

MR G.W.E. RUSSELL ON THE CRETAN CRISIS

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ENTHUSIASTIC PROCEEDINGS  
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On Monday evening there was a crowded attendance at the lecture hall of the Luton Liberal Club, where MR G.W.E. RUSSELL delivered an impassioned and eloquent address upon the Cretan crisis. Mr H.C. Middle occupied the chair, and there were also on the platform, the Deputy- Mayor (Mr B Oakley), Mr B Blundell, Mr H Warren, Mr T Cain, MR H. Rayner, Mr D Moon, and others. A number of prominent Dunstablians were amongst the large audience.

The Chairman in opening the proceedings said they were extremely fortunate in having such a speaker that evening (cheers). Mr Russell was so well known that he required no introduction in Bedfordshire, nor indeed to any audience in the country. United to the historic lustre of the name of Russell, he had added the lustre of his own great ability and was known as a statesman of broad and generous sympathies. He was one of the leading apostles of the Liberal Forward Movement which claimed the right to criticise and if needs be to condemn the foreign policy as well as the whole policy of the government. With reference to the serious question which had brought them together that night, he would ask: were they satisfied in all respects of what the governments had and had not done? If not then let them say so. He considered that the honour and credit of England were strongly involved. He believed he would be within the limit of truth when he said that England had done more than any other power in Europe to uphold the oppression and misrule of the Turk, the Concert of Europe had proved that it could be a concert only so long as inactivity could be maintained, it was no longer a concert when it came to active and positive intervention. Perhaps that could hardly be considered correct now, for at last Greece forced the hands of the Powers; they had been active and the guns of their fleets had been turned not on the unspeakable Turk, but on the Cretan Christians who were rightly and nobly struggling for freedom. That was a shame and a disgrace (cheers), and if the Concert of Europe that the policy of the government was to cut right across all the sentiments of Englishmen and all the noble traditions of our past, then the sooner we cut away from that concert the better (applause).

Mr Russell, who was very enthusiastically received, explained that he was present that evening in fulfilment of a deferred and broken engagement. Owing to unavoidable circumstances he was unable to fulfil his promise to be present at the Club dinner, and of course he only regarded his engagement as postponed to the best favourable opportunity. That opportunity had been accelerated by recent developments of foreign affairs, and he had stolen an evening to come down and speak a few plain and strong words in respect of the Cretan Question and England's policy in the East (applause). Their chairman had said that he came amongst them as a representative of the Liberal Forward Movement. That was a name given to them half in jest and half in cynical sarcasm, but he felt that unless the Liberal party moved onward and forward it was doomed to inability and eventually to extinction, for the life and law of liberalism was progress and advance. He ventured to think that that was true, not only of the foreign liberal policy, but of the Liberal policy generally; they were in want of a forward movement. In a town like Luton it would not be inappropriate for him to adopt metaphors of the football field, and to say that they had lost not one but two captains, and were in as powerless a state as any team could be in. They had lost their grand old captain in Gladstone (cheers) in 1894, and the young and hopeful and promising Roseberry had taken himself off on his own account (laughter) for reasons best known to himself, and for motives it was not for him (the speaker) to criticise that evening, thus leaving the Liberal party in the position of a team without a captain. They had a deputy captain (cheers) it was true, and an extremely effective one, too, in Sir William Harcourt (cheers), but with regard to their practical advancement there had been a want of 'go' in their leadership. Some of them were Liberal forwards and they hoped by their zeal and activity to produce some effect upon the Liberal 'half-backs' (laughter), but up to the present it had been difficult job. Like all good movements, they were at first both abused and laughed at. One gloomy day last October he was one of a small party of four who had assembled in a small back parlour in a street off the Strand, to consider the duty of the Liberal party in reference to the 'Armenian Question'. If abuse could have put an end to them, they would have been 'spiflicated' before the following Christmas (laughter). But they went on, faint yet pursuing, never turning their backs but marching breast forward. What was the result? The other day, at a meeting in Queens Hall, they were 4,000 strong, and at Hyde Park on the previous day they were 40,000, (applause). He had always been greatly interested in foreign politics, and the present crisis

