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SICILY—THE SULPHUR MONOPOLY, AND COMMERCIAL TREATY.*

THE evasive course which the King of Naples has unfortunately been advised to pursue, in the late negotiations relating to the monopoly of sulphur, has at last awakened government to the necessity of asserting our rights; and after somewhat too long sufferance—during which, it is believed, all means of amicable adjustment were fairly tried and exhausted—we are forced to prove, that although our commercial interests may be sacrificed for a time by apparent indifference and neglect, they must not be entirely abandoned, or the British flag be insulted with impunity.

Various opinions are entertained with respect to the motives which led to granting this monopoly, and the tenacity with which it has been adhered to, contrary to the pressing remonstrances of the government of both England and France, whose commercial interests are equally injured by it His Neapolitan Majesty is known to be not less anxious about his privy purse than his more powerful uncle of France; and it would be well, if by the publication of the names of the proprietors or share-holders in the sulphur monopoly, all suspicions could be removed of its having enjoyed the influence of parties who should never be engaged in such undertakings.

It is curious to mark how much the judgment may be warped by private interest, and how many ingenious devices are resorted to in order to gain over opinions. Pamphlets have been published and circulated gratis, to prove that British commerce is benefited by doubling the cost of an article, which has become essentially necessary in the very commencement of several of our most important manufactures; and that Sicily is equally benefited by lessening the export of one of her superabundant and inexhaustible productions; and one of these clever papers might induce a belief, that in granting this monopoly, the King of Naples was moved by affection for the kelpgatherers on our northern coasts, whose prosperity, it is contended, can only be restored by an artificial rise in the price of sulphur.

The contractors, among other exertions for the maintenance of their nuisance, have stated a case upon which they obtained and published opinions of those eminent lawyers, Sir John Phillimore, and Sir Frederick Pollock, favourable to the authority under which the monopoly was granted;

* See our previous article on this subject, vol. i. p. 212.

and it cannot be doubted, that the sanction such opinions appear to afford the contract, raised for a time the hopes of all those interested in it, and strengthened the desire of his Neapolitan Majesty to maintain it. But if the absolute will of the king gives him the undisputed power of granting a monopoly of sulphur, he may claim the same right over every other production in his dominions— and what protection have our countrymen at Marsala, who have devoted, for more than forty years, so much industry, talent, and worth, in the formation of a mole and harbour, with extensive buildings for the collection, improvement, and storing the wines of the surrounding district, against adventurers pandering to the cupidity of Neapolitan courtiers, by a scheme for monopoly or contract, under which they may lay on the export of Marsala wine a similar impost to that on sulphur; as parallel cases might be stated in justification of a wine-monopoly, Sir John Phillimore and Sir Frederick Pollock's opinions must, of course, be equally favourable in both cases to the divine rights of his Neapolitan Majesty; and the growing prosperity of the only thriving district in Sicily be thus sacrificed to sordid private views—the capital and industry lavished in the vineyards, harbour, and large establishments in Marsala wasted, and the people employed in them driven into bands of mountain-marauders, to save their families from starving.

If, in granting the sulphur monopoly, the derangement and losses inflicted on the commerce of Sicily, England, and France were either entirely overlooked or undervalued, the calculated private gains on it were much exaggerated when estimated at about £ 4 per ton, on an export of about fifty thousand tons, forming a sum of £ 200,000; but it has been already found that no such scale of profit can even in part be realized, without doubling the ordinary price of sulphur in England and France; and the effect of such advance of price has attracted an increased supply from the sulphur mines of Tuscany, and the Roman state, besides opening new sources of supply in the West Indies and Iceland, from whence cargoes of inferior sulphur have already been drawn—while schemes are in progress for opening sulphur-mines in the Western Islands, and in an island in the Levant: and our manufacturers have been so successful in making at home cheap substitutes, that the consumption of sulphur in England may be reduced to only a fourth of its late quantity, and that of France be even more reduced, by returning again to the use of barilla, imported from the neighbouring ports of Spain, and abandoning the manufacture from sulphur of soda.

