

THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

An Incident of Napoleon's Threatened Invasion of England.

About the beginning of this century, while the Revolutionary Wars were raging, communication in cipher was naturally very prevalent; and ingenuity was taxed to the utmost on one hand to invent, and on the other to detect, the medium used in secret correspondence. As a rule, the decipherer had beaten the cipher; and no known method was secure of detection. If conventional signs merely were used, the recurrence of the different symbols gave a key easily followed out. Some ingenious spirits corresponded by reference to the pages of particular editions of particular books—others by an agreed upon vocabulary. But these last methods, although they might preserve the secret, disclosed what was often quite as dangerous, that there was a secret. I am about to tell you of a plan which for a long time was not only undetected but unsuspected.

It was at that time that the first Napoleon had assembled his fleets and transports at Brest, with the ostensible, and as is generally believed the real, view of making a descent on England. The greatest precautions were observed by the English Government in regard to correspondence with France, and an amount of espionage was practiced at the post-office which left Sir James Graham's subsequent performances in that line far behind. The national excitement was intense, and the political department was administered with an iron sway.

My uncle, Sir George Trevor, was, as all the world then knew, high in the Admiralty; and as it was from him that I heard this anecdote, its veracity may be depended upon.

The dispatches to and from the Admiralty were the subject of the greatest vigilance and the most stringent regulations. The clerks were not permitted to send or receive letters which were not first submitted to the chief clerk, and it was believed that letters addressed even to their private residences were frequently opened at the post office.

At the time I speak of, the chief clerk was an elderly man of the name of Parker—a wizened, wiry, dapper individual, so imbued with the official tincture of Whitehall that it had become second nature to him. He was a genial and kindly soul, keen and energetic in the affairs of his office, and in all others a mere child.

He had engaged as a private secretary a young fellow by the name of Beaumont, who was one of the most promising subordinates in the establishment. He was a modest, unassuming man, very good-looking, with a countenance and an air suggestive of depression and melancholy. He was evidently of good education, and probably well-born also, for his manners were easy, and indicated good breeding. He was a native of Jersey, and had been introduced to the notice of the Admiralty authorities by some influential members of parliament. He was much liked in the office, and di[s]charged his duties to perfection.

One morning Parker presented himself before my uncle with a visage pale with woe, and trembling with excitement[.]

“Why, what’s the matter, Parker? Has Bonaparte come?”

“He may have, for aught I know,” said Parker. “Things are all wrong, Sir George!”

“What are wrong?”

“The letters are wrong. There is a spy among us. I have known it for long: now I am quite sure: but I cannot find him out.”

Parker went on to explain that he had for some time suspected that someone in the office communicated their private information and dispatches outside. He had redoubled his precautions; but more than ever confirmed his suspicions, was entirely baffled in his endeavors to detect the culprit.

“But, Parker,” said my uncle, “how do you come to be so sure that your secrets have transpired?”

“By the funds, Sir George. They answer to the news as surely as the bell downstairs to the bell-rope. I find them going up and down as if they were sitting in [t]he office,” said Parker, personifying the Stock Exchange for the moment.

“Have all the letters to the clerks been examined strictly?”

“Yes, I read them all myself.”

“Find nothing in them?”

“Mighty little. Some are from home, some from friends, and most of them from sweethearts,” said Parker, twisting his face into a grim smile, “and rum things they say in them.”

“And the young men’s letters. Are they rum, too?”

“They are more careful like, as they know I am to see them; but, Lord save you, sir, they are all stuff; not a ha’porth of harm in them.”

“This matter must be seen to,” said my uncle; “I have had my own misgivings on the same subject. Bring me all the letters which come to, and are sent by, the clerks for the next week. There is no reason why you should have all the rum things to yourself.”

So my uncle had the letters for a week, and found them very much as Parker had described them. The suspicious symptoms increased; the Stock Exchange responded more sensitively than ever; but not the slightest ground for suspecting anyone transpired. My uncle was bewildered, and Parker was rapidly verging to insanity.