carried him back in memory to the great national uprising over the "Bulgarian Question" 20 years ago, when Mr Gladstone, then, although 70 years of age, he was at the zenith of his power (cheers), carried the fair flag of England. That was the "Eastern Question" at that time, when the great controversy was being tried, whether Christian England should or should not have part or lot in propping up the monstrous empire of the Turk. That was the question that drew him into politics and led him to place such gifts and powers as he might possess at the service of the Liberal Party (cheers), and since 1880 the question of England's policy in the East in relation to the Turkish Empire had been the one great question of foreign politics that had for him the strongest interest. For a few years the question slumbered. The Bulgarian atrocities took place in 1876; in 1876 there was that great national uprising; in 1877 the war between Russia and Turkey resulted in those great victories by the former; then came the Congress of Berlin, in which England represented by Lord Beaconsfield and Lord Salisbury, was party to an arrangement by which more than a million of foreign yet fellow Christians and fellow creatures in the East were handed back to the odious tyranny from which they had fought themselves free. Therefore on account of that Berlin Congress, England became accountable largely for the rule of the Sultan. At that time there obtained from the Sultan concessions and promises - not for the first or the last in his history - for the amelioration and better treatment of the wretched creatures who groaned under his tyranny. At that time there were some wise politicians who said those promises were utterly rotten, and if England leaned on that reed it would surely break, for no faith could be placed in the Sultan, and if England gave back to him those suffering Christians, those unhappy people would pay the penalty. What was prophesied then has come true to the letter. As he said the Eastern Question had slumbered for a time, while more pressing domestic matters occupied the attention of the nation, and thus distracted the public mind from what was going on in the East; but about three years ago Englishmen began to be dimly aware that things were going on in the East in their old bad course, and that the prophesies that were made twenty years ago to the effect that the Sultan could not be trusted were being fulfilled. Then there happened that which always happens when any tale of injustice, wrong, or tyranny comes to our knowledge from a foreign country; they were told it was all newspaper lies, (laughter), travellers tales, and that the Turk was not such a bad creature after all; and that the Armenians were a sorry lot, and that the Turk was only exercising the severity which England would use to any of her subjects who chose to become rebels and traitors; that all talk to the contrary was mere sentimentalism and hysterical romantic what-not those who had read the newspapers during the last two years knew well enough how to pile up that sort of trash (applause). It was greatly to the discredit of the Government - a discredit shared also by the Foreign Secretary of the last Liberal Government - that all official information on the question was withheld, although he would not say that it was withheld from a bad motive. He had had opportunities of discussing that matter with those who had withheld the official information, and it was their conscientious opinion that if the Consular Reports which they received from week to week were made known there would have been such an outburst of horror that the English people would have insisted upon at once on going to war with the Sultan (loud cheers). Whether that would have so he would not undertake to say, but that was the motive that led them to withhold the information. But at last the truth had come out (loud cheers), in black and white printed reports sent by the Consuls as a matter of official business to the English Foreign Office and submitted to Parliament, and then it appeared that instead of being exaggerated the tenth part of the truth had not been told. He was extremely averse to reading long quotations while speaking in public but there were cases when, to make extracts from what one read would lay oneself open to the charge of perverting the truth, and in those cases it was the duty of the public speaker to read the whole unabridged quotation.

Mr Russell proceeded to read several long reports from the British Consuls giving harrowing details of Armenian massacres and atrocities. The first report giving an account of the Sassoun massacres, which commenced in August 1894 stated that altogether 25 villages had been destroyed. The Turkish troops had showed themselves in the district saying they were there to protect the villagers. The villagers let them lodge with them for the night in the villages and during the night the troops arose slaughtered all the people, men, women and children. In another place a large number of leading men, headed by the priest, went out to meet the Turkish commanding officer, taking their taxes in their hands as proof of their loyalty and begging for mercy, they were surrounded and killed to a man. A number of young men! were seized, bound hand and foot, laid out in a row, had brushwood piled upon them and were burnt to death. The people of another village had fled to a secret grotto, where they remained until the weaker died of hunger. The remainder were later discovered by the Turkish soldiers and put to the bayonet. Sixty young women and girls were driven into a church, and then the soldiers were ordered to do as they liked with them and afterwards kill them. Some of the prettier women were invited to accept Islam and marry Turks; they refused and were killed. Many of the terrified inhabitants hid themselves

in deep wells and when they were discovered, the soldiers fired down upon them, then getting tired of that means of extermination they saturated matting with kerosene and ignited it, then threw it down the wells. Ripping open women and tearing children to pieces by main force were among the barbarities recorded. A letter from Sir P. Currie, the British Ambassador at Constantinople, at a moderate estimate put the total loss of life at 30,000, and stated the survivors were in a state of absolute destitution.

