

# **The Trent Affair: How The Prince Consort Saved The United States**

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**One of the Prince's last and most notable services to his adopted country was the redrafting of a provocative British despatch at a moment of high tension in Anglo-American relations.**

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THE RECORD OF THE SOUTHERN CONFEDERACY in the field of foreign policy was one of almost unrelieved failure. It is indeed ironic that the closest approach to the realization of Confederate diplomatic ambition—namely, intervention and recognition on the part of Great Britain—was not achieved by the efforts of Confederate Commissioners but through the agency of a Federal naval officer and was frustrated by the intervention of Queen Victoria's husband.

President Jefferson Davis had not waited for the outbreak of hostilities to make his first overtures to the Great Powers. Scarcely had Southern secession been consummated by the establishment of the Confederate Government in Montgomery, Alabama, in February 1861, than he dispatched to Europe a three-man Commission headed by that "Founding Father of Secession," William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama, accompanied by Pierre A. Rost of Louisiana and Judge Dudley Mann of Georgia, charged with the task of seeking recognition and treaties of commerce and amity from Britain, France, Spain, Belgium and Russia. It was understood that the most vital of their diplomatic targets was Britain.

Arriving in London in April, coincidentally with the fall of Fort Sumter, the Confederate Commissioners established an office in Suffolk Street, off Trafalgar Square hard by Garland's Hotel, and conveniently adjacent to the Houses of Parliament and to Downing Street. Their record of success, however, was virtually negligible. Lord Russell, the British

Foreign Secretary, though he received them with courtesy, remained unmoved by the arguments of Southern oratory and the blandishments of Southern charm. Britain, in company with other European Powers, had declared her neutrality in the War between the States and was not disposed to depart from this policy. The Confederate Commissioners received little comfort from their interviews in London and, while those astute sovereigns the Emperor Napoleon III and King Leopold I of the Belgians were more cordial in their reception, they made it abundantly clear that they would wait upon British initiative before taking any action themselves. By the high summer of 1861 the foreign fortunes of the Confederacy had become utterly becalmed: " a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

This situation underwent sudden change as a result of the events of July list, 1861. The first Battle of Manasses (or Bull Run) disposed at a single stroke of the belief that the United States would be able to bring an early conclusion to the Southern Rebellion by force of arms. When the newspaper correspondents' despatches reached London early in August, they left no illusions as to the importance of the Confederate victory nor of the magnitude of the Federal rout.<sup>1</sup>

With the Union army withdrawn to the defences of Washington and the forces of the Confederates almost within sight of the nation's capital, the reaction of European nations inevitably underwent a change, though not necessarily in favour of the Confederates. It was now abundantly clear that the war in America would endure considerably longer than had been originally expected and that, particularly in the case of Britain, it would be necessary to reconcile policy to an indefinite prolongation of the annoyances and " incidents " that inevitably arose from the Union blockade of Southern ports and the consequent shortage of raw cotton in Lancashire.

Yet this did not cause the British Government to change in any major degree its intention to remain neutral in the American conflict. Though the possibilities of ultimate recognition of the Confederacy were not ignored, there was no precipitate move in this direction. Lord Palmerston might write privately with a certain malicious glee of " the defeat of Bull's

Run, or rather of Yankee's Run," but his views as expressed to the Foreign Office were much more cautious.

"It is in the highest Degree likely [he minuted] that the North will not be able to subdue the South, and it is no doubt certain that if the Southern Union is established as an independent state, it would afford a valuable and extensive market for British manufactures. But the operations of the war have as yet been too inconclusive to warrant an acknowledgment of the Southern Union."<sup>2</sup>

Inauspicious though these circumstances might be, it was clear to President Davis that the military advantages gained at Manasses must be utilized to make a further Confederate diplomatic offensive in Europe. The immediate objects of this manoeuvre were to emphasize both the unshakable intention and the ability of the Southern States to establish their independence of Washington and therefore to merit immediate recognition, to stress the privation and annoyances caused to the Powers by the Union blockade and to hold out glowing prospects of vast supplies of cotton available to Europe once this blockade was broken. Instructions were sent to Yancey and his colleagues to pursue this line of argument, but the results of their efforts were no more propitious than before. President Davis therefore decided to abandon the medium of negotiation by Commission and to send to London and Paris two of his ablest representatives.<sup>3</sup> In October 1861, he dissolved the Commission and appointed to the Court of St. James's James M. Mason, a member of a distinguished Virginian family who numbered among his ancestors a "signer " of the Declaration of Independence and had himself sat in the United States Senate; to the Court of the Tuileries President Davis accredited John Slidell, a New Yorker by birth who had migrated early in life to New Orleans and had also served as Senator from Louisiana.