“It is certainly not the clerks,” said my uncle. “There is no treason there,” said he, pushing back the letters of the day. “By the way, how does young Beaumont get on? She seems a nice creature, that sister of his, to judge by her letters.”

“He is the best hand in the office, [by] a long sight; and his sister is a very sweet, ladylike creature. They are orphans, poor things, and he supports her out of his salary. She called at the office two months ago, and I gave him leave to see her for a few minutes in my room. But he knew it was against rules, and has not seen her here again.

“But what are we to do?” said my uncle. “I think I will speak to the First Lord.”

So he spoke to the First Lord, who thought the affair serious enough.

“It must be in the letters,” said he.

“It cannot be in the letters,” said my uncle.

“As you please,” said the chief; “but although you cannot find it there, perhaps another can. I would try an expert.”

My uncle had no faith in experts, or Bow Street runners, and mistrusted them. But he could not refuse to try the experiment suggested. So the most experienced decipherer in London was summoned into council, and to him the letters of the day were secretly submitted.

He read them all very carefully, looked at them in the light, and looked at the light through them. At last he put them all aside, excepting one from Elinor Beaumont.

“Who is the lady that writes this?” said the taciturn man of skill at last.

“A very sweet young woman,” said Parker, smartly, “sister of my private secretary.”

“Does she write often?”

“Yes; she is his only correspondent, and writes about twice a week.”

“Where does she live?”

“She lives in Jersey, Beaumont told me. Their father was in the business there.”

“And does she always write about the same kind of things—aunt’s rheumatism, picnics, squire’s tea parties, and the like?”

“Much the same, excepting when she spoke of Beaumont himself.”

“Hum!” said the expert.

“Well, sir,” said my uncle, who was rather impatient of the man of skill’s pomposity, “and what may ‘Hum!’ mean? Have the young woman and her aunt’s rheumatism done the mischief?”

“Hum! She dates from Fleet Street.”

“And why should she not date from Fleet Street, sir?”

“I should be sorry to prevent her,” said the unmoved philosopher. “Has this correspondence continued long?”

“O, yes—a couple of years or so, but not nearly so regularly as lately.”

“For how long regularly?”

“About two months.”

“That is about the time when you first suspected the betrayal of confidence?”

“Really, my friend, if you can’t see any further into a millstone than that, you may give up the profession,” said my uncle. “Take my word for it, the Beaumonts have nothing to do with it. Rubbish.”

“Hum!” And with that the man of skill took his hat and departed, saying he would return in two days. The two days, however, were five before he came back, and was again closeted with my uncle and Parker, with whom he had fallen into great disfavor.

“Wants to make a job,” said the latter—“a regular Humbug.”

“Sir George,” said the regular humbug, “has Mr. Beaumont a locked desk in his room?”

“Yes, sir,” said Parker, “he has.”

“Have you a key which will open it?”

“I have—and what of that?”

“I wish to have that desk opened without his knowledge, and the contents brought to me.”

“And on what pretense,” said my uncle, “do you propose to put this insult on a man against whom there is no reasonable ground or suspicion, and who has not been allowed to speak for himself?”

“There need be no insult, for he will know nothing of it; neither will anyone else.”

“I will not permit it, sir.”

“Hum! Then I can do no more in the business.”

“But,” said Parker, whose official notions made him unwilling to break off the negotiations in this manner, “what pretence have you for doing this to Mr. Beaumont and not to the other clerks?”

“Shall I tell you? There is no such person as Elinor Beaumont, and the address on Fleet Street is a notorious haunt of suspected foreigners.”

“Good gracious,” said my uncle, changing color, “you don’t say that?”

“It is a fact, and you will see the necessity of being cautious and silent in the matter. Detection hangs on a thread as it stands, and a whisper will break it.”

“What do you mean,” said Parker, “about Elinor Beaumont? I have seen her.”

“There is no Elinor Beaumont in Jersey. I sent and have ascertained the fact.”

“I am sure there is some mistake about all this, which Beaumont can clear up. Let us send for him.”

“If you do the game is up. I trust in fact that he does not know of my visits. We cannot be too cautious in these matters.”