Soon after the perpetration of these outrages, the German Emperor caused his portrait to be painted and presented as a complimentary gift to the Sultan (hisses and groans). But the worst was yet to come, and in August last there were 5000 others murdered, not in the outlying districts and villages, but in Constantinople, and for that bloody massacre six of the resident ambassadors had put their names to a declaration that the Sultan himself was responsible (loud hisses). He (Mr Russell) had told them these things to make it absolutely clear about the state of affairs by giving them not his own words, but the language of official memoranda forwarded to the Foreign Office, the condition of horror to which, by his infamous tyranny the Turk had reduced his Christian subjects in the East. That was not a matter of party politics; it was a matter in which all Liberals, humanitarians, and Christians no two ways of duty (applause). They all know what has recently happened in Crete, how there they rose in self-defence in a way that did not seem to have been in the power of the poor Armenians. Then the Turks closed upon them and the gallant young Prince George of Greece went to the rescue (cheers). On those gallant defenders of the Christian population in Crete our British guns had been suffered to fire (Shame!). It was not for that the British ratepayers paid the enormous sums required for the construction of British war vessels (loud cheers), it was not for that that the hard working artisans of Devonport and other ship building centres toiled night and day and spent their constructive skill upon those vessels of war. No; any ordinary British artisan, knowing to what devilish work those vessels would be put would have thrown down his tools and would have told Lord Salisbury to go to the devil in his own way (loud cheers and enthusiastic demonstrations).

Lord Salisbury had announced that the Concert of Europe was going to bring pressure to bear on the King of Greece and also on the Sultan of Turkey. Crete was not going to be allowed to unite herself to Greece; she was to have Autonomy, a form of self-government under the suzerainty of our friend the Sultan (ironical cheers), samples of whose suzerainty would be found in the ambassadors reports he had just read. Every Greek soldier was to be cleared out of Crete and the Turks left behind for police. That was on all fours with our police saying that Jack the Ripper was allowed to look after the people of London! Men sunk to such depths of degradation, criminals of such deep and devilish dye, it was not conceivable that such reprobates should be left as police of that Island (cheers), and one could hardly understand how such a proposal could have been received with anything but howls of execration. Yet they knew that the Powers of Europe had presented what they purported to be a final decision to the King of Greece, and if by four o'clock that afternoon the King of Greece had not consented to evacuate Crete we were to fire on him again. That was the ultimatum from the Christian Powers of Europe.

Speaking at Queens hall the other night, he ventured to say that if they stripped off its diplomatic disguise the Concert of Europe would be nothing at all but a huge trades union of stock jobbers and loan mongers (loud cheers), in whose hands the three empires about which the newspapers say so much, were as powerless as the three gilded balls hanging outside a pawnbroker's shop (laughter and applause). They were very bright and attractive as they were seen flashing in the daylight, but the real business was done by the grimy gentlemen behind the counters inside (laughter). The rich people were the potentates in whose interests these crimes against civilisation were being undertaken, but since the meetings in St Martin's Hall, Queens Hall, and the huge gathering in Hyde Park on Sunday, he was persuaded that the British guns would not again be allowed to fire upon the Cretans (loud cheers). God grant that his words might come true (loud cheers), but of course they could never be sure they might read in the papers of action that would cause them to blush deeper even than when they read what occurred on Sunday fortnight; that however seemed hardly possible. It might be avoided. It might be - but he hoped not - that the King of Greece would see that the powers ranged against him were so overwhelmingly strong, that there would be no chance for him and his country to stand up for their rights. He could hardly believe that would be the case because the Greeks were essentially a fighting nation, and he therefore believed that Greece would continue in the line she had taken (cheers), and would refuse absolutely and wholly to capitulate. And somebody else would have to capitulate then, and the first person to do that would be Lord Salisbury, who knew that in England, there were a free people, who, if he did not capitulate, would call upon him to account at the tenure of his office and perhaps before. After all, the power was with the people. It was different in England to the miserable military despotism of Germany. But Lord Salisbury would probably have learned wisdom

within the last few days and would prepare himself for emergencies. They must remember, however that things only go well when human beings make them go well, and when a band of earnest citizens and countrymen have determined things shall go well. It was for that purpose that he was devoting every moment he could give to the subject in order to persuade all he could to bring their influence to bear upon this question. He need not ask them to pressure on their MP; there was no necessity for that, but they might bring pressure to bear directly on Lord Salisbury within the next few days. One of the great events of that day in London was the unprecedented number of postcards delivered at the Foreign Office saying "No war with Greece!" One postcard might be thought ridiculous, but a card from every elector in the country (laughter and cheers) would be little trouble and expense, and in their accumulated millions they would within the next few days form a plebiscite to guide Lord Salisbury in accordance with the will of the English people (loud cheers). That was a question which transcended the ordinary limits of party warfare, a great moral issue was involved, and every man and woman in England was morally bound, in the sight of God and humanity, to take stand for the right and make their influence felt.