The despatch of special envoys to Europe was not confined to the Confederacy. Both President Lincoln and his Secretary of State, William Seward, were fully alive to the dangerous potentialities of their blockade of Southern ports. They did not rule out the possibility of an armed conflict with Great Britain arising therefrom and they sought to lessen the chances of such a catastrophe by private negotiations. Seward sent his

close friend, Thurlow Weed, to London to support the United States Minister, Charles Francis Adams; while that old veteran, General Winfield Scott, arrived in Paris, ostensibly in pursuit of pleasure but actually—as the British Embassy reported to Palmerston and Palmerston told Queen Victoria—with the diplomatic mission of offering to France the restoration of French Canada in the event of hostilities developing between Great Britain and the United States.<sup>4</sup>

It was at this moment that the Trent Incident occurred

## II

The two Confederate Commissioners, together with Mr. Slidell's wife and daughter, and two secretaries, George Eustis and James McFarland, ran the blockade out of Charleston, South Carolina, in the steamer *Gordon* during a storm on the night of October 11th, 1861. They arrived at Nassau in the Bahamas on the 13th, and at Havana on the 17th, whence on November 7th they sailed in the British Royal Mail steamer *Trent* (Captain Moir) for St. Thomas on their way to England. Meanwhile, news of their sailing plans had reached Captain Charles Wilkes of the U.S. warship *San Jacinto*, who was searching Caribbean waters for the Confederate cruiser *Sumter* (Captain Raphael Semmes).<sup>5</sup>

Captain Wilkes at once determined to intercept the *Trent* and arrest the Commissioners and their secretaries. He reached this decision in opposition to the views of his second in command, Lieutenant Macneill Fairfax, who pointed out that, in view of the widespread sympathy for the Confederacy in Europe, and particularly in Britain and France, the captain's projected action might well precipitate war between the United States and these two great naval Powers.<sup>6</sup> Wilkes, however, remained adamant and set his course to intercept the *Trent* in the Bahama Channel.

Shortly after noon on November 8th the two vessels sighted one another. The *San Jacinto* bore down and at 1.15 fired a round shot across the *Trent's* bows. As the *Trent* slowly approached, the *San Jacinto* fired a shell which exploded half a cable's length ahead of her. Resistance was impossible. The ship's company of the *San Jacinto* were at quarters, her ports open, exposing her guns with the tampions removed. Only two

hundred yards separated the vessels. Captain Moir therefore hove to and was boarded by Lieut. Fairfax and an armed guard of U.S. marines. Under vehement protest from Captain Moir, from the Royal Mail agent, Commander Williams, against such action, and from the Confederate Commissioners themselves, Messrs. Mason, Slidell, Eustis and McFarland were removed under guard to the *San Jacinto* with their baggage. Mrs. and Miss Slidell and Mrs. Eustis remained in the *Trent*, which then proceeded upon her lawful occasions.

Captain Wilkes conveyed his prisoners first to Fortress Monroe, then to New York, and finally to Boston, where the Confederates were lodged in Fort Warren on November 15th.

News of the seizure of the Confederate diplomats was received in the North with demonstrations of mad exultation—mad indeed in view of its more than probable repercussions in Britain. President Lincoln was credited with the remark: "I would rather die than give them up." William Russell, the correspondent of *The Times*, wrote in his diary on November 18th that "Wilkes is the hero of the hour,"<sup>7</sup> and indeed this was no exaggeration. The commander of the *San Jacinto* was publicly commended by the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, who shortly thereafter promoted him to the rank of commodore. When Congress met on December 2nd, Wilkes was honoured with a vote of thanks, and in New York he was paraded down Broadway to the City Hall. In his native New England he was received with the wildest acclamation, and the Governor of Massachusetts distinguished himself at a public banquet in Wilkes's honour by declaiming: "That there may be nothing left to crown this exultation Commodore Wilkes fired his shot across the bows of the ship that bore the British lion at its head." The North was consumed with a passionate outburst of anti-British feeling. Notwithstanding the domestic conflict with which they were already involved, the Yankees seemed all set to twist the British lion's tail.

