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Hugh Elliot in Berlin

Author(s): Oscar Browning

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HUGH ELLIOT IN BERLIN.

BY OSCAR BROWNING, M.A., F.R.Hist.S.

(Read, November 1887.)

NO diplomatic story is better known than that of Hugh Elliot stealing the despatches of Arthur Lee at Berlin. The most graphic account is to be found in Carlyle's 'Frederick,' vol. vi. page 557. He describes how the American war is raging and blundering along. The devoted colonists have their Franklins, Lees, busy in European courts. 'Help us in our noble struggle, ye European courts; now is your chance on tyrannous England.' He says that the British cabinet had got it into their sagacious heads that the bad neighbour at Berlin was in effect the arch-enemy, and probably the main-spring of the whole matter, and that it would be in the highest degree interesting to see clearly what Lee and he had on hand. Order is therefore given to Elliot, 'Do it at any price;' and finally, as mere price will not answer, do it by any method—steal Lee's despatch box for us. Carlyle says further that Elliot had no appetite for the job, but that orders were peremptory. 'Lee is a rebel, *quasi* outlaw, and you must.' Elliot thereupon hired or made his servant hire the chief housebreaker or pickpocket in the city. He is told that Lee lodges in such and such an hostelry; bring us his red box for thirty hours; it shall be well worth your while. 'And in brief space the red box arrives. A score or two of ready writers are ready for it, who copy all day and all night, till they have enough, which done, the Lee red box is left on the stairs of the Lee tavern. The box locked again and complete, only the Friedrich-Lee secrets completely pumped out of it.' Carlyle goes on to tell us that this 'astonishing mass of papers'

is still extant in England, in the Eden House archives. That he has seen the outside of them, but not the inside, but that he is able to say from other sources, which are open to all the world, that the discovery had no value, but that the only question mooted between Lee and Frederick was the conclusion of a treaty of commerce. He says further, that this surprising bit of burglary was done on Wednesday, June 25, 1777, and that the box, with the essence pumped out, was restored the following night.

This account is as inaccurate in every particular as Carlyle's historical statements very often are. The British cabinet did consider Frederick as their arch-enemy, nor were they more afraid of him than of the courts of France and Spain. There was no order given to Elliot to steal the despatches, but only a general warning that Lee and Sayre were in Berlin, and that they must be carefully watched. Elliot contrived the whole job himself. No professional housebreaker was employed. When the despatch box arrived it was received not by a score or two of ready writers, but by four Englishmen of good family. They copied not all day and all night for thirty hours, but for about six hours. The despatch box was not left on the stairs of the hotel, but given to the landlady by Elliot himself. There is no astonishing mass of papers, but nineteen documents, the titles of which, with most of the documents themselves, are in my possession. Finally, the robbery took place, not on Wednesday, June 25, but on Thursday, June 26, 1777, and so far from the documents being of no importance, they were admitted to be of the highest importance by Lee himself.

A different account of the matter is given by Lady Minto, in her life of her father, Hugh Elliot. Her story is that a German servant of the ambassador having heard him say at his dinner table that he would gladly give a sum of money to anyone who would bring him the papers of the American envoys, waited for no further authority, but, in the most imprudent and reckless manner, broke into the apartments occupied by the Americans in their hotel, entered the room by the window, forced open the bureau, and carried off the papers it

contained. When the theft became known Mr. Elliot declared that he considered himself solely responsible for what had occurred. One of his servants had been led to commit the act by Mr. Elliot's own imprudence. No time had been lost in restoring the papers to their rightful owners.

