

Lord and Lady Palmerston—the lovers who married at fifty

by Rudolph Robert

THE Brocket estate, so much admired by Queen Victoria, had towards the end of Lord Melbourne's life been somewhat neglected. Reduced financial circumstances forced him to economize on maintenance and repair work, and in any case failing health had made him indifferent about such things. Without the help of relatives, in particular of his sister Emily, not even the atmosphere of past affluence could have been preserved.

Since Melbourne's only son, Augustus, had predeceased his father by thirteen years it was Emily who, in 1849, inherited the estate. She, too, loved Brocket, with its green vistas between the oaks and horn-

beams, its cascading waterfall and the Palladian bridge that the architect Paine had built. There as a child she had romped about in the open spaces of the park with her brothers and their circle of high-spirited friends.

Emily, born in 1787, was very much her mother's daughter—less well intellectually endowed, but possessing the same social graces, the same scorn for conventional attitudes, the same vitality. She married her first husband, the fifth Earl Cowper of Panshanger, in 1805, only a few weeks after her

brother William and Caroline Ponsonby had entered into their ill-fated union. Cowper was a nobleman blessed with a great deal of worldly wealth but with no outstanding natural abilities. He was by nature dull and stolid, yet the match was far from being a failure.

Their home life at Panshanger was typical of the period. They raised a family of children, had their extra-marital affairs and yet managed to maintain a show of family unity, respectability and harmonious living.

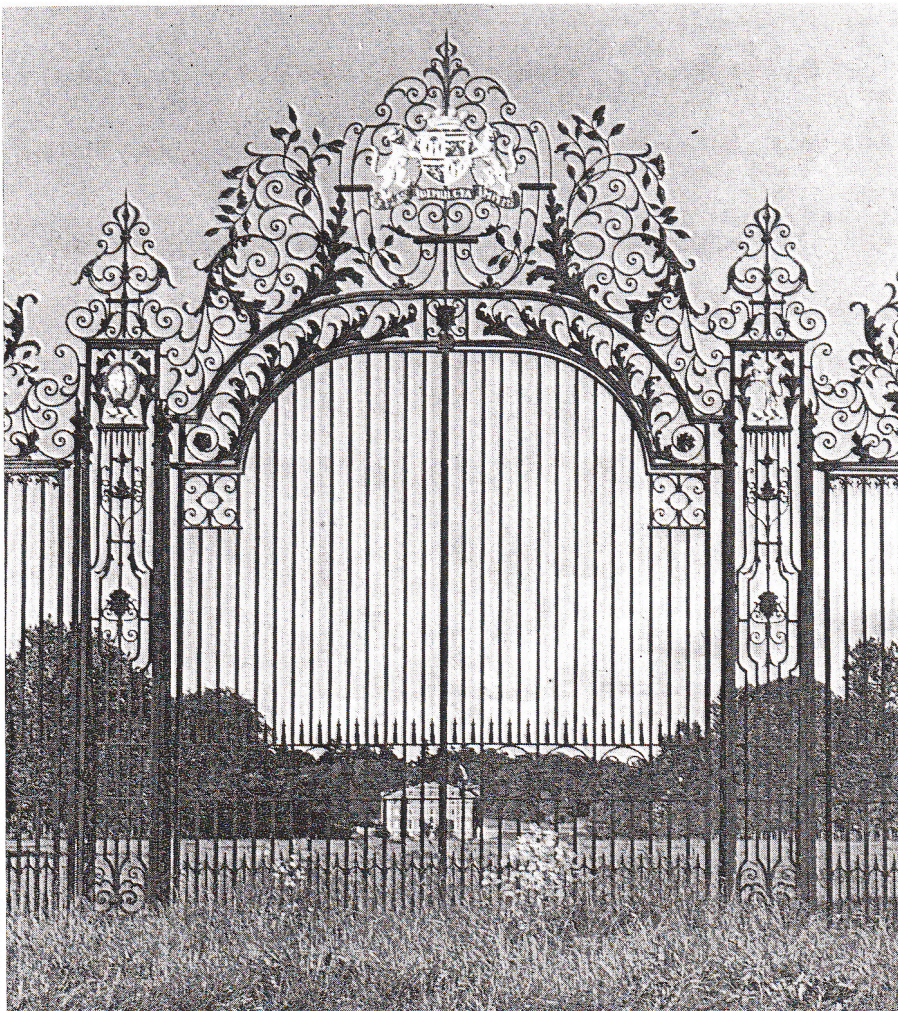
The true state of affairs, however, was revealed by a somewhat bizarre incident that occurred in the spring of 1818, when Emily's mother, Lady Melbourne, lay desperately ill.