To the Southward, the whole Confederacy was thrown into transports of excitement and optimism. There was immense satisfaction at the thought that "the growl of the British lion would now be heard to frighten the raving Yankees into submission." That inveterate gossip and chronicler

John B. Jones remarked to the Secretary for War "that it would bring the Eagle cowering to the feet of the Lion" and Mr. Seddon replied, smiling, that it was, perhaps, the best thing that could have happened;<sup>9</sup> and another diarist in the Confederate War Department recorded hopefully: "if England desires a quarrel it is provided; or ... Seward, convinced that he cannot conquer a union, may desire to provoke a foreign war as a good pretext for making a general peace."<sup>10</sup>

President Davis, though perhaps more reserved in his optimism, at once grasped the opportunity to drive home the enormity of Wilkes's action, seeing that Britain would interpret the incident as an insult to her flag, and venturing to hope that from it might result the long-desired recognition of the South. In a message to the Confederate Congress in Richmond on November 18th, he declared:

"The United States have thus claimed a general jurisdiction over the high seas, and entering a British ship, sailing under its country's flag, have violated the rights of embassy, for the most part held sacred even amongst barbarians, by seizing our ministers while under the protection and within the dominions of a neutral nation. These gentlemen were as much under the jurisdiction of the British Government upon that ship and beneath its flag as if they had been on its soil, and a claim on the part of the United States to seize them in the streets of London would have been as well founded as that to apprehend them where they were taken."<sup>11</sup>

It was therefore with equal jubilation— though jubilation which stemmed in each case from different causes—that both the Union and the Confederacy awaited the next move to be made by the British Government. "I don't think it likely that they (the North) will give in," wrote the British Minister, Lord Lyons, to Lord Russell on November 19th, "*but I do not think it impossible that they may do so, particularly if the next news from England brings a note of warlike preparation, and determination on the part of Government and people.*"<sup>12</sup>

### III

There was certainly no dearth of reaction in Britain. No sooner had the *Trent* made port on November 27th than the Admiralty were in receipt of

a report from Commander Williams giving a graphic account of the incident. Dated on November 9th, and therefore written within twenty-four hours of the events which it described, the report in its essentials does not greatly differ from that of Lieutenant Fairfax, a remarkable fact when one considers the relative positions of the two writers.<sup>13</sup> Captain Moir also gave his story to the newspapermen as did Mrs. Slidell and her daughter, and the account of the ladies certainly lost nothing in the telling. At once there arose a storm of feeling throughout the country; a clarion call to the Government to extract satisfaction and apology for this outrage to the British flag, and to demand the release of the Confederate Commissioners. "Bear this, bear all," became the national outcry and the editors of the London journals loosed tirades against the United States that matched in vitriolic content the anti British sentiments expressed on the other side

of the Atlantic. The Morning Chronicle declared: "Abraham Lincoln . . . has proved himself a feeble, confused and little-minded mediocrity. Mr. Seward, the firebrand at his elbow, is exerting himself to provoke a quarrel with all Europe," and *The Times*, in a wholesale denunciation of "Yankees," proclaimed Captain Wilkes "the ideal Yankee . . . swagger and ferocity, built upon a foundation of vulgarity and cowardice, these are his characteristics, and these are the most prominent marks by which his countrymen, generally speaking, are known all over the world."<sup>14</sup>

The possibility that the United States Government might intercept the Confederate envoys had already been discussed by the British Cabinet before the news of the *Trent* affair had become known, and on November 13th Lord Palmerston had informed Queen Victoria of the opinion of the Law Officers of the Crown. This was, in effect, that, according to British precedents, if a U.S. warship were to stop and search a British vessel on the suspicion of her carrying enemy despatches, which by the recent proclamation of neutrality were declared to be contraband of war, and having found such on board, were to take the vessel to the nearest American port and hand her over to a prize court, such action would be legal.<sup>15</sup>



