



THE FUTILITY OF IT ALL

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THE FUTILITY OF IT ALL

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It isn't often that writers on cryptology adopt an irreverent attitude towards their subject. Usually their tone is serious, if not pompous. But in 1855 an English diplomat and journalist published a chapter on interception and ciphers that cast stones at some of the official sacred cows of those topics. In a book entitled *Embassies and Foreign Courts: A History of Diplomacy* (London: Routledge), he waxed indignant at the offensiveness of letter-opening and sneered at the pointlessness of enciphering. The chapter is different and refreshing enough, we feel, to merit reprinting in this journal.

The author was Eustace Clare Grenville Murray, born in 1824 as the natural son of Richard Grenville, second duke of Buckingham and Chandos. The *Dictionary of National Biography* suppresses, with Victorian prudery, the name of the mother. Murray attended Oxford and one of the Inns of Court and attracted the attention of Lord Palmerston, then foreign minister, who persuaded him to enter the diplomatic service. In 1851, Murray was sent as an attaché to Vienna, agreeing at the same time to serve also as a correspondent of the *Morning Post*. This breach of Foreign office proprieties led to his being transferred the next year to Hanover. Thence he went to Constantinople, where he came into conflict with the British ambassador, causing his ostracism to Mytilene as a vice consul.

In 1853, he published *Droits et Devoirs des Envoyes Diplomatiques* (Rights and Duties of Diplomatic Envoys), the nucleus of *Embassies and Foreign Courts*. In 1854 appeared his *Roving Englishman*, a well-received travel book. After *Embassies* appeared, with the author identified only as "The Roving Englishman," he became known in official circles--a note on the titlepage of one copy says--as the Mentor of Ambassadors. In the same year as its publication, he was sent as consul general to Odessa, where for 13 years he fought with the British residents. Soon after he returned to England, he began publishing a mordant weekly journal, which apparently fit what must have been a prickly personality. One article led to a peer's horsewhipping him on the steps of the Conservative Club, and soon thereafter Murray quit England for Paris, where he remained, taking the title of the Comte de Rethel d'Aragon from the Spanish lady he married. He died there in 1881.

The *Dictionary of National Biography* says (13: 1263-4) that "He produced several novels, but was more at home in short satirical pieces, and wrote innumerable essays and sketches, caustic in matter and incisive in style, for the English and American press...He was certainly one of the most accomplished journalists of his day. He probably did more than any single person to initiate the modern type of journal, which is characterized by a tone of candour with regard to public affairs, but owes its chief attraction to the circulation of private gossip, largely by means of hint and innuendo."

The present extract, Chapter XI, pp. 130-145, certainly partakes of some of those acerbic qualities. It also reflects a more leisured and learned age in its calm assumption that the average educated reader will understand Latin, French, and German, in all of which he gives extracts. The translations are included.

Letter Opening: Swift, Martin Luther, Duclos, St. Simon and Richelieu, Kemmerich. --Anecdotes: Klüber, Cypher, De Callières, the Lacedaemonians, Richelieu, Mazarin.

Complaints respecting the unauthorised opening of letters and despatches have been at all times frequent among diplomatists. It is impossible to stigmatise

the infamy of such a practice too indignantly, though persons of high repute have been known to practise it with impunity and applause. The art has even been pushed to such shameful perfection that letters and despatches may be opened without apparent injury to the seals. Lucian (Pseud. c. xxi., v. ii., p. 228) actually chronicles a series of experiments on the disgraceful art of opening and resealing letters, so that the felony may not be discovered.

Walsingham, the famous secretary of state to Elizabeth, is said to have stained his honour by misdemeanors of this kind; and he is further stated at last to have become so shameless a scoundrel in this respect as to have invented an art of filching the written confidence of other people without disturbing the fastening of their letters at all.

Swift bitterly complains, in one of his letters to Pope, that his correspondence was not safe from the dishonourable tampering of official hands.

The letters of Martin Luther were opened by some scandalous official rogues, who had subsequently the shocking effrontery to avow the crime and question him as to their contents.

It appears that several letters had been addressed by Luther to some burghers of Leipsic, on the subject of the religious persecutions they had suffered. These falling into the hands of his enemy, Duke George of Saxony, this improper person feloniously opened them, and rejoicing in the base means he had thus acquired of striking a blow at the defenceless object of his stupid enmity, he falsely accused Luther of a plot to excite disturbances; and his intended victim was summoned by the elector to answer the accusation.

