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AT THE TURN OF THE TIDE

LISBON AT THE CLOSE OF 1810: FURTHER EXTRACTS
FROM THE LETTERS OF A MERCHANT BANKER

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It is not wishful thinking when one affirms that, dark and grim for England though the past few months have been, dawn is breaking, carrying with it the certainty that the evil things we are fighting against will at last be swept away. Some such conviction must also have been held by our predecessors, the British community in Lisbon, when, during the last quarter of 1810, it became evident that Masséna's invasion had failed in its intention and that the Portuguese army, like Wellington's men, could «take it», and, as they showed at Salamanca and the Nivelle, give the troops of France as good as they got.

Clear evidence of that better hope for the future can be found in chance sentences embodied in letters of Edmund Power written subsequent to his re-opening business here after his departure — in November 1807 — commented upon in last year's Report under the heading, «Lisbon on the Eve of Invasion». Even then things were looking up. It was in February 1809 that Major General William Carr Beresford took command of the Portuguese army, and although Soult captured Oporto the following month he was soon sent to the right about, with Oporto recaptured and the Frenchman over the Spanish border again by the end of May, with two Portuguese generals, António da Silveira and Manuel de Brito Mouzinho, in hot pursuit. So, writing on the 1st June 1809, to his correspondent

William Sweetland, of Gibraltar, after regretting that the convoy taking the letter cannot carry goods on freight as they have troops for the garrison aboard, Edmund Power continues :

«this country has now got completely rid of the «barbarous French, but unfortunately after committing «the greatest cruelties that ever was known. It is «equally expected that Spain will within a short space «of time be free of them, but much, we think, must «depend on the success of Austria.»

How we of to-day can sympathise with the writer's hope for a speedy victory, but there was the long check at Torres Vedras to be suffered in patience, and Sabugal and Almeida, both battles fought in the spring of 1811, precluded the passing of hostilities to Spanish, and later, to French soil.

From our merchant-banker's letters it is not easy to form an exact opinion on the state of trade. In matters of business he is far too objective to take long views and obviously careful in his judgments. One gathers an impression that perhaps things were not quite as unprofitable as the writer made out. Thus on the 18th August 1810 he writes to Ant. Jul. da Costa, at Liverpool, informing him that a vessel, the «Swan», recently arrived, will be «completely loaded» with wool at 5/6, «which is the «highest freight that is given but even so in addition to her «outward freight will not amount to what you chartered her «for, but will not be so bad as the charter of the Luiza». As Senhor Costa was by way of being a relative through marriage ties with Edmund Power and, largely through the latter's pestering Lord Strangford, was eventually named Consul General for Portugal in the Mersey port, letters addressed to him are usually fairly frank. Army orders nevertheless loom in the offing, and though both barley and rice are so plentiful as to be unprofitable shipments «what our market is at present very scarce of is Dutch «cheese, in case of any being at your market for sale I recom- «mend your embracing the earliest opportunity of shipping «100 boxes... being particularly careful in seeing they are in «good state». He goes on to say that «we do not consider oursel- «ves in that dangerous state here that we are considered in «England to be in, having the pleasure to inform you that «appearances are daily more and more favourable».

Then as now the question of transferring funds was compassed with difficulties. On the 6th October 1810 Power writes to his London agents, Richard Power & Co., saying; «notwithstanding our exchange having lowered to 67d there is hardly «a bill to be got. With difficulty we obtained one bill of £ 700. «By next packet we expect the British Commissarys will have «occasion to draw when we shall make you further remittances «to the extent we possibly can».

Then follows an interesting bit of news. It links up, naturally enough, with the notice issued by the British Consul General, Mr. John Jeffery, which is reproduced in Mr. A. R. Walford's informatively interesting work, «The British Factory in Lisbon» (page 89). It runs as follows :

«Consul General's Office.

«Lisbon, 5th October 1810.

«The established British merchants resident in Lisbon are requested to attend a meeting at the Consul General's house tomorrow morning at ½ past 10 o'clock on important business.