DISTINGUISHED ADMIRER

Emily had been summoned to her mother's bedside in order to discuss various matters of family interest. Among other things, Lady Melbourne tried to extract from Emily a promise that she would be "faithful and true" to an ardent admirer as gay and distinguished as her husband, Lord Cowper, was dull and ordinary. That admirer was Lord Palmerston, then in his middle thirties, a man marked out by destiny for high political office. What Emily thought of her mother's request we can only surmise, but her conduct remained outwardly unaffected. She continued to play the part of loyal wife and devoted mother, indulging her romantic fancies but taking care to avoid scandal.

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Reading her letters, many of which have been published, we catch endearing glimpses of her attending to her children's illnesses, arranging the annual Panshanger ball, or driving over to Brocket Hall to see how her brother William and her sister-in-law Caroline were managing their affairs. All the Lambs came to regard Emily, as they had previously regarded Lady Melbourne, as the capable, shrewd and yet charming head of



The ornamental gateway, with a glimpse of Brocket Hall between the bars. The Brocket estate had been much admired by Queen Victoria. Photograph by Rudolph Robert.

The third Viscount Palmerston, one of England's most remarkable prime ministers. He married Countess Cowper, née Emily Lamb, who in 1849 succeeded to the Brocket estate. Reproduced by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

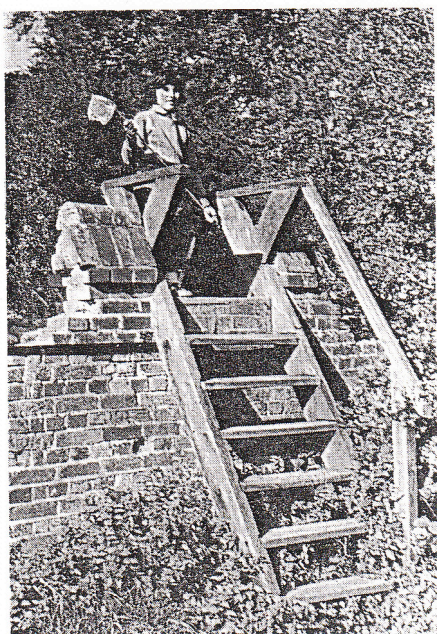
the family, who watched over their fortunes, their health and their love-affairs with matronly care and affection.

William certainly had many reasons to be grateful to Emily, especially after 1837, when Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne and the most brilliant phrase of his career was opening. These happenings coincided with a drama in Emily's own life, for it was in June 1837 that Cowper, her lack-lustre husband, died, leaving her free to think more seriously about the plea that her mother had made nineteen years earlier.

THE QUEEN APPROVES

Soon after becoming a widow Emily left the rambling, castellated Gothic house at Panshanger (demolished only in recent years) and went to live at the seaside. She relaxed, found solace in the change of scene and forgot her cares, until suddenly, at about the time when she would have been making preparations for Christmas at Panshanger, she decided that she would go to live at Brocket with her widowed brother. From a practical point of view there was much to be said in favour of such an arrangement, though William was just then far more often in town than in the country.

Sentimentally Emily was far more attached to Brocket Hall than to the grey, pretentious house that the Cowpers had built. Brocket



was brighter, more elegant, full of the memories of people she had loved in her childhood. She had been happy there as a young woman, radiant with health and beauty, and found she could be happy there in middle age, when she was the mother of a family and her good looks were fading. Lord Palmerston, too, liked Brocket and was often there, openly demonstrating the constancy of his affections and the honourableness of his intentions. In his eyes, at least, Emily's charms were as potent as ever.

