

AN INCIDENT OF THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON.

BY

WALTER GEORGE BELL.

This is a mere trifle of flotsam picked up on the broad ocean of our history. The incident, dismissed lightly as of no importance, very likely was forgotten in the lives of those whom it concerned, who are long since dead: the world knew nothing of it, and it was likely to have remained unknown but for the fact that the papers chanced to be preserved among the muniments at Montagu House, the great London mansion of the Dukes of Buccleuch.¹ There was a secret well kept, and now lost for ever. The brief story will introduce men whom the world counted great, not in their greatness, but in moments when they were mean and petty: King Charles II, back from exile a few years, enjoying his popularity with his subjects and the exercise of regal power so long denied to him, but craftily suspicious, uncertain whom to trust; Henry Benet Lord Arlington, his Secretary of State; Sir Samuel Morland—the last filling a lesser space in the eyes of his contemporaries, but the second, if not actually the first, inventive mind of his day.

The Great Fire of London broke out at two o'clock on the morning of Sunday, September 2nd, 1666, blazing up in the darkness amidst dry timber-built houses at Pudding Lane, by London Bridge. A high wind drove the flames forward, and, sweeping along the riverside, they had reached Dowgate by nightfall. In Cloak Lane, which still you may find off Dowgate Hill, was the General

¹ See *Hist. MSS. Com (Buccleuch MSS. at Montagu House, ii, 48-51)*.

Post Office for the mails. Sir Philip Frowde was at the time manager for the lessee, Katharine Countess of Chesterfield, who farmed the posts under a monopoly which gave the profits to the King's brother, the Duke of York, and his heirs. Frowde and his lady anxiously watched the Fire bearing towards them, and at midnight, when the peril had become grave, they fled for safety. The acting postmaster, James Hicke, was no stranger to horrors. At hazard of life he had remained in London throughout the previous year's Great Plague, keeping the letter office open and attending to its business,² when neighbours were dying all around, and the red cross and that tragic appeal, "Lord have mercy on us!" were chalked on many citizens' doors.

He stayed himself this night of the Fire till one o'clock. Such was then the alarm of his wife and children that they would stay no longer, fearful lest the flames should entirely cut off their escape. With difficulty, and no little danger in the burning streets, Hicke managed to reach an inn bearing the sign of the Golden Lion in Red Cross Street, outside Cripplegate, where he temporarily re-established the post-house. He saved such packets as he could hastily remove, and forwarded to Williamson, Lord Arlington's secretary, the letters of State received by the Chester and Irish mails, with a despairing note, "that he knows not how to dispose of the business."³ He left behind that, the thought of which must have caused him many a twinge of conscience, and many wakeful half-hours in those terrible nights, lighted like noonday and noisy with the crackling and fall of houses, during which London continued to burn. Sir Philip Frowde, too, knew what it was.

Left behind to the flames, if fortuitously they should reach it first, or to the hand of any marauder who might

² *State Papers (Domestic)*, 1666-7, p. 401.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

break into the untenanted post-house before the Fire wholly consumed it, was a complete secret apparatus for tampering with, copying, and forging letters in the interests of the State.

This was the device of Samuel Morland, a man whose extraordinary ingenuity would have brought him immense fortune had he lived in an age when the adoption of the mechanical arts to commercial uses was better rewarded. A calculating machine, the drum-capstan for up-winding heavy ships' anchors, the gland and stuffing box of the plunger pump, the speaking trumpet, and practical water-raising contrivances—all were his, the product of his resourceful mind. Like the late member of Parliament of our own acquaintance who invented the safety lucifer match and omitted to patent it, he missed his opportunity, but that was his misfortune—to be in advance of his time. He was made late in life *Magister Mechanicorum* by the King. The philosopher's reputation and trustworthiness were not untarnished, for he had sought to serve two masters. Pepys has drawn him as a lonely figure in a great company assembled on the Fleet to await Charles's embarkation for England: "Mr. Morland, now Sir Samuel, was here on board, but I do not find that my Lord [Montague, Earl of Sandwich] or anybody did give him any respect, he being looked upon by him and all men as a knave." He had, with Isaac Dorislaus the younger, during Cromwell's government been one of the Board of Examiners of the Post Office, by whom any suspicious letters directed abroad were opened and read. Also, he kept up secret communications with Charles in France. Cromwell, served by many others whose infidelity was yet blacker than the inventor's, of course knew nothing of this.

Morland had been Secretary Thurloe's own secretary. A dramatic incident in his career of duplicity, as told by Welwood in his "Memoirs," reads much like an excerpt from *The Arabian Nights* and little like the truth. This

was his eaves-dropping at the plot (so called by Royalists) to induce Charles II and his brother to effect a landing on the Sussex coast, under pretence of meeting many adherents, and to put them both to death the moment they disembarked. Cromwell, Thurloe, and Sir Richard Willis met to scheme at Thurloe's office, and the conversation was overheard by Morland, who pretended to be asleep at his desk. On discovering Morland's presence there, Cromwell drew his poignard, and would have killed him on the spot but for Thurloe's solemn assurance that his secretary had sat up two nights in succession, and was certainly fast asleep. Morland is said to have betrayed Willis, the originator of the plot. His reward was one of the first knighthoods bestowed by Charles at his Restoration. Pepys, I have said, held him to be "a knave"; later they had a chance meeting at the Privy Seal office, whence Morland had come with two baronets' grants given to him by the King to make money out of, "all which," says the worldly-minded diarist, "do make me begin to think he is not so much of a fool as I took him to be."