This, of course, was what Captain Wilkes had not done, though he had, curiously enough, come very near to it. His written instructions to Lieut. Fairfax had been to take possession of the persons of Mason and Slidell and their secretaries and to bring them on board the *San Jacinto*, to examine their baggage and despatches and retain the latter if necessary, and to take possession of the *Trent* as a prize. Lieut. Fairfax, on his own admission, deliberately disobeyed these orders. He removed the Confederate envoys to his own ship, together with their personal baggage, but permitted their despatches to remain unconfiscated and he did not take the *Trent* as a prize. The reasons which he gave to his superior officer for this action were, first, that it would require too large a prize crew to take possession of the *Trent* and, secondly, that her capture would seriously inconvenience a number of innocent women and children and merchants who were bound for various ports. On his return to America, however, Fairfax explained to Mr. Salmon P. Chase, the Secretary of the Treasury, his real reasons, which were that he was so impressed with England's sympathy for the South that he felt she would be glad to have so good a ground to declare war against the United States.<sup>16</sup>

A further vital point was that of responsibility. Captain Wilkes had stated publicly that he was acting on his own initiative without orders from Washington, and both Mrs. and Miss Slidell testified that this statement was also made by Lieut. Fairfax on boarding the *Trent*. Yet there was some evidence to the contrary. Lord Lyons reported that, though he could not vouch for the truth of it, he was "told confidently that orders were given at Washington which led to the capture on board the *Trent*, and that they were signed by Mr. Seward without the knowledge of the President";<sup>17</sup> while in Paris General Scott had told his American friends that the seizure of the Confederate envoys had been "discussed in Cabinet at Washington, he being present, and was deliberately 'determined upon and ordered.'"<sup>18</sup>

Lord Palmerston's views were in complete consonance with those of Lord Lyons as expressed in his letter of November 19th which, however, was still in transit across the Atlantic when the news of the Trent affair reached London on the 27th.<sup>19</sup> It is highly improbable that the Prime Minister was observed by a small boy that evening in deep confabulation

with judge Mann at the Confederate Offices in Suffolk Street and that their conversation turned upon New York and Philadelphia as possible points for attacks by a British squadron and even a combined operation with General Joseph E. Johnston's army against Washington. Mr. Guedalla in recording the incident seems doubtful of its authenticity. 20 Nevertheless, Palmerston was in no doubt as to the necessity for strong measures. At the Cabinet meetings of November 29th and 30th, it is a matter of fact that he carried at least a majority of his ministerial colleagues with him in ordering what was tantamount to the mobilization of the British fleet and also to the immediate despatch to Canada of a force of 8,000 troops, including a detachment from the Brigade of Guards. 21 At the same time, the Law Officers of the Crown advised the Government, as the Prime Minister wrote to the Queen, "that a gross outrage and violation of international law had been committed, and that Your Majesty should be advised to demand reparation and redress." The Foreign Secretary was in process of preparing for the consideration of the Cabinet a draft instruction for Lord Lyons demanding a disavowal on the part of the United States Government of Captain Wilkes's action and an apology, the liberation of the Confederate envoys and their restoration to British protection; should these demands be rejected the Ambassador was to be authorized to ask for his passports and to withdraw from Washington. 21 Lord Russell's draft was considered and approved by the Cabinet at its meeting on November 30th. It began by quoting Commander Williams' account of the Trent incident of November 8th and continued:

"Her Majesty's Government, having taken the facts into consideration, have arrived at the conclusion that the conduct of the Commander of the *San Jacinto* was not justified by international law. Certain individuals have been taken from on board a ship of a neutral Power, which was proceeding on a lawful and innocent voyage.

Her Majesty's Government are unwilling to imagine that the United States Government will not of their own accord be anxious to afford ample reparation for this act of violence committed by an officer of the United States Navy against a neutral and friendly nation. The reparation which Her Majesty's Government expect and with which they would be satisfied would be

1. The liberation of the four gentlemen captured, and their delivery to your lordship, with a view to their being again placed under British protection.

2. An apology for the insult offered to the British flag. Should these terms not be offered by Mr. Seward, you will propose them to him."23

The draft instruction to Lord Lyons to request his passports in the event of a refusal of the British demand was included in a second and personal letter from the Foreign Secretary. The two drafts were despatched to Windsor for the Queen's consideration on November 30th, with Lord Russell's respectful request that they be returned "without loss of time, as the packet goes tomorrow evening."

