

ITALY
AND
THE ITALIANS.
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LETTER CXIII.
Sicily — Sulphur Trade and Sulphur Monopoly.
Malta, August 20th.

You recollect, no doubt, from your early days, that it was formerly customary to give schoolboys Latin passages in which all sorts of blunders were purposely made in grammar and syntax, that they might correct them and thence learn how Latin ought *not* to be written. The same course seems to have been pursued in Naples in the regulation of the Sicilian sulphur trade; it may be clearly shown from the more recent laws and contracts, how, consistently with true wisdom and experience, things of this nature ought not to be managed and treated. The contract between the government and the house of Taix and Aycard is pre-eminently a monstrum *horrendum, ingens, cui lumen ademptum*, such as is scarcely to be matched in the modern financial history of Europe. Charges of this kind are severe; but it will not be difficult to prove them.

Some years ago, when the price of sulphur, the most important of the exports of Sicily, declined, owing to various natural causes, all the sellers complained, as usual, and many represented that the government ought to do something for the purpose of raising the price and the profit upon it, as though any government can regulate the buying and selling price of goods at pleasure.

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Interested persons took advantage of this error, and a M. Taix presented a grand plan for affording relief to the sellers; the nature of it shall presently be explained.

Though Sicilian commissioners rejected this plan for very good reasons, M. Aycard, nothing daunted, submitted a second and finally a third, in which he said that it was foolish to allow the owners of sulphur mines to exhaust them by working them immoderately; that the state ought to interfere to cramp self-interest, and to dispel the empty dream of free trade. It ought to secure and maintain against foreigners the monopoly of the sulphur trade, which nature has given to the island. It would be advantageous for Sicily to produce but little sulphur, and for that little to obtain a high price. A private commercial company could alone lead to this desirable end, and Messrs. Taix, Aycard and Co., were willing, out of sheer generosity, to take upon them so dangerous a business, and to construct roads, dispense alms, compensate proprietors, and found a mineralogical cabinet at Palermo, into the bargain.

Phrases and baits of this kind gained many unenlightened persons; means of a different sort were employed in other places; an examination of the matter in full council of state was avoided, and the management of the affair was committed chiefly to one minister.

Loud complaints were raised at the same time in Sicily against the mill-tax, which had recently been very much

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increased, and certain persons solicited its reduction, not from a sense of justice, or because the revenue from it might be dispensed with, but because it would then be no longer possible to avoid the *salto mortale* for founding a sulphur company.

Accordingly, on the 27th of June, 1838, was issued a royal ordinance signed by St. Angelo, the minister, the preamble to which says: For the benefit of our beloved subjects, in order to pay debts in Sicily, to alleviate burdens, to diffuse great wealth, and to call forth public works, which the island has such need of, a contract is concluded (without listening to plans of rights and privileges) with Taix, Aycard and Co. for ten years, to the following purport: —

1. As the great production of sulphur is the cause of every calamity in Sicily, the same shall be reduced from 900,000 quintals to 600,000 per annum, consequently diminished one third.
2. The average produce from 1834 to 1837 shall determine the quantity of the two thirds, beyond which no sulphur shall henceforth be allowed to be raised.
3. The price at which the company buys and at which it sells shall be officially fixed.
4. It pays to the king 400,000 Neapolitan ducats per annum.

5. The proprietors have full and unlimited liberty to sell their sulphur to whomsoever they please, and to send it whither they will, in case they do not choose to dispose of it to the company.

Thus favourably to liberty runs this clause in the ordinance of the 27th of June, 1838, but in the contract concluded by St. Angelo on the 8th of August with Taix, after the word "company" is inserted a single line — "provided that the owners pay to the company 20 carlines per quintal."

Such is the substance of a contract which (I repeat it) can scarcely be matched in the history of finance. Though it needs no explanation, I cannot forbear adding a few remarks.

1. It is true enough that the quantity of a production may exceed the consumption and the demand. The prices then fall, and this transient or permanent sign serves to warn every intelligent producer and maker to curtail the supply here and there, more or less, or perhaps not at all, in the prospect of a favourable change of things. In the infinite variety of relations of persons and things, it is only the individual who can form just conclusions on this subject; and it is a palpable folly to pretend to prescribe the course to be pursued by numbers at one and the same time. Every regulation of this kind rests on mere caprice, and always shows something too much or too little.

2. It is one of the grossest errors to attempt to

increase the wealth of a people in commanding by law the diminution of productions and industry. The old fabulous story that the Dutch threw their spices into the sea, in order to keep up their price, is reduced to practice in our so-called enlightened age, and upon a larger scale. To be consistent, the government must, for the prosperity of Sicily, limit also the production of wine, oil, wheat, &c., and all for the purpose of amassing wealth, paying debts, and so forth. What conjuror, what oracle, can have inspired and revealed the normal standard of two thirds and one third? If an English minister were to propose similar measures in regard to the working of the coal mines, it would be thought high time to send him to Bedlam.