Thus the cupidity of the contractors would, even under a continuance of the monopoly, have been defeated, and those who were betrayed into advancing their money in support of this delusive and very mischievous scheme, begin to see that they must be content to lose it—the only question being, whether they submit at once to a present sacrifice, or allow it to be wasted gradually for the emolument of projectors and agents in carrying on an abortive undertaking, until the whole of the money subscribed for it is expended.

It is contended, that as the King of Naples formally sanctioned a solemn contract, some compensation will be due to the contractors, if it is abolished; and such a claim might be admitted on a contract honestly obtained, and all the conditions of which were, by both the contracting parties, fairly and punctually fulfilled; but if the contract was (as has been so generally asserted) obtained by bribery, can compensation be claimed for breaking up a bargain so vicious in its origin? If any compensation is due, it seems rather to belong to the King of Naples, who was deluded by futile pretexts into a transaction in every way destructive to the best interests of his Sicilian subjects; and if the contract can be considered as a valid instrument, binding upon either party, a heavy forfeiture is certainly due on it to the King of Naples, the contractors having totally failed to fulfil any of the onerous conditions it imposed on them—such as making roads, and donations to charitable institutions; and although the names of several leading capitalists have been freely used, as connected with this contract, it is now evident they never lent themselves to such a project, or their ample means would have been applied to stop in Sicily the clamours of the unfortunate sulphur producers for payments too long deferred of their accumulating stock.

It seems, therefore, no longer doubtful, that the small capital which has been yet embarked in this nefarious speculation will be totally lost, whether distributed in propitiating persons of influence at the court of Naples, or actually paid for the artificially advanced cost of the sulphur, or wasted in the enormous charges of transport and agencies in the heavy stocks brought under this novel system to England and France by the contractors, who have now enjoyed an exclusive monopoly ever since the 1st of August, 1838, comprising a period of nearly two years; during which the contractors have not succeeded in selling five thousand tons in England, while it appears by an able paper in the Sixth Part of the Second Volume of the Quarterly Journal of the Statistical Society, and by a subjoined note taken from official returns of the sulphur that paid duty in England in the last five years,

that the average consumption for the time the contract has lasted would not, under the former free system, have been less than fifty-six thousand tons. And if, as it is supposed, the contract has produced about similar results in France, there will have been a retarded, if not lost, consumption of more than one hundred thousand tons of sulphur, which has deprived Sicily of the circulation of half a million sterling, and has substracted more than double that sum from the revenues and various branches of industry of England and France. The contractors will be fortunate, if, after imposing such serious derangements on the wealth, commerce, and industry of Sicily, England, and France, they are allowed to escape with no other punishment than the loss of the money they have embarked in this scheme.

The government of Naples has, for more than forty years, been much influenced by a party sharing the principles of the French ultrarepublican school. This party, though more remarkable for restless activity than for its respectability or wealth, has nevertheless exercised considerable power over the king's counsels, and being imbued with the deepest hatred and jealousy of the naval preponderance of England, has systematically adopted every means to diminish and restrict our commercial intercourse, by fettering it with exorbitant duties and heavy imposts, under every pretext that could be devised through complicated fiscal and ridiculous quarantine regulations. While the opinions of this ultra-republican French party predominate, there can be little improvement in the relations between England and Naples; but if the king, unhappily swayed by this party, was imprudent in contemning the advice of that portion of his ministry who shared the opinions of the Prince of Cossaro—if he was rash in forcing a most attached ally to adopt hostile measures against his subjects—he has probably acted on his own more unbiassed and better judgment, in his ready acceptance of the mediation of France, and in the appointment, as envoy to this country, of the Prince of Cashel Cicula, a worthy descendant of the respected minister at our court in the reign of George the Third. We may now, therefore, hope to see harmony permanently restored between two countries who have so many reasons for maintaining the most friendly intercourse.