“Pedantic ass,” muttered my uncle; “but I suppose we had better give him his own way. If you meet Parker and me here at seven tonight, we shall have that wonderful desk opened, and your great discoveries shall be made.”

They met again that evening. The desk was opened by Parker, and a bundle of letters, carefully packed up, all from Elinor Beaumont, and a quantity of circulars, play-bills, and shop receipts were handed to the expert.

That gentleman read through the letters, and seemed much struck by the last.

“Read that,” said he, handing it to my uncle. As the letter is important, I give it entire:

“120 Fleet Street, Sept. 24, 1803”

“*My Dear Charles*:--Although we had an averse wind all the way, we made without difficulty the port we were bound for. My Aunt, in spite of the weight of her fifty years, enjoyed the trip much, and is ready to sail again. I hope you will think of sending the line you promised on the 25th, and come yourself as our party is much smaller, and we should enjoy the visit.”

“When I was in London last week I saw our Cousin Henry, fresh from Windsor. There is little change to be observed in him—not as much as you would expect. Come to us on Friday.

“Yours, very affectionately, Elinor B.”

My uncle read this out loud, from beginning to end, and then he said, "Do you see anything suspicious in that? It seems to me very innocent."

"Hum! It may be. Was there anything else in the desk?" said he, addressing Parker.

"You may go and look," growled that potentate; and he led the way, the expert following.

The desk was quite empty, with the exception of two or three scraps of waste paper. On one of these the expert pounced, and returned with an air of elation to the other room. He then unfolded his scrap of paper, and disclosed a half-sheet exactly the same size of the paper on which Elinor Beaumont's letters were written, in which oblong holes at intervals had been cut.

He then placed his half-sheet over the letter, and handed both, thus placed, to my [u]ncle, whose astonished eyes read the following words, which the holes left visible:

"Fleet wind-bound. Fifty-sail of the line, 25 smaller. Should the wind change, expect us on Friday."

"The devil!" said my uncle; "and Nelson ordered off to the West Indias."

Then was there, as you may suppose, hurry and scurrying, and running and chasing, and dispatching of government couriers, and [semaphore] telegraphs and carrier-pigeons, and all the old-world means of communication then in fashion. The key thus obtained disclosed the whole correspondence, which turned out to be a connected series of letters from the French government, smuggled into Jersey. The result history knows; the intended invasion was abandoned, and Napoleon went elsewhere.

"But what put you on the scent?" asked my uncle, afterwards, with many apologies to the expert.

"I suspected the trick, from the first, although it was a very good specimen of it. The letters were too innocent, and had too little point in them. But they were done with admirable skill. The grammar was complete; and the little dots or marks which bunglers use to guide them in writing the words which are to be read were entirely absent. The way in which the deception is effected is this: The correspondents, before commencing, take a sheet of paper and cut holes in it, which, of course in the two half-sheets, exactly correspond. They each took one half-sheet, and when a letter is to be written, the writer so arranges the words that those intended to be read shall appear in the holes when the half-sheet is placed over the paper, which is of the same size. When his correspondent receives the letter, he places his half-sheet over it, and reads off the words, as you did. The difficulty, which was so well conquered in this case, is to make the sense run fluently, and to prevent any visible break in the writing. Without the half-sheet with the holes in it, no one can have the slightest clue to the real meaning.

"My suspicions, once aroused, were confirmed by the inquiries which I made. The whole story about the sister was a fabrication. The letters did not come from Jersey, the answers went to Fleet Street, to the charge of various notorious foreign agents. But if our friend

had not been fool enough to leave his half-sheet in his desk, we might have groped in vain for the mystery.”

Beaumont disappeared that night, and was never heard of again at the Admiralty, and his inquiries in Jersey. He had made an attempt to get admittance to his room, but was scared by the sounds he heard, and contrived to escape to France. The lady who acted the sister, and who visited the Admiralty, partly to put the authorities off their guard, and probably also to interchange the key to the cipher, was a Parisian celebrity who both before and afterwards was renowned for her daring in political intrigue.

2562 words

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