
Rumours of War

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CHAPTER ONE

THE EASTERN QUESTION

Whitehall, early evening, 19 September 1826

Lieutenant-Colonel Lord John Howard, assistant quartermaster-general at the Horse Guards, returned the sentry's salute as he passed through the gates and set off down Whitehall in the direction of the palace of Westminster. He was not best pleased at being bidden at so late an hour, for he had an engagement at White's club at seven, and summonses such as these had a habit of becoming drawn-out affairs. Too often, it seemed to him, His Majesty's ministers tarried inordinately over their business before, as the evening's diversions finally beckoned, they would make their pleasure known to their lordships at the Admiralty, or to the commander-in-chief at the Horse Guards.

And it would be a pretty business, of that there was no doubt. The summons had been to the quartermaster-general himself, but he was absent from London on duty, and even the adjutant-general, who might have stood proxy, was at a review on Wimbledon Common. Lord John Howard had had no opportunity to enquire of the Admiralty what might be the cause of the summons - it was rare that the one place should be troubled and not the other - for as the principal staff officer remaining in the Horse Guards that afternoon he had been detained with all manner of affairs.

But he knew what would be the cause anyway. Or at least he thought he did. What else could it be but the Greek war? It had truly become very tiresome: what with Shelley's Hellas and then that preposterous amateur warrior Byron (God rest their souls), the country was losing its sense to a heady tide of romantic self-indulgence. He frowned and shook his head. Well . . . be what may; the government had dug itself a fearful deep ditch and might yet find it difficult to come by a ladder. And what had prevailed on so level-headed a man as the Duke of Wellington to go to St Petersburg and do Mr Canning's bidding? For now there was a treaty to help the Greeks, with the French and the Russians a party to the folly, and an ultimatum that the sultan would undoubtedly find repellent. There was a fleet at this very moment in the eastern Mediterranean - for all he knew in the Bosphorus itself. And so the

nation would next send a landing force, doubtless to seize Constantinople in the expectation that the sultan would at once seek terms. Had not the same happened at Rangoon? And what had followed? Two years of fever and fighting. He shook his head again. A right Gadarene rush to war it was, and at six o'clock of a chill autumn evening.

There was just a suspicion of fog, too, in the gaslight. Lord John Howard would have pulled up the collar of his greatcoat had he had to walk to the House of Peers itself, but parliament stood prorogued until November, and in a few more yards he turned right into the cul-de-sac of Downing Street and made for Number Fourteen at the western end, the modest three-storey house that was His Majesty's Colonial Office. Here he was admitted promptly, shown to an ante-room and told that Lord Bathurst would see him directly. This surprised him, for his dealings were, as a rule, with an under-secretary. There again, it had been the quartermaster-general himself who had been summoned. Lord John Howard looked at his half-hunter a shade anxiously; he hoped this interview did not presage an intrusion on his appointment at White's.

In five more minutes he was called to Lord Bathurst's office. On entering he bowed, forage cap under his arm, and bid good evening to the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies.

Lord Bathurst looked preoccupied. His features were amiable but pinched; his hair, grey and much receded, was awry. At sixty-four years he was the second oldest member of the cabinet, and much the most experienced, having held his appointment since 1812. The Duke of Wellington counted him a friend and ally. Lord John Howard could not help but think that there should by rights have been little to disturb so richly earned an ease at this time. Europe and the Colonies were - at last - at peace, but for those querulous neighbours in the eastern Mediterranean . . .

The Secretary of State was undoubtedly troubled, however. His voice revealed it. 'Ireland, my dear sir, Ireland. The oats and potatoes are ruined there. Drought!'

Lord John Howard was puzzled. He could see no immediate connection as far as his duties at the Horse Guards were concerned, unless the cabinet had a mind to increase the Irish establishment to deal with the imagined unrest - and that hardly seemed necessary, for there were surely more than enough soldiers in that country?

'We shall have it out all over again with the Corn Laws. I see no escape from it. And what with Catholic relief and all.'

Lord John Howard, increasingly mindful of the hour, decided to attempt a conclusion. 'Do you wish the commander-in-chief to place additional troops in readiness, my lord?'

Bathurst looked puzzled. 'For Ireland? No, no, indeed not. Not for Ireland. There will be no need of that. Indeed no. Not when the situation in the Aegean Sea is so uncertain.'

Lord John Howard was beginning to chafe. 'The Duke of York has placed a force upon notice for Greece, sir, as you know. Do you wish me to communicate with the general commanding-in-chief on the matter?'

'Lord Hill? No, I think not, though I should wish to speak with him presently on sundry other matters concerning Greece. No, it is Portugal. That is what exercises His Majesty's ministers.'

'Portugal, my lord?' Howard read the official despatches as well as the newspapers. He was well aware of the constitutional difficulties occasioned by the death of King John (and no doubt distantly stirred from Madrid too), but-

'The Foreign Secretary asks that a special mission be stood up for Lisbon to tender advice to our ambassador. Or rather, I should say, to our chargé d'affaires. The commander-in-chief is already apprised of matters in a general sense.'

Lord John Howard was uncertain of this, as well as surprised. The Duke of York was hardly in a state to be conscious of anything but his own mortality at this time. He had been too ill of late even to put his signature to things. The officers at the Horse Guards who ran the army in his name saw the periodic despatches from His Majesty's embassies in Lisbon and Madrid (and, indeed, from Paris, for Howard had a mind too that France's hand would be detectable in the business) but he was certain that no thought had been given to intervention of any kind.

'How large is the mission to be, my lord, and at what notice?'

'Five or six officers, no more. A colonel to be in charge. Mr Canning is not yet decided on when they should sail, but by the end of the month I would say. There will be passports and the like to arrange. Would you have it attended to? And with discretion, if you will.'

Lord John Howard closed his notebook. 'Of course, my lord.'

'When is the quartermaster-general returned?'

'On Friday.'

'Very good. I would speak with him as soon as he is.'