The government of Naples have on several occasions, long before the sulphur monopoly, deeply infringed the treaty of 1816; and as the provisions of that treaty do not appear to have satisfied the wishes or promoted the true interests of either of the contracting parties, it is, perhaps, not to be regretted, that the treaty has been virtually annulled

by the various infractions of it committed by the Neapolitan government; and as hostilities between the two countries have been avoided by the friendly intervention of France, the relations between England and Naples may now be considered as restored to the position in which they stood before the treaty of 1816, and it is to be hoped no time will be wasted in attempting to reanimate that abortive measure. But in framing a new treaty, Naples may be relieved from the complaints of Austria, America, and other states, against the exclusive pretended advantages granted to England, France, and Spain,—advantages which, if they were real instead of being quite illusory, England would willingly forego, as she disclaims all exclusive rights, and seeks only those of a free and unrestricted friendly intercourse in common with other countries, which may equally promote the welfare of all; and as it would be utterly impossible to determine with fairness and precision the losses and damage imposed on British subjects by the breaches of treaty committed under the authority of the Neapolitan government since 1816, commencing, as some of those infractions did, almost immediately after the treaty was signed, compensation should be now sought in a liberal remission of existing imposts, rather than in attempting now to assess damages which should have been earlier stated to render a present claim for them valid. What we have a right to expect, it would be as much the interest of Naples to concede as ours to demand:—

1st. A revision of her tonnage dues and port charges, placing the British and other foreign vessels more nearly on a footing with those under the Neapolitan flag, and relieving all from paying those dues at more than one port when on a continuity of the same voyage.

2d. Such reasonable and fair reduction on the import duties on all kind of productions as may be safely made without injury to the revenue of Naples; and when such alterations are under consideration, the duties on British iron and fish should be placed on a more equal footing with the duty paid on iron and stock-fish imported from the north of Europe, for although the rate is nominally the same, it falls, in reality, about fifty per cent. heavier on iron and salt cod from England and Newfoundland than on iron and stock-fish from Russia and Norway.

3d. The quarantine regulations of the kingdom of Naples should be modified so as to assimilate to those of other civilized states, equally anxious for the preservation of public health.

4th. It is contended that, while the subjects of Naples enjoy, in all parts of the British dominion, full liberty for the decent celebration of their religious rites, we should be allowed similar privileges in Naples,

and any other places in the Two Sicilies where the number of resident British subjects may render it desirable. This privilege has been hitherto denied, under the plea that granting it would offend his holiness the Pope; but after his Neapolitan majesty has been bold enough to bid defiance to Great Britain in a very doubtful cause, he cannot want courage to free himself from the bondage of Rome, in asserting his independent right to tolerate and permit the free exercise of their unostentatious religious worship to all British Protestants within his states.

If, under pretence of affording compensation to contractors, or satisfying the cupidity of those who sought to enrich themselves at the joint cost of the sulphur producers and British and French manufacturers, it should be proposed to levy an export duty in Sicily on sulphur, our government may be expected to impose such a countervailing duty on its import to England from Sicily as will encourage the production in other quarters, and render us in a short time more independent of Sicily for a supply of that article than the late contract has proved we already are. But Naples has learnt so expensive a lesson in her oil trade, by not acceding to our views of fair reciprocity, that it may be supposed she will not soon fall again into a similar mistake. We were formerly as dependent on Naples for our supply of olive oil, as she lately supposed we were on Sicily for brimstone; but the government of Naples drove us to seek our oil in other countries, and our import of oil from the Neapolitan dominions, which formerly exceeded six thousand tons in a year, has latterly, by the impolicy of Naples, been reduced to about a tenth of that quantity; and we have found the remainder of our supply in other countries, that receive our manufactures in exchange at much more moderate duties than are imposed on them by Naples, and in which countries, when once entered for consumption, they are allowed to circulate freely without further imposts, whereas British goods, that have paid the full duties in one part of the dominions of Naples, are liable to them again on removal to another part of it.*

- The quantity of sulphur that paid duty in England in the five years from 1835 to 1839 inclusive, was in 1835, 31,258 tons; 1836, 26,439 tons; 1837, 37,607 tons; 1838, 34,715 tons; 1839, 31,055 tons.

In 1839 the quantity of olive oil that paid duty in England was 7,204 tons, of which, it is believed, that imported from the Neapolitan states did not amount to one-tenth.