IV

The situation on the night of November 30th was one of extreme tension. In the United States there was public defiance and rejoicing at the twist that Captain Wilkes had administered to the Lion's tail. In Britain the voice of the people demanded redress for an outrage against the British flag. The Governments of the two countries were in accord with the popular view. A British force was on the high seas en route for Canada. The British fleet was at its war stations. In Richmond the Confederate Government watched with bated breath and scarcely dared to give utterance to its hopes. All now depended on the action of the British Government and that action had been all but determined. The centre of the drama had moved from Downing Street to Windsor Castle.

Lord Russell's drafts arrived at the Castle late that evening, and were earnestly discussed by the Queen with her husband. The Prince Consort was at this moment an already dying man. He had been ailing all winter and since early in November had been the victim of persistent insomnia. Yet despite his increasing weakness, he was still urged on by his inexorable duty as a parent and a public servant. He visited the Prince of Wales at Cambridge and returned on November 26th in a very weakened state. On the 29th he went to watch the Queen reviewing the Eton Volunteers and, despite the warmth of the day and his fur coat, he remarked that he felt as if cold water were being poured down his back. On the momentous 30th he had inspected the new buildings at Sandhurst in the pouring rain.

But he could not rest. His acute Germanic brain was still active in his ailing body and, after discussing Russell's drafts with the Queen, he took them to his bedroom. A sleepless night followed and at dawn he was up again and labouring on a Memorandum for the Queen's reply to the Government. To his clear and detached mind it was apparent that Britain had nothing to lose, but, on the contrary, much to gain by preserving peace. In the American struggle the Prince cared little for the respective claims of either the North or the South. His interest was entirely for Britain and, in consonance with his life-long tenets of belief, he held that the good of Britain was bound up with the cause of peace. He was no appeaser, however; he believed that due retribution should be exacted from the United States, but he also thought that the Washington Government should be given a chance of making a dignified retreat.

At eight o'clock he brought his Memorandum to the Queen's room, exclaiming pitiably: "Ich bin so schwach, ich habe kaum die Feder halten können." But his work was done; it was the last service he was to perform for his country. He had avoided war. Two weeks later he was dead (December 14th, 1861).

The Memorandum, in its final form, ran as follows, the Queen having made some minor alterations:

" Windsor Castle, December 1st, 1861.

The Queen returns these important Drafts, which upon the whole she approves; but she cannot help feeling that the main Draft,—that for communication to the American Government—is somewhat meagre.<sup>24</sup> She should have liked to have seen the expression of a hope, that the American captain did not act under instructions, or, if he did, that he misapprehended them, —that the United States Government must be fully aware that the British Government could not allow its flag to be insulted, and the security of her mail communications to be placed in jeopardy; and Her Majesty's Government are unwilling to believe that the United States Government intended wantonly to put an insult upon this country, and to add to their many distressing complications by forcing a question of dispute upon us, and that we are therefore glad to believe that,

upon a full consideration of the circumstances of the undoubted breach of International Law committed, they would spontaneously offer such redress as alone could satisfy this country, viz. the restoration of the unfortunate passengers and a suitable apology.<sup>25</sup>

The suggestions put forward by the Prince Consort, and particularly those in favour of adding to the despatch clauses stating Britain's unwillingness to believe that insult to her flag was wantonly committed and expressing the expectation that redress would be spontaneously offered, found a ready response in the Cabinet. Lord Granville and Mr. Gladstone were vastly relieved, and though it is to be doubted if their view was entirely shared by Lord Russell, it was certainly endorsed by the Prime Minister, who, contrary to general belief, was not spoiling for a fight. The despatch to Lord Lyons was re-drafted in the following form.