Prior to this also, a letter, said to have been written by Luther to Doctor Link, a preacher at Nuremberg, somehow or other came into the hands of Duke George, who immediately published certain unworthy slanders reflecting on the character of the great reformer. Rogues of the rank in those days were very fond of having all the publicity on their own side. They liked to indulge in gibes and dull jokes. There were fond of assembling together in organised bands of fashionable calumniators. But they were unprepared to find an obscure scholar, who would dare to flash back the battle and rear his head in haughty and scornful defiance of their manifold infamies and oppressions. Martin Luther, however, was one of those men who cannot sit down tamely under a wrong: so he very properly couched his pen and attacked these paltry rogues in a treatise, which, though published more than three centuries ago, endures until this day. He has there condemned the name of Duke George of Saxony to the scorn and contempt of all time; and he has taught to rogues of rank a lesson they will hardly forget, that if humble men start in the world without interest or friends, God in his mercy has given them strong brains and fearless hearts; the power to punish unprovoked assault--ay, and the will.

Luther neither denies or admits the authorship of the stolen letter attributed to him; but he treats the subject with a quiet and biting irony peculiarly his own. It is the style of a wise man chastising a fool.

"This letter," he says, "according to Duke George's statement, is mine. If so, the said Duke George must of necessity confess that he has abstracted my property without my privity or consent. Doubtless, he must be troubled with a bad conscience. From whence, however, has Duke George derived the power of seizing upon the property of another man against the wish of its lawful owner? Who has authorised him to retain such ill-gotten goods? If we grant him so unprecedented a right, why should he also disgrace himself by insult and outrage? He disposes of the property he has acquired unjustly according to his own despotic will and pleasure, to the irreparable loss and detriment of the real owner. This stolen, violated, and intercepted letter was printed for my oppression and for his exaltation. I will put a case, however, on a level with

his comprehension.

"If I had obtained a letter from Duke George's Chancery without his knowledge and consent,--if I had made use of it to the disparagement of his honour, and character,--would he be well pleased with such conduct? He might perhaps act with contemptuous clemency, and leave the letter in my secret possession. Whether he interfered in the matter or not, however, I should stand a chance of losing my head, though my neck were of steel or iron.

"Or, suppose I had taken a thousand florins from a merchant without his knowledge or consent, and then not only boasted of my crime, but bullied my victim and sought his ruin; let the Duke be judge himself what such conduct had deserved. 'Yes,' it may be urged, 'but letters are not goods!' My dear reader," continues Luther, playfully, "what if a letter were of more importance to you than a thousand florins? *A thief is a thief, whether he steals money or letters.*"

He then proceeds to read the Duke and his adherents a stern admintion as to the propriety of conforming to the command of the Almighty against theft, and concludes with an explanation of the seventh Psalm which he pertinently applies to the rogues of rank, who had expected an easy victory, and found utter confusion.

In another place also, the renowned pioneer of religious reform reflects on his triumph with that generous pain which men naturally gentle and kind-hearted feel for the most dastard adversary when he is completely discomfited. "God knows," he says, with touching pathos, "how gladly I would have spared Duke George, not only for the sake of his own peace, but also for that of all the Honourable House of Saxony, &c. Even so, on nearer inquiry, I should have learned how to give him such a cut over the nozzle (*sic*) in my answer, that he would have lost all inclination for a further quest, while I need not have spared his adherents." [Vide Miruss, *Europäische Gesandtschafts Recht*, part i. pp. 171, 172. I have given Luther's answer verbatim.]

Luther's able and stinging defence of the privacy of letters has been constantly reprinted, and is usually cited by all public writers on this subject. Knoblauch, King, Friesen, Kemmerich, and others, have since treated on letter-opening with various degrees of ability. All are agreed that it is one of the most unworthy of crimes and pettifoggeries; the only difference among them appears to be as to who shall give it the hardest name; the choice being between the gentle substantives "theft," "larceny," "treason," or "breach of trust."

Nevertheless, and Luther's eloquent censures notwithstanding, the practice of opening letters is not only one of notorious frequency in our time, but it has always prevailed more or less even among the most enlightened states of Europe. Duclos, St. Simon, and Richelieu have all numerous passages proving the distressing height which this official crime had attained in their time. In the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (Economie Politique et Diplomatique, tom. i. p. 538.) occur also the following passages:--"La méthode d'ouvrir, en tems de paix et en tems de guerre, les lettres et les dépêches qui peuvent contenir des instructions utiles, est en usage presque partout."--"On autorise les autres puissances à agir envers nous comme nous agissons à leur égard."--"D'ailleurs on surcharge de travail ceux qui dirigent les affaires publiques; car on sait combien les ministres ou négociateurs, obligés de chiffrer, se donnent de peine."--[The technique of opening, in time of peace and in time of war, letters and dispatches which could contain useful instructions, is used almost everywhere.--One (consequently) authorizes the other powers to act towards us as we would act towards them.--Moreover, this overloads those who direct public affairs with work, because how much trouble ministers or negotiators who are obliged to cipher make for themselves is known.]--Neither the morality or the sense of this, however, is very clear.