But I am losing the story in recalling the actors. The Stuart letter-writer knew nothing of envelopes. The written letter was penned upon one side of a large sheet of paper, then the sheet was folded, addressed on the back, and sealed with wax or wafer—a good method, for the convenience of which all who have had the handling of large numbers of old documents are profoundly grateful. It had, of course, the disadvantage that with a little expert manipulation of seal and wafer the contents were soon at the disposal of prying eyes. The Spaniards, masters of intrigue, had a way of so sealing up letters that it was said to be utterly impossible to open them without discovery being made. Lord Arlington, having heard of Morland's proficiency in tricks of the kind, brought the method to the King's notice. Morland, by way of experiment and to show his powers, induced Arlington to go alone into a private room, there write ten or twelve lines, fold and seal

the paper in the Spanish manner, and leave the document with the inventor.

A day or two later he waited upon Arlington, and gave him first a copy of what he had so penned and sealed, then put into his hand his own sealed letter. Arlington examined both and opened them with all care imaginable, afterwards confessing that he could not tell which was his own handwriting. "He immediately left me," Morland records, "being not a little surprised, and acquainted the King with what had happened, and showed him all the papers."

Charles's curiosity was aroused, and his love of devious methods led him to desire to know more. The flagrant dishonesty of the thing must be condoned if all be fair in love, war, and statecraft. A demonstration was first arranged at the Secretary's office, at an hour when all the clerks and messengers had left for the day. Models of the apparatus were shown and explained, and the whole process was gone through under the King's eyes, "with which his Majesty"—so Morland writes—"was so well pleased that he sent for the Postmaster-General, and ordered him to prepare two rooms at the General Post Office to put these things in real practice, which three months after was done."

The King came down again to witness a second demonstration, when all went well. The circumstances were highly dramatic. A private gentleman's coach drove into Whitehall. Late at night, between ten and eleven o'clock, the King entered it. With him was Lord Arlington, the State Secretary, and one other. Together they rode unnoticed into the City, to the General Post Office. There, in the shuttered and concealed rooms, they witnessed the forgers at work, and staved nearly three hours—almost till dawn was in the skies—seeing with admiration and very great satisfaction, so the unblushing Morland declares, the various operations, which were:—

I. Opening with great ease and expedition all manner of seals, both wafer and wax, and again sealing the letters

up so that the most curious eye could not discover that they had been tampered with.

2. Counterfeiting all sorts of seals, giving as sharp impressions as with the original seals, both in wafer and wax.

3. Counterfeiting all manner of writing, so as to make it impossible for any person to know or distinguish his own handwriting.

4. Rapid and exact copying of any writing, even when a whole sheet of paper was closely written on both sides, for which little more time than one minute was required, and so proportionately for any number of sheets.

A fine night's work for a King! Morland, I fear a sad scoundrel, no doubt was dead to those feelings common to all normally constituted beings, which make them regard a forger as a loathsome and despicable creature; but it would be interesting could we read Charles's unquiet thoughts as he drove away.

The King was well satisfied. All these black arts were thereafter, by Royal command, practised at the General Post Office, "with great advantage to the Crown," until by the Postmaster's negligence, when he fled before the advancing fire during the night of September 2nd, 1666, the machines and utensils employed were left behind and destroyed by the flames.

Years passed by. Morland, grown old and always needy—large monies he had received, but they slipped through his fingers—desired, for his own profit, that the tampering and forgery should be restored, and he set out in a petition to Lord Shaftesbury, then Secretary of State, the great advantages that would accrue to the King thereby; that he would, by frequent inspection of letters when the practice was unsuspected, come to know the temper of all his principal and active subjects throughout his dominions; that where treason was suspected it would be easy to make a disaffected subject and his accomplices correspond by copies only, and to keep the originals till their designs

were ripe for discovery and conviction. "And this person," says Morland, the tempter, "may sometimes happen to be a favourite, or a Privy Councillor, or a great military officer, and nearly concern the Prince's life and government." Furthermore, the devices of Ambassadors and Foreign Ministers would be thwarted. These people were always careful to send their despatches of consequence as late as possible to the General Post Office, so that no time was available for spying into their contents. But by the wonderful process exact copies, even of ten or twelve written sheets, could be made in as many minutes.

Macchiavelli himself gave no more Satanic counsel to his Prince. But the old order had changed, swept away in a night—the night during which Charles had lain such an unconscionable time in dying. One recalls that tremendous indictment that John Evelyn wrote in his *Diary*:—"I can never forget the inexpressible luxury and profaneness, gaming, and all dissoluteness, and as it were total forgetfulness of God (it being Sunday evening) which this day se'night I was witness of, the King sitting and toying with his concubines, Portsmouth, Cleveland, and Mazarin, etc., a French boy singing love-songs, in that glorious gallery, whilst about twenty of the great courtiers and other dissolute persons were at basset round a large table, a bank of at least £2,000 in gold before them; upon which two gentlemen who were with me made reflections with astonishment. Six days after was all in the dust."

A cautious and stolid Dutchman, William of Orange, sat on the British throne. He refused his consent. There is a note at the end of Morland's petition in Shaftesbury's hand: "The King made a very honourable answer, that Sir Sam should be considered, but he thought that the secret ought to die with him, as too dangerous to be encouraged." And so far as I know, and so far as is known at St. Martin's-le-Grand, the secret died with him, and no doubt it is well.