St. Petersburg. At Vienna he had an interview with Prince Metternich, who sees generally to have been sympathetic, although the college began with “You have a bug on your sleeve.” The overland journey through Poland was delightful; but the reception by the Czar and Count Nesselrode was as friendly as could be expected, considering the triangular duel, wherein Russia, Austria, and Great Britain were striving their best to make capital out of the proposed kingdom, and each would choose the two other rivals to play a secondary rôle. This mission of a few months is ominously interesting. The recital contains a world of details, including a week’s trip to Moscow and a visit to Berlin.

The return home was followed by a second marriage, the mostful diplomat having rejected all refusal; and Mrs. Canning’s influence in the embassy became an ever increasing one during the third mission (1826–27) events marched fast. The “ barbarisation of the Moree” and Ibrahim Pasha excited the strongest feeling in England, especially among the poets; and matters were complicated by the stubborn opposition of Sultan Mahmut, who had consolidated his power upon the judicial measures of the Jannissaries; by “the impracticability of those rascally Turks”; by the effects of Lord Stratford’s mischievous blustering; by the incessant cries of the Duke and Lord Aberdeen; and, lastly, by the death of George Canning.

Although Czar Nicholas—“the handsome youth who was destined to keep all Europe in alarm [?] for thirty years and to close a proud career under the pressure of a disastrous [?] war”—had assumed to his brother with sentiments somewhat more pacific, the question of prestige was further complicated, and confusion was worse confused, by a French song in the Poloneness, and what Mr. Secretary (Memoires, vi. 157) explains it far more simply—

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