" Her Majesty's Government, bearing in mind the friendly relations which have long subsisted between Great Britain and the United States, are willing to believe that the United States naval officer who committed this aggression was not acting in compliance with any authority from his Government, or that, if he conceived himself to be so authorised, he greatly misunderstood the instructions which he had received. For the Government of the United States must be fully aware that the British Government could not allow such an affront to the national honour to pass without full reparation; and Her Majesty's Government are unwilling to believe that it could be the deliberate intention of the Government of the United States unnecessarily to force into discussion between the two Governments a question of so grave a character, and with regard to which the whole British Nation would be sure to entertain such unanimity of feeling. Her Majesty's Government therefore trust that, when this matter shall have been brought under the consideration of the United States, that Government will of its own accord offer to the British Government such redress as alone could satisfy the British nation, namely, the liberation of the four gentlemen, and their delivery to your Lordship, in order that they may again be placed under British protection, and a suitable apology for the aggression which has been committed. Should these terms not be offered by Mr. Seward you will propose them to him."<sup>26</sup>

Secret instructions to the Ambassador empowered him both to inform Mr. Seward of the purport of the despatch before presenting it, and to offer the Secretary of State seven days for consideration of his reply. The whole nature of the communication had thus been deprived of any aggressive or minatory character.

Meanwhile, in Washington and in New York there had already been something of a revulsion of feeling. Reports of the reactions in Britain to the *Trent* affair had already reached America and had a certain effect. Thurlow Wood had been so greatly impressed by the intensity and unanimity of feeling that he had written to Mr. Seward from London advising him to yield to whatever the British demands might be absolutely and immediately. Public excitement in America had rapidly evaporated and had been replaced by a certain apprehension. The New York money market and Stock Exchange showed signs of weakness reflecting public anxiety, and President Lincoln had so far modified his own views as to assure the Canadian Minister of Finance, who enquired about the matter of the Confederate envoys: "Oh, that'll be got along with." The Cabinet, however, still remained divided between peace and war parties and it was the general view of the diplomatic corps in Washington that the prisoners would not be given up.<sup>27</sup>

Lord Lyons' instructions reached the British Legation in Washington late on the night of December 18th and the Ambassador went to the State Department on the following morning. Mr. Seward, who was now the leader of the peace party in the Cabinet, asked that the context of the British Note might be first communicated to him "privately and confidentially" as "everything depended on the wording of it." With this Lyons complied, saying that it was the desire of the British Government to avoid any suggestion of menace but that they must have a reply within seven days and that if it were not satisfactory he could not accept it. On reading the Note Mr. Seward expressed his satisfaction at finding it "courteous and friendly—not dictatorial or menacing."<sup>28</sup>

On December 21st, the Secretary of State received other tidings that strengthened his desire for peace. The French Minister, M. Mercier, of his own volition and without waiting for formal instructions from his Gov-

ernment, called to warn the United States Government that their choice lay between compliance with the British demands and war. In the event of hostilities the United States could expect no support from France, for, contrary to popular opinion, the Emperor Napoleon III would not be glad to see Britain embroiled in a war that would leave his hand free to pursue his own ends in Europe without opposition.<sup>29</sup> So much for the diplomatic deftness of General Winfield Scott.

In the face of this cumulative evidence of isolation and danger, the forces of reason and of peace in the Federal Cabinet eventually triumphed. On December 26th a Note of portentous length and abounding in exuberant dialectics was received from Mr. Seward. The meat of its purport, however, was contained in two brief sentences: "The four persons in question ... will be cheerfully liberated. Your Lordship will please indicate a time and place for receiving them."<sup>30</sup>

The victory had not been won, however, without a bitter struggle. "Mr. Seward told me he 'had been through the fires of Tophet' in order to get the prisoners surrendered," Lord Lyons reported,<sup>31</sup> and much bitterness remained, of which the following prayer offered by the Chaplain to the United States Senate (the Reverend Dr. Sunderland) on December 30th is an instructive example:

"O, Thou, just Ruler of the World, in this hour of our trial, when domestic treason stabs at the nation's heart, and foreign arrogance is emboldened to defeat the public justice of the world, we ask help of Thee for our rulers and our people, that we may patiently, resolutely and with one heart, abide our time . . . bring this unnatural rebellion to a speedy end; and then prepare us to assert upon a broader scale, and with a vaster force, the inalienable rights and responsibilities of man: through Jesus Christ. Amen."<sup>32</sup>