I have frequently ventured to express the opinion that secrecy in state-affairs is extremely inadvisable. Nothing but the immediate concerns of actual warfare can render it either serviceable or proper; and on ordinary occasions it is merely a cloak for folly, and a charter for dishonesty or incapacity. As long, however, as nations continue to admit the principle of secrecy in state-affairs, the correspondence of diplomatists has an especial claim to be respected. If it were possible that there could be any difference on such a subject, or any shades or degrees of guilt in the crime of a felon, official despatches have even a stronger claim to inviolability than the letters of private individuals; because the rights of nations are greater than those of individuals,--the affairs and interests of a whole people are of more importance than those of a few persons. Kemmerich, in his Preface to Luther's treatise, cites the following passage on this subject from Just. Presbutæ Tract. de Jure Legationis statuum Imperii:--

"Id certum est, legatum, cujus literæ dolo malo interceptæ sunt, non modo, ut sibi satisfiat, postulare posse sed ut eo occasionem sæpe præberi, revocandi domum legati, et inimicitiarum cum illa republica, quæ vindicare selus negligit." [From *The Law of Legation of the States of the (Holy Roman) Empire*: This is certain, not only that a legate whose dispatches have been intercepted by an evil trick can demand that satisfaction be given him, but that the opportunity can often be offered of recalling the legate and of hostilities with that nation that neglects to vindicate the crime.]

De Wicquefort gives several instances in which sovereigns have very properly insisted on the most signal satisfaction from any state whose officials have been detected in the nefarious practice of tampering with the despatches of their ambassadors. Cocceji, Dissert. de Legato Sancto, cap. i. § 9, maintains that an ambassador can only expect that the inviolability of his correspondence will be respected as long as he keeps strictly within his duties. I do not understand, however, that any question whatever can be honestly raised on the subject. If an ambassador be suspected of malpractices, let him be expelled the kingdom in which he is bringing disgrace on himself and his office. The government of an honourable people should never condescend to filch his letters.

Nations, however, appear to have positively no sense of shame on this matter. Not only is the correspondence of ambassadors systematically intercepted and opened in many countries, but couriers have been often robbed, ill-used, and even murdered to obtain it. [Vide Klüber, *Kryptographik*, p.36, notes a, b, and c.] The French ambassador of the day once made a complaint to the feeblest and worst of English ministers (the Duke of Newcastle), that the despatches sent to him from France had been not only opened, but were actually forwarded on to him sealed with the royal arms of England!

"It was in consequence of a mistake at the Foreign Office," replied the Duke, laughing at his infamy as a good joke.

The opening of despatches is looked upon as such an infinite jest in some of the petty states of Germany, that not long ago a certain minister found that all the despatches he received through the post for some time invariably reached him sealed with the official seal of one of the German post-offices. He remonstrated with the ministerial worthy with whom he had immediately to deal. "Que foulex fous," ["What do you expect? It's habit."] returned the latter agreeably, "c'est l'habitude." Sometimes ambassadors have been obliged to resort to a singular device to escape the prying of unauthorised persons into their correspondence. They have sent two sets of despatches,--one, in all the pomp of official forms, to amuse the spies; and another modest little packet, containing the true matter of their communication, which escaped violation from its apparent insignificance.

It is obvious that any state which refuses to respect the privacy of letters will inevitably diminish its revenues and materially injure its commerce; for if the post-office will not transmit letters without inquiry into their contents, people will soon cease almost to write at all,

Klüber, pp.49-56, has given a long list of precautions against letter-openers; and a book was also published at Lubeck, on the same subject, in 1797: it is entitled, *Wie sichert man sich vor Brief-Erbrechung* [*How One Secures One's Self From Letter-Opening*]. One of the most common means to secure the contents of despatches from coming to the knowledge of improper people is the employment of a cypher. This is a secret species of writing very much employed in diplomacy, though an antiquated invention, and really of little worth. Despatches in cypher are usually written when the subject of them is particularly important, and a thoroughly trustworthy messenger cannot be procured to convey them to the place of their destination. It is generally admitted, however, that no cypher has been yet invented which cannot be read after some study by an experienced person. Formerly, it was customary to write only a small part of the despatch in cypher; but the context usually threw so much light on the other and secret parts, that this practice was afterwards abandoned. There is a curious letter extant from the Florentine ambassadors, at Naples, to the Chancellor Adriani, in which they thus refer to this subject:--