A third account is given in Bancroft's 'History of the United States,' vol. vi. page 123. He says that Elliot, then British minister in Berlin, at a cost of one thousand guineas, hired a burglar to steal the papers of Arthur Lee, but, on his complaint to the police, sent them back and spirited the thief out of the kingdom. The rash envoy attempted to throw on the officiousness of a servant the blame of having stolen the American papers, which he himself received and read. Another account is to be found in a work of Friedrich Kapp, called 'Friedrich der Grosse und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika.' He tells us that Arthur Lee was at dinner in the Hotel Corsika, Brüder-Strasse No. 2, when the English ambassador, by means of a servant, opened his door with a false key, broke open the desk which was in the room, and stole a portfolio. Lee got up from table sooner than usual, and met Elliot on the stairs on the way to his chamber. Elliot, he remarks, was a very unskilful thief; that when he heard that Lee had hastened with a complaint to the police, he became very much frightened, and instead of securing his prey and studying it carefully, he got rid of it and sent back the papers to Lee's door in less than half an hour. Frederick the Great himself gives an account of the transaction which is as far from the truth as those which we have already quoted. Writing to his brother, Prince Henri, on June 29, 1777, he says: 'The English ambassador, in the absence of the American agent Lee, went to his hotel and stole his portfolio, but he became frightened, and instead of opening it threw it on the steps of the house. All Berlin speaks of the occurrence. If one were to act with strictness, I should have to forbid this man the court because he has committed a public robbery, but in order to make no noise I suppress the matter.' At the same time he writes privately on July 1 to his ambassador in London, Count

Maltzan, 'Oh, this worthy scholar of Bute, this incomparable man: your goddam Elliot. In truth Englishmen ought to blush for shame that they sent such ambassadors to a foreign court.' All these accounts are very far from the truth. The papers disclosing the true story were discovered by me in a country house last autumn, and with their assistance I will now proceed to give a narrative of what really happened.

Arthur Lee was a native of Virginia, and was born on December 20, 1740. He was educated at Eton College, and was afterwards sent to Edinburgh to prepare for the medical profession. Having taken his degree as doctor, he travelled in Holland and Germany and then returned to his native country, where he began to practise, but afterwards determined to devote himself to the study of the law, and in 1766 went over to London and became a student in the Temple. He continued to hold correspondence with his brothers and several other persons in America on the political state of things in England and on the affairs of the colonies. In the spring of 1775 he was appointed agent in London for the colony of Massachusetts in succession to Benjamin Franklin, and, in December of the same year, the committee of secret correspondence in America requested him to act as their agent in London, and to send them any information which he might think important. When the young Republic was attempting to obtain assistance from European powers, they sent commissioners to the court of France, and Jefferson declining the appointment, Arthur Lee was put in his place; this was on October 22, 1776. Lee went to Paris, where he met the other commissioners, Franklin and Deane. In the spring of 1777 he went to Spain to obtain assistance from the Spanish government for the United States, and in this object he was partially successful. Shortly after returning to Paris he set out for Berlin, where he arrived on June 4. He travelled by the circuitous route of Munich and Vienna, driving, we are told, in an English post-chaise painted deep green, with the letters 'A. L.' in a cypher. His companion was to have been Carmichael, but Sayre, an alderman of London, devoted to the

American cause, was substituted at the last moment. Lee and Sayre lodged, as we have before said, at the Hotel Corsika, in the Brüder-Strasse, a small street near the king's palace, in which the principal hotels of that time were situated. In 1777 there were no hotels in the Unter den Linden.

Hugh Elliot, at this time a young man of twenty-five, had been sent as minister to Berlin, where he arrived on April 1, just two months before the American envoys. His instructions, dated March 3, are in the Record Office, but do not differ from the ordinary run of such documents. The Earl of Suffolk was then Secretary of State who had charge of the Foreign Department. On May 9, 1777, he wrote in the following terms:—

Messrs. Carmichael and Lee, two of the rebel agents, are said to have quitted Paris in order to attempt some negotiation at the court where you reside. These two persons are not on good terms with each other; the first of them has the best abilities and is most in the confidence of his principals, Messrs. Dean and Franklyn. The other, however, is more immediately in the commission of the rebel congress and was lately employed in their service at Madrid, but was not suffered by the Spanish ministers to open his business. I am not yet informed of their views at Berlin, but should conjecture that they had general instructions to hold out false ideas of the progress of their rebellion towards independence and of the commercial advantages in their power to grant, with a view to obtain in return money and experienced officers. You will, of course, give every proper attention to their conduct, and to the impression which it may make.

On May 30, he writes again:—

I now find that Mr. Sayre (and not Mr. Carmichael, as was at first proposed) accompanies Mr. Arthur Lee to Berlin. His Majesty's ambassador at Paris has already communicated to you the supposed object of the rebel agents in this mission, and I have only to add with regard to Mr. Sayre, that he is a man of desperate fortune, but with the disposition rather than the talents to be mischievous. His personal vanity is at the same time so great, that he talks of going forwards to Petersburg in order to try the effect of his address and figure at that court.