J. JEFFERY.»

Mr. Walford assumes that this important business dealt with the early entry into force of the Treaty of 1810, but Mr. Power's note on the proceedings indicates that other and apparently even more urgent matters were on the agenda. He says,

«the writer is just returned from our Consul General's house where the British merchants were desired to assemble this day. It was chiefly to present «to them a letter received from Admiral Berkeley desiring that in case they should be disposed to ship off «such property as they may have on hands it was «necessary to be prepared for the event without making «any use of the transports in our harbour, as such «would be necessary for His Majesty's Service. This «has been by way of caution to be prepared for the «worst, but not in a disponding style. Our headquarters «are retiring to Leiria, within 15 leagues of our capital «to receive the enemy in case they make an attack.

«In such case hopes are entertained that our Combined «Armies, which are in great force, will give an account «of them. Something decisive must soon take place».

The foresighted old merchant then goes on to say :

«After our departure from the Consul's we went to «the Customs and ordered the Despatcher to suspend «despatching the sailcloth, fearing we may have to pay «the duties and then to ship them off. God grant we «may have some favourable information to give you «in our next. Bill of £ 700. drawn by Round Slack & «Co. on George Slack at 30 d/s. and 67^d.»

Only a week later, on the 13th October 1810, he writes again to the same correspondents :

«The fate of this country must now be shortly «decided. The enemy is advanced to Villafranca which «is within five leagues of our Capital, but the general «opinion is that it is impossible for it to conquer the «formidable force it has to meet with and in the «advantageous positions that the combined army are «strongly prepared to meet the enemy. Their greatest «ambition is to see them come forward, which it is «feared they will not. We have had so short warning «of the departure of the vessel that takes the mail that «we must refer you to our next for further particulars.»

The next is a fortnight later, on the 27th October, and business is clearly looking up. There are various remittances, one of £ 4,000. on account of a Portuguese merchant

«who will be remitting further by next opportunity «and he is very anxious for your effecting shipments «in wheat, flour, barley, beans, rice, and Dutch cheese. «Every article of provisions must, we think, answer. «We refer you to what he writes you on the subject. «In point of politicks thank God everything has gone «much beyond our expectations, in so much that the «general hope is that the Nation will be soon clear «of the Vile Enemy and to their total destruction.»

There was still six months to wait before that disorderly retreat of the starved French forces who had shivered and died before the grim emplacements and redoubts of the lines of Tórres Vedras was to be in full swing. But it came ; and it heralded not only the end of the legend of Napoleon's invincibility but also the collapse of his proud plans for the domination of Europe and the Middle East. One more quotation, from a letter dated 20th April 1811.

«We have the pleasure now to inform you that the
«General Enemy is now completely driven out of the
«country with the loss of more than half their entire
«army that entered. We hope it will prove to be finally
«the fate of Bonaparte in all countries that he has
«invaded. We shall keep you advised of the state of
«our market according as any alteration takes place.»

Alterations did take place. One gathers that heavy and belated imports of grain and other foodstuffs, principally from the United States, continued dull, though Dublin Whiskey is selling well at 6\$000 the almud. A shipper is advised of a regrettable accident ; two puncheons turned out of the vessel broke and were quite empty ! It is not clear as to whether the crew had been «sucking the monkey» on the passage down or whether Lisbon stevedores were responsible. What is interesting to note is that Irish whiskey was a common article of import here in 1812. It may also come as a novelty to some to learn that in the same year Lisbon evidently had a Health Officer ; a shipper is told that the whole of his shipment of cheese «came in a most putrid state» and was thrown into the river «by the Health Officers». But by this time the tide of war had not only receded from Lisbon but was clearly on the ebb in Spain. Portuguese troops fought, and fought well, in the hard campaigns of Trás-os-Montes that culminated in the crushing defeat of King Joseph at Vitoria in June of 1813. All that is however another if an even more glorious story ; the desire behind these somewhat unconnected delvings into old files is to strike a comparison 'twixt then and now, finding, it may be, certain similar factors at work which justify a belief that, great though the present flood may be, the tide of war has yet once more turned, and has turned in our favour.