The disappointment felt throughout the Confederacy at this pacific settlement of a dispute that had sent their hopes of British recognition ascending like a sky rocket, only to come down like the stick, was expressed no less poignantly—if less elegantly—by the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*: "The Yankees have licked the spittle that fell from the British

lion's mouth as he uttered his first wrathful growl, and now they squirm and writhe in the dust of a national humiliation unexampled in history—despised of mankind, the loathed and ridiculous vermin of civilization."3

## V

The news of Seward's capitulation reached England on January 9th, 1862, and was at once communicated by a highly satisfied Cabinet to the widowed Queen at Osborne.<sup>34</sup> Her Majesty's first reply was indicative of her tragic state of mind. "The things of this world are of no interest to the Queen," she wrote to the Prime Minister, "beyond the satisfaction she must experience if Peace is maintained and this country is in prosperity: for *her* thoughts are *fixed above*. She thinks with satisfaction, that the slight alterations in the draft to Lord Lyons, which the Queen suggested, and which was her precious husband's last work (which rendered it more easy for the American Government to comply with our request) have helped in bringing about this peaceful result, which she knows her dear Angel much wished for."<sup>35</sup> In a subsequent letter she was more positive: "Lord Palmerston cannot but look on this peaceful issue of the American quarrel as greatly owing to her beloved Prince, who wrote the observations upon the draft to Lord Lyons, in which Lord Palmerston so entirely concurred. It was the last thing he ever wrote."<sup>36</sup> And with this view Lord Palmerston most heartily agreed.

There was ample room for jubilation. The spectre of war had been removed from the field of Anglo-American relations, and it had been a very substantial spectre. Cobden might castigate the Government for putting the country into a state of false alarm:—"Palmerston ought to be turned out for the reckless expense to which he has put us. He and his colleagues knew there could be no war"—but this was simply not true. Lord Palmerston had *hoped* that by a display of force in sending troops to Canada and concentrating the fleet, coupled with a stiff note, he might enforce the liberation of the Confederate Commissioners and an apology from Washington, and in this view Lord Lyons had concurred. In effect this is what had indeed happened, but in Russell's original draft submitted to the Queen on November 29th the Government might well have overplayed their hand. There seems little doubt that had this draft been



delivered in Washington, it could not, in face of the prevailing tone and tempo of public and official opinion, have resulted in anything save a rejection of the demands contained therein; whereas the amendments of the Prince Consort had provided a loophole for the United States Government to get out of an impossible position with dignity and honour. The result had been a diplomatic and bloodless victory for British diplomacy<sup>37</sup> which remained unequalled until thirty-six years later the Fashoda incident of 1897 provided similar circumstances and a similar result.

The peaceful solution of the *Trent* affair, however, spelled disaster for the Confederacy. Had war developed between Great Britain and the United States, one of its first consequences must have been the recognition of the Confederate Government and the breaking of the blockade. What military and naval operations would have followed it is impossible to say, but it is a certainty that the United States could not single-handed—and the support of France had already been denied her—have prosecuted the war against the Southern States and at the same time defended herself against, say, an invasion from Canada and naval operations against her coasts. She would almost certainly have been compelled to recognize the independence of the Confederacy as a *fait accompli*.

By this supreme and dying effort, therefore, the Prince Consort not only saved his own country from war, but preserved the present form of government on the other side of the Atlantic.

37. As a fitting recognition of the services of Lord Lyons, who had borne the labour and heat of the crisis in Washington and whose tact had contributed greatly to the pacific outcome, the Queen awarded him a G.C.B.

## Footnotes

1. William Howard Russell's famous despatch on Bull Run was published in *The Times* of August 6th, 1861.
2. Philip Guedalla, *Palmerston* (London, 1926), pp. 427-428.