"We should inform you that your clerks and notably D. Luca are very careless in their use of our cypher. We desire also to observe to you, that it would be better to write the whole despatch without cypher than to cypher only a very small portion; because the preceding and following paragraphs make the whole easily understood, and betray the whole cypher." [See Alfred Reumont, pp. 487, 488, and De Callières, cli. x.]

Nothing can be more ridiculous, however, than the history of these tricks and devices of cunning men to keep those things secret which would go on so much more safely and better if publicly known. The art of cyphering is one diplomatic accomplishment; the art of decyphering is another. It is a notorious fact that no foolish and rigmarole precaution of this kind will prevent a clever rogue from worming out the contents of a despatch after a few hours' study. He no more requires what is called the "key" to this old woman's delusion than a housebreaker wants the key of your writing-desk. A key may be all very well in its way; but if it is not forthcoming, he has got one or two rusty little instruments, which will soon do all he wants without it. The only thing which gives him the smallest uneasiness is the fear of a policeman; for if even love laughs at locksmiths, crime positively sneers at them.

There is as much difference between decyphering as an accomplishment and decyphering as a profession, as there is between a burglar and a person who enters a house with a latch-key. There are men who positively have a genius for roguery; the accomplished decypherer is one of them. De Callières (ch.,xx.) tells us there have been many distinguished sneaks of this kind. Their art also is not really so difficult as might be imagined at first sight, for the crooked-minded and dodgy old ladies who first bethought themselves of sending each other conundrums of this kind on public business, were often so confused in their ideas, that no means could be possibly applied to make sense of their mysterious communications. Courts and cabinets were kept in a constant state of distress and uneasiness by the incomprehensible despatches of their agents in foreign parts. Strange news was often bruited about, which was supposed to have been received in this way. When it had thrown a nation into the utmost dismay, and given every member of the government a surfeit of horrors and indigestion, it usually turned out to be false. Persons learned that they had been frightened out of their wits, because there had been a mistake either in composing the conundrum, or in finding out what it meant. Sometimes the riddle

might be read also in several ways, so that a government did not know whether to rejoice or despair--whether a general illumination should be commanded, or a public fast.

Any class of men in the world but diplomatists would have given up a series of tricks, the performance of which was attended with such serious inconvenience. They have not, however, been able to persuade themselves to renounce these singular mysteries, even up to the present time. They have invented an expedient. Diplomacy is great at expedients; and her device in this instance was worthy of the occasion. Finding, for the reasons already mentioned, that it was unsafe to use a cypher which no person could read correctly, the modern practice has been to adopt one familiar and easy enough to be generally understood (especially by foreign courts). Diplomacy has thus the trouble and importance of secrecy, without any of its supposed advantages.

M. de Callières (ch.xx.) here comes to our aid with a valuable suggestion. He lays it down as a rule, that despatches written in cypher should always be as short as possible; and perhaps few persons of our time will differ with him in so reasonable an opinion.

The use of cypher appears to have early puzzled the wits of mankind. It is asserted on respectable authority, that the Lacedæmonians inconvenienced themselves by its employment; [See Baron Ch. de Martens, *Guide Diplomatique*, &c., tom. i. p.279; also *Bapt. Porta de Occultis Literarum Notis* (Montiobelic. 1593, 8vo.), p.3-11.] and probably it was a part of that "Greek faith" and trumpery system of intrigue which ultimately led to the utter confusion of that renowned old republic.

The wily diplomacy of Richelieu, however, seems to have first restored the frequent use of cypher in modern times. A belief in cypher still remains among the remarkable hallucinations of our own day, but it is not so general as in the time of Richelieu. An ambassador must be at a lonely and out-of-the-way court indeed, if he cannot find some trustworthy person who will carry an important despatch among the swarm of modern travellers. Many a smart officer and aspiring gentleman rejoices in the fancied importance he will acquire as bearer of a packet for the Foreign Office. A paragraph in the *Morning Post*, and invitations to dinner for six weeks, are among the least of the honours which a person of quality may acquire from so fortunate and exciting a circumstance in his biography. Hence cypher, at least before the outbreak of the present war, was rather at a discount; and perhaps, with a few more years' peace and progress, attachés and other quill-driving officials would have got rid of it altogether. Cypher, however, has revived a little of late, though I am privately persuaded that its present activity is merely what Sir Henry Halford used to call a lighting up before death.