He often thought about the passage in the fifth chapter of Judges', "Curse you Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse you bitterly, the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty" (loud cheers). The curse of Meroz was never unrepresented in human history. That grand old story of Jewish warfare was now being re-enacted on the stage of our national politics. On the one side there was the cursed rule of the Turk and all the powers which go to back it up; selfishness and love of money and every base ambition and thought, with all the sneers of the cynical and the tremors of the timid, and the rebukes of stately critics who tell us we are exciting ourselves about nothing; and on the other side there was a question of common humanity, the fair fame of Christian England, duty's clear call and the joy of obeying it (loud cheers). He was not going to say anything that would incite the young men who were present to volunteer for active service; he did not consider that his duty and he would never ask men to face a danger into which he could not lead them, but he would never forget the sight he witnessed at the Queens Hall, where the young men sat with pale faces and tense lips and when the call came for volunteers, although it was plainly told them that no promise could be held out of some treasure from an African mine or a share in a Chartered company, but instead nothing but a Turkish bullet in their heart and the undying benediction of generations to come, a hundred of those young men quickly responded to that call (cheers). He had spoken strongly because he felt strongly upon that question. At another time he would be ready to talk to them of domestic politics, but until this great question was disposed of in a manner compatible with Christian humanity, he would decline to waste time and strength on any other question. It was a matter that might stand over for a month or two; it might be settled within an hour or two. At that very moment things were hanging in the balance, and the strong determined will of the English electors might turn the scale in the right direction. They must feel that to have any share in propping up and defending from its righteous doom the government responsible for these horrors would be an act that would haunt a man through every remaining hour of his life and rise like an avenging spirit and confront him before the Judgement Seat of God. It might be that within a few hours they would learn that Lord Salisbury had taken his lesson again, like a threatened child, from that young soldier Emperor of Germany. Such a policy might be suitable for the prime minister of a tenth rate country like Portugal, but what were they to say of the Imperial Minister of the greatest empire the world has ever seen, if he could not hold our flag in the face of Europe and tell the German Emperor that he takes his lessons in foreign policy from the Christian religion and the electors of England? (cheers), and not from the mad ambition of an emperor whose one thought is the aggrandisement of his house. (cheers). If Lord Salisbury did surrender and consent our national forces against those gallant Greeks, who have risen to defend their fellows in blood and religion against the nameless horrors of Turkish tyranny, well, then; "Bow down thy broad back, cringe to the stronger, drape thy white cliffs with black, England no longer" (loud and continuous applause). The only way of arresting Lord Salisbury on this downward course and making him feel that the path of safety - because he was afraid it was useless to talk of the path of honour - but to make him feel that the path of safety does not depend on him serving the Turks (cheers) was to let him hear directly from the electors of England. Their fellow Christians in Crete were threatened with death and annihilation, and England was involved in the disgrace of being party to their fate.

Let not one elector in that division rest until he had conveyed his own personal views to Lord Salisbury. Such a remonstrance was not to be laughed at, and a postcard from every elector in that town, would surely have its effect. The demonstration that had already taken place had taken effect, and might God grant that this moral victory might be won, even at this eleventh hour (applause).

It was all very well in calm weather and bright sunshine for them to say they were all jolly good Liberals and would promise Mr Ashton another victory, but now things were coming to a closer grip than that. They had not only to consider a question of their whole-hearted loyalty to Liberalism, for the Liberal cause was not a mere matter of majority hunting and office seeking; if it was a cause worth serving, then it was a case of humanity and freedom the whole world over (cheers), and was the cause of their fellow creatures and fellow Christians wherever they might be found. It was not always in their power to help their fellow Christians; now, however, they had this power and this was a crisis which would put every man on his mettle and try him. For every Christian man and every lover of freedom there could be no course but to contribute his quota to the condemnation, upon that anti-Christian power which for two centuries has ravished its provinces with the cruel tyranny of rape and massacre, and all the arts of hell. He would incite them to one more great battle for the right, and let them remember that, winning or losing, the reward would be the same because it would be the reward of a satisfied conscience (applause).

The following resolution was then proposed by Mr H Blundell and seconded by Mr E Oakley: "That this meeting records its profound sympathy with people of Crete in their heroic struggle for freedom from Turkish oppression and mis-rule, and views with the greatest satisfaction the gallant efforts of Greece on their behalf. It deeply deploras the recent use of our fleet to attack the Cretans, and calls upon the British government to refuse to participate in any measures for the coercion of Greece."

An animated debate among the gentlemen present followed, and finally the resolution was put to the meeting and carried with acclamation. A cordial vote of thanks to Mr Russell concluded the proceedings

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