3. Of the three Commissioners Yancey resigned, Rost was recalled and not again employed and Mann was appointed to Brussels. All were instructed to remain in London until the arrival of Mason and Slidell.
4. *Letters of Queen Victoria*, First Series, Vol. III (London, 1907), p. 596.
5. Captain Semmes later attained fame as the commander of the Confederate warship *Alabama*.
6. Lieut. (later Rear-Admiral) Fairfax wrote his account of the affair as "Captain Wilkes' seizure of Mason and Slidell" in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. II (New York and London, 1956), pp. 135-142.
7. William Howard Russell, *My Civil War Diary* (London, 1954), p. 261.
8. Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis, Confederate President* (New York, 1959). p. 184.
9. John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* (New York, 1958), pp. 55-56.
10. *Inside the Confederate Government, The diary of Robert Garlick Hill Kean* (New York, 1957), P. 17. "I am afraid that he (Seward) is not sorry to have a question with us like this, in which it is difficult for France to take a part," wrote Lord Lyons to Lord Russell from Washington. Lord Newton, *Lord Lyons* (London, 1913), Vol. I, p. 55.
11. Quoted by Robert McElroy in *Jefferson Davis, the Unreal and the Real* (New York, 1937), Vol. I. p. 328.
12. Quoted by Sir Theodore Martin in *The Life of the Prince Consort*, Vol. V (London, 1880), p. 419.
13. Unpublished Crown Copyright material in the Public Record Office is reproduced by permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.
14. Quoted by Strode (*op. cit.*), p. 184.
15. Lord Palmerston to the Queen, November 13th, 1861, *Letters of Queen Victoria* (*op. cit.*), p. 593.
16. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. II (*op. cit.*), p. 140.
17. Lord Lyons to Lord Russell, November 19th, 1861. Newton (*op. cit.*), p. 55.
18. Lord Palmerston to The Queen, November 29th, 1861. *Letters of Queen Victoria* (*op. cit.*), p. 596.
19. The first submarine telegraphic cable between Britain and America was not laid until 1866.
20. Guedalla (*op. cit.*), pp. 428-429. The eminent historian of Confederate diplomacy, Professor Frank Lawrence Owsley, states that "it is extremely

- doubtful whether Palmerston and Mann met during Mann's residence in England." (*King Cotton Diplomacy* (Chicago, 1959), p. 81.)
21. Palmerston was castigated by Richard Cobden in the House of Commons for this display of "brinkmanship"; "Palmerston likes to drive the wheel close to the edge, and show how dexterously he can avoid falling over the precipice." (Quoted by Guedalla, p. 431.)
  22. Lord Palmerston and Lord Russell to the Queen, November 29th, 1861. *Letters of Queen Victoria* (*op. cit.*), pp. 595-597.
  23. Unpublished Crown Copyright material in the Public Record Office is reproduced by permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.
  24. The choice of the word "meagre" is curious. What is clearly meant is that Russell's draft was considered to be too brusque and abrupt.
  25. *Letters of Queen Victoria* (*op. cit.*), pp. 597-598. The Prince Consort's draft, with amendments in the Queen's own hand, is printed in facsimile in Martin (*op. cit.*), V, p.422. It is the final indication of the manner in which their minds were brought continually to bear upon the subjects with which they dealt. The Prince's draft is endorsed by the Queen: "This draft was the last the beloved Prince ever wrote; he was very unwell at the time, and when he brought it in to the Queen, he said: 'I could hardly hold my pen.' Victoria R."
  26. Newton (*op. cit.*), pp. 61-62.
  27. Wm. H. Russell (*op. cit.*), p. 262.
  28. Lord Lyons to Lord Russell, December 19th, 1861. (Newton, pp. 65-66.)
  29. Lord Lyons to Lord Russell, December 23rd, 1861. (Newton, pp. 67-70.) Within the next few days similar representations were made to the Secretary of State by the Russian Minister, Prince Gortschakoff, and the Prussian Minister, Baron Brunnow.
  30. The Confederate envoys were liberated on January 1st, 1862, and arrived in England on January 29th.
  31. Lord Lyons to Lord Russell, December 27th, 1861. (Newton, p. 72.)
  32. Quoted by Lord Newton, p. 76.
  33. *Southern Literary Messenger*, XXXIV (1862) 65. (Quoted by E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1950), p.187.
  34. Lord Palmerston to the Queen, January 9th, 1862. *Letters of Queen Victoria*, Second Series, Vol. I (London, 1926), pp. 7-8.

35. The Queen to Lord Palmerston, January 10th, 1862:.(*ibid.*); pp. 9-10
36. Martin (*op. cit.*), V, p. 426.
37. As a fitting recognition of the services of Lord Lyons, who had borne the labour and heat of the crisis in Washington and whose tact had contributed greatly to the pacific outcome, the Queen awarded him a G.C.B.