Cardinal Mazarin [See *Breviarum Politicorum seu Arcaua Politica* Card. Jul. Mazarini, (Ams. 1721, 12mo.) p.2.] was of course a great advocate of cypher and secret writing of all kinds. He also had another pretty little deception, which is so ingenious, that it has often been performed since with various degrees of success and ability.

Aware that his despatches would be opened, he used to write many useful falsehoods therein, for the especial purpose of misleading the inquisitive rogues into whose hands he knew they would fall. Stolen waters are sweet, and the thieves, however wary on ordinary occasions, were prompt enough to believe information they had acquired at the price of a misdemeanor.

Cypher must not be confounded with stenography or short-hand writing, which is of course too simple and practical for the purposes of diplomacy.

A gang of bandits were arrested some time ago in Germany, and brought to

condign punishment, in consequence of their having been so indiscreet as to employ cypher in communications to each other respecting robberies.

Every ambassador has a distinct cypher confided to him with the key thereof, for the special use of his mission. This cypher is also changed from time to time, in the vain attempt to insure farther security.

Sometimes, an ambassador not only corresponds with his own government in cypher, but also with the rest of the corps diplomatique at the court to which he is accredited. It is needless, however, to reflect upon the disorderly and disgraceful state of any country where such a precaution should be necessary; and the public morals must be reduced to a low state indeed, in a place where gentlemen are unable to send a note to each other without its being opened and read on the road. De Flassan, in his *Histoire Générale et Raisonnée de la Diplomatie Française* (vol. iv. p.218), has the following passage: "Le Baron recut en 1760 du ministère Français, outre ses instructions, quatre tables de chiffres différentes; le premier chiffre pour la correspondance avec le ministre des affaires étrangères; le second pour les pièces communiquées; le troisième pour la correspondance avec les ministres du Roi à Vienne à Stockholm à Copenhague et à la Haye. Le quatrième chiffre intitulée de réserve ne devait servir que dans les cas extraordinaires, ou lorsqu'on aurait lieu de soupçonner que le chiffre ordinaire pourrait avoir été intercepté." [In 1760, the baron received from the French minister, in addition to his instructions, four different cipher tables: the first cipher for correspondence with the minister of foreign affairs; the second for documents communicated (to the host state); the third for correspondence with the ministers of the king at Vienna, at Stockholm, at Copenhagen, and at The Hague. The fourth cipher, entitled "for reserve," was only to be used in extraordinary cases, or when there was occasion to suspect that the ordinary cipher could have been intercepted.]

Klüber enumerates the following various kinds of secret writing, as among the best in use:--

- The circular or sliding method.
- The book method.
- The transposition cypher.
- Net or trellis writing.
- The Lacedaemonian method.
- The card cypher.
- Baco's method.
- Mirabeau's method.
- Beguelin's method.
- The syllable cypher.
- Writing in verse.
- The multiplications cypher (observing the precautionary rules of the author).
- The word cypher (a most complicated affair).
- The dot cypher.
- The Mnemonian cypher.
- Figure and colour writing.

He explains also two other methods, and mentions a third, which he says he discovered in 1805. He does not, however, instruct us in the use of it. Respecting this obscure invention for increasing the difficulties of mankind, he says it yields to none in safety and secrecy; it is easy to write and easy to read; it may be used with uncommon celerity; it is economical, because it does not require the assistance of a third person, or even a second, if a man chooses to write to himself. If the person desirous of employing it, however,

be too indolent to do even so easy a thing as write in secret, according to Klüber's plan he may employ another person, without the possibility of that *other person's* being able to understand what he is writing about. I am glad Klüber has not told us anything which will afford a guess at this cunning means of deception; though, with respect to the last advantage he has enumerated, few ambassadors appear to need a cypher to render their despatches completely incomprehensible to everybody. One would think they might safely defy the curiosity of all the world in this respect. As a general rule, it may be perhaps assumed that no living man is ever able to explain the meaning of an ambassador's despatch, except a minister interrogated in the House of Commons; and then it is not always easy to determine which is most obscure--the despatch, or the explanation.

The *Guide Diplomatique*, among other works of the kind, may be cited as having some silly and worthless instructions on this subject.



"I'll tell you why the ancient Egyptians wrote their history on walls. It's because they were smart enough to know that, if they put it in the files, it would be lost forever."

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