3. One blunder leads to another. The average produce of three years is to decide the future extent of the trade, without regard to good or bad times, scanty or abundant capitals, without permission to advance. As soon as the two-thirds, to pound and ounce, are above ground, the business must stand still; nay, one-third of all the workmen is, for the increase of wealth, suddenly thrown out of bread, and almost forced by want to take up the trade of robbing and stealing. The government itself has undertaken the task of founding an inexhaustible nursery of wretchedness and crime, and the paltry profit is almost entirely swallowed up by the regiments of soldiers

that must be sent to Sicily for the preservation of order. The more we enter into detail the more conspicuous becomes the folly. Thus an American house expended in the years 1834 to 1837 very large sums on opening sulphur mines, but they have hitherto produced nothing. And, according to the wise law, there is no better prospect for the future. Of arbitrary proceedings, concealment, fraud, impossibility of superintendence, and redoubled distress of small proprietors, only too many instances are enumerated.

4. How tyrannical and absurd it is to fix buying and selling prices for years to come, every one knows who has learned the a b c of national economy; and the company which imagined that it had calculated so cleverly for itself may find at last that it has miscalculated.

5. But if it should even make no profit whatever, the 400,000 ducats which are taken from the proprietors of sulphur mines, (in order to increase their wealth,) would be a most oppressive and most unjust tax. But one can scarcely tell whether the most galling and intolerable part of the business may not be this, that the man who drew up the above law speaks with incredible hardihood of hatred to rights and privileges, and eulogizes perfect freedom of trade, while he confers, in the 20 carlines per quintal, a monopoly upon the company, and renders a free sale absolutely impossible for every proprietor.

At the same time the company knows

how to evade purchasing at the fixed prices, attempts are every where making to find sulphur out of Sicily, and a discovery made at Manchester already furnishes a substitute for many purposes. In spite of all repentance and all changes, stupid rulers will in a short time have so effectually destroyed the chief trade of Sicily, that this already so wretched and discontented country will be past recovery. Averse as I am to join in the too frequent complaints against authorities, in this case boundless ignorance is displayed; or there might have been at the bottom more reprehensible motives, on which people in Naples and Sicily speak so loudly and so personally that I dare not venture to repeat what they say.

But the Sicilians themselves are not blameless. For though one may be disposed not to be too severe upon many, because they were ignorant of the genuine principles of political economy, yet speedy experience and the outcry of the country ought to have enlightened them. Instead of this, however, not a few, belonging even to the first families, presented to the king when in Sicily an address of thanks for establishing the sulphur company. Whether then it were ignorance, error, cowardice, flattery, interest, or all these put together that led to this step, so much is certain that these silly panegyrists have no right whatever to complain,

or the assailed rulers may scornfully hold up to them their own hand-writing like a Medusa' s head. If, meanwhile, country and people sink lower and lower, who cares for that? Or those who do care have no legal means of redress at their command, and their sense of right will not permit them to employ illegal ones.

LETTER CXIV.

Sicily—Corn Trade—Land-tax—Revenues and Expenditure of Palermo and Messina—Foundling Hospitals.

Messina, August 23d.

WHAT I have related to you in my last letter about the sulphur monopoly far surpasses (a retrograde step of course) all the singularities and follies that were formerly practised for the ruin of the corn-trade, but gradually abolished. In the middle of the month of August, namely, the authorities formerly met, and decided what should be the price of corn in the current year, how much the government laid under embargo for the country, and how much the local magistracy for the place, how much was to be carried to the great magazines (*caricatoji*) at Catanea, Grgenti, Sciacca, Termini, and Alicata, &c. Arbitrary acts, fraud, bribery, annoyances of every kind, were necessarily connected with these regulations, and were ruinous to agriculture. And Sicily is still behindhand in all those improvements which other countries have derived

from better theories and greater experience; and persons conversant with the subject complain of the like very great imperfections which prevail in the preparation of sulphur, while their recommendations tending to increase the produce are disregarded. The aspect of the naked hills of Sicily proves that the complaints of the destruction of wood are well founded.

After the decline of the price of corn, the complaints of the amount and unequal assessment of the later taxes on land grew so loud that it became necessary to rectify the register, and to take the average produce from 1820 to 1830 as the standard. No rise or alteration of the *cadastral* is to take place in regard to agriculture before 1880, and in regard to olive-trees and woods till 1900. On the question whether the land-tax is proportionably higher in Naples or in Sicily, the opinions of the inhabitants of the two countries differ exceedingly, as they do on a thousand other subjects. The same may be said of the question, whether the revenues of the state in Sicily are higher in proportion than the income and property, or the number of the inhabitants. Loud and general is the complaint that the government promotes the extension of the ruinous lotto into the smallest villages, and that it has seduced even the poorest to indulge delusive hopes.