Soon it became generally known that romance was in the air, and that they were destined for one another. People were amused, but no one could think of any impediment to the match, and most of their

friends were genuinely in favour of it. Nevertheless, two years elapsed before the engagement between Lord Palmerston and Countess Cowper was officially announced. The Queen, on hearing the news, passed it on to Prince Albert (whom she was to marry in the following year), adding that she fully agreed with their decision. "They are both of them about fifty," she wrote, "and I think they are quite right, because Palmerston, since the death of his sisters, is quite alone in the world, and Lady Cowper is a very clever woman and much attached to him." Emily was also tiring of widowhood and thinking it was time she took steps to improve her "worldly position."

At last, on a bright, clear day in December 1839, the two were married at St. George's, Hanover Square, and lived happily together for the next twenty-five years.

The stile that crosses a wall at Lemsford and gives access to footpaths in Brocket Park. One leads to Waterend, a second to the Chequers inn at Cromer Hyde and a third to Ayot Green.

PALMERSTON AS PRIME MINISTER

Palmerston's career had up to that point been interesting but not remarkable, though his intellectual capacity and energy had



A glimpse of Bocket Park, which covers an area of approximately 500 acres. This peaceful pastoral scene was taken by Rudolph Robert.

impressed everyone. Born in 1784, he had succeeded to the peerage as a young man of eighteen. When returned to Parliament for the first time in 1807 he was a Tory, but later changed his ideas and became a Whig supporter. In 1818 he narrowly escaped death at the hands of a would-be assassin.

Twelve years later, in 1830, Palmerston was appointed foreign secretary, and while in that position pursued policies that often brought him into headlong collision with his Cabinet colleagues. In 1851, because of his premature recognition of the French emperor Napoleon III after the military *coup d'etat*, he was at the queen's peremptory request dismissed from office.

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Time and public opinion, however, were very much on Palmerston's side, and soon he was back in harness—this time as home secretary. He became prime minister for the second time in 1855, at a time of acute crisis. The Crimean war, the second China war (which resulted in the cession to Britain of Hong Kong), the Indian mutiny and the American civil war were among the major events of the historic period to which he belonged and which he helped to shape.

He was, of course, often at Bocket, relaxing there after his bellicose sword-crossings with the statesmen of other countries. In most of these encounters he came off best, and it required a Bismarck to out-bluff and defeat him—over the Schleswig-Holstein

issue. Whether in the right or wrong, advancing or retreating, acting the part of liberal reformer or ruthless autocrat, he found in Lady Palmerston an unquestioning, resolute and constant ally.

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When, on June 30, 1859, "Old Pam" formed his second administration he was already in the "sere and yellow leaf." Disraeli, several years earlier, had dismissed him in contemptuous terms as "an impostor, utterly exhausted, and at the best only ginger-beer and not champagne, and now an old pantaloons, very deaf, very blind, and with false teeth, which would fall out of his mouth when speaking if he did not hesitate and halt so much in his talk." He also suffered from gout, but that did not stop him from shooting pheasants or playing billiards.

In July 1865 Palmerston, aged eighty but still indomitable, fought his last election campaign and, notwithstanding his alleged infirmities and senility, was enthusiastically re-elected by his Tiverton constituents. The end, however, was very near, for in October of the same year, when the Palmerstons went down to stay at Bocket, he contracted a

severe chill. For a day or two he hovered at death's door, but unexpectedly rallied. Lady Palmerston, writing to her son on October 16, 1865, reported that he had improved his diet, and had eaten a mutton chop for breakfast and taken a half glass of port besides. Two days later, surrounded by dispatch boxes full of state documents, and with his wife anxiously watching over him, he breathed his last.

Emily lived on for another four years, and still spent a great deal of her time in the gracious rose-pink mansion on the banks of the Lea that her ancestor Sir Matthew Lamb had built in the middle of the eighteenth century. No doubt she thought often of the people she had outlived—her brother William, her sister-in-law Caroline, her mother, her father, her two husbands, and innumerable friends. Only the Hall, the woodlands and the park—the incomparable natural heritage—remained as they had always been. The clear waters of the river sang endlessly under the arches of Paine's Palladian bridge, every evening the wildfowl swooped in formation before settling down on the artificial lake. In spring, as always, the flowers flamed in the gardens.

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Emily lived on until 1869, enjoying the coming and going of the seasons, and when she too passed from the mortal scene she found a last resting place in Westminster Abbey by the side of her husband.