For Palermo, Messina, Catania, and Caltagirone,

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the mill-tax was retained at its full height, and for the rest of the country diminished. Instead of a kind of personal tax which was levied in most places, a tax has been again laid upon mills, even for the level country. Many regard this, and justly, as a very inconvenient retrograde step.

For the construction of roads, which are more rare in Sicily than in any civilized country in the world, 1 ½ per cent of the land-tax is now allowed to be applied; and permission has been granted to raise a loan of a million of dollars at 5f per cent, for the purpose.

By way of supplement to my former statements relative to the population, I subjoin the following particulars which I have just received. There were in

	1798.	1831.	1836.	
Palermo	140,000	173,000	175,000	inhabitants.
Messina	46,000	58,000*		
Catania	45,000	52,000	56,000	
Girgenti	14,000	17,000		
Sicily	1,660,000	1,943,000	in 1833. 1,927,000	

It was computed that there was one monk to 254 persons.

That the administration in the towns of Sicily needs superintendence is proved by older and later experience, and also by the discussions of plans (*stato discusso*) for the city of Palermo in 1838.

* Others say 83,000.

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They form a thick folio, which contains, besides the plans themselves, the remarks of the city-tax committee, of the intendant, of the ministers, and, lastly, the royal decision. For many years past the expenditure of the city has exceeded its income, and its finances are not yet in due order. The income of 186,000 ounces arises chiefly from landed property, land-tax, and taxes on consumption; thus, for instance, 50,000 ounces from flour, 18,000 from cattle for slaughter, 5,000 from fish, 32,000 from wine, &c. Among the expenses there are not only the ordinary, (salaries, pensions, buildings, interest 6000 ounces, lighting 10,000,) but also some of a peculiar kind. Thus, for instance, notwithstanding rich endowments, there are 8,000 ounces more for churches, convents, and festivals of all sorts, of which that of St. Rosalia alone costs 4000 ounces. Still more striking are two items, namely, 4000 ounces for the cure of diseased prostitutes, and 10,000 for foundlings, while the public schools are put off with 1000. Whether it is true that, in Palermo and other cities of Sicily, the money destined for this or that purpose finds its way into other channels, I cannot decide; but I may venture to assert that strict financial economy (deeply in debt and highly taxed as the city is) might diminish many expenses, or at least establish very different relative proportions between them.

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The revenues and expenditure of the city of Messina amount annually to 40,000 ounces, about five-sixths of which arise from taxes on consumption, upwards of 3000 from the sale of snow, and the rest from rent of property, fees of court, &c. Taxes on consumption are levied upon oil, tobacco, fish, wine, must, vinegar, brandy, 8tc. Wine pays 4 tari per salma; oil 1 tari the cafisso, (156 pounds Vienna weight,) butchers' meat 8 grani the rotolo, four for the king and four for the city, which are levied by two distinct authorities.

The corn-tax too is of a double kind. In the first place, the salma of corn pays on entering Messina, for the city 16 tari 3£ grani. The levy of this tax is let for the yearly payment of a specific sum to private persons (*campisti*). Secondly, on the salma of wheat, maize, and barley, 13 tari 12 grani are levied at the mill for the king. The salma, therefore, pays altogether 30 tari 8| grani.* Forty-two rural communes belonging to Messina are subject to the same heavy taxes.

The salaries paid by the city amount to between 5000 and 6000 ounces. A principal item of charge arises from the debts, most of which pay 5 per cent, interest. Money to pay them off is wanting. The sum of 30 ounces is put down annually for the library;

* A salma contains 18 tomoli, or about 5{ Vienna metzen. A cantaro, or 100 rotoli, is equal to Mil pounds Vienna weight. A tari is about 5d. English.

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on the other hand, 1000 for the festival of the Virgin Mary on the 15th of August, and 1600 or 1700 for foundlings. The number of these in the city of Messina alone is from 30 to 50 monthly; for even wealthy men are not ashamed to send their illegitimate offspring to be nursed, or rather killed, in the convenient foundling hospital.

In a general statement for Palermo for 1836, exclusively of the children found alive, there are the following three items:

Found dead in the turning wheel	21
-----half dead, who soon afterwards died	45
Perished from miscarriage and abortion	36

Such are the occurrences of institutions encouraging murder, sin, and wretchedness of all kinds, and yet patronized and extolled by state, city, and church!