It will be seen that in these letters there is no indication

that Lord Suffolk ordered Elliot to take the strong measures which he eventually adopted.

On June 6, two days after Lee's arrival, Elliot writes from Berlin in the following terms:—

Two persons alighted at an inn the day before yesterday, who call themselves Americans. One of them is Lee, mentioned in your lordship's letter No. 1; the other is Sayre, the banker, who travels under the name of Stephens. They are said to have come from Vienna by way of Prague and Dresden, and give out that they are to stay here about a fortnight. Their servant, who arrived in town some time before them, went immediately to the Marquis de Pons, the French minister, to whom he gave letters. Lee himself carried a letter to M. de Schulemburg, by whom he was received, although that minister in the evening turned the conversation towards the report prevailing of the arrival of American agents, that he might have an opportunity of assuring me he was perfectly unacquainted with the truth of it. Mr. Zegelin, formerly minister of the court at Constantinople, who possesses a great share in the king's confidence, and in consequence of being employed in his most secret transactions always resides at Potsdam, came to Berlin unexpectedly the day before Lee, and is now lodged at the same inn and upon the same floor. It will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible to discover negotiations carried on through so private a channel. The appearance of emissaries from the rebel congress is the general topic of conversation, but as any knowledge of their character is totally disclaimed by the ministry, from whom I continue to receive every mark of attention, I have no other line to take than that of watching their motions in private with all possible diligence.

On June 10, he gives this further information:—

I am not yet able to give your lordship any authentic account of the particular object which the American agents have in view at this court. It is probable nothing will transpire till the King of Prussia is returned from Pomerania. I am well assured that Lee has brought a letter from the rebel congress, but it is not supposed that any answer will be given to it. He has had some conferences with M. de Schulemburg, but though received politely he is said to have met with little encouragement, and had no hopes given him that his proposal would be accepted by his Prussian Majesty. Sayre and he talk of going to Potsdam about the time of the king's return, which is fixed for Saturday next. In the meantime they employ themselves

in making inquiries of the different manufacturers at Berlin concerning the prices of cloth and linen ; and I make no doubt if they pay ready money but they will be supplied with what quantities they please.

And on June 19 he writes as follows :—

M. Hertzberg told me yesterday at dinner, loud enough to be overheard by the French minister, that no permission had been sent to Embden to receive American privateers, &c. Mr. Sayre continues at Berlin, and often sends letters to M. de Schulemburg's department and receives answers from it. He has also written two lately to the King of Prussia, but I cannot give your lordship any information of their contents.

In the meantime Lord Suffolk had written the following instruction from London, dated June 20 :—

I have secret and certain information that Mr. Arthur Lee's journey to Berlin was the result of a correspondence which had been carried on some time between the other rebel agents at Paris and Baron de Schulemburg, who you know possesses very good abilities, and is supposed to be much in his Prussian Majesty's confidence. The object of that correspondence on the part of the rebels was to obtain some public countenance of their cause at the court of Berlin, with a view to make it the pretext for a similar avowal at other courts. His Prussian Majesty however would not give any sanction to an indecency so derogatory to the sovereign character in general ; and though the proposal of the rebel emissaries to make some agreements respecting tobacco (which had been thrown out as the lure on their part) was not rejected, they were informed that any person sent by them to treat thereon at Berlin must be content to remain incognito.

The robbery of the papers took place on Thursday, June 26, and of the details of this transaction there are no particulars whatever in the papers which are preserved in the Record Office. From the state of the binding it can easily be seen that the volume which ought to contain the documents has been tampered with, but a happy accident has enabled me to discover the very papers which by some unknown means were removed from their proper depository.

On June 28, 1777, Hugh Elliot writes the following letter in cypher to the Earl of Suffolk :—

(Most Secret.)

My Lord,—I have only time to inform your lordship that I have taken copies of several papers belonging to Lee which contain some important information respecting the connections of France and Spain with the rebels. I am sorry to add, that by any accident I may be subjected to considerable trouble from the consequences, and perhaps lose my situation. I will write in full upon this subject, either by the next post or by a courier. In the meantime I presume to observe that the most confined secrecy on this subject is material. I have the honour to be, with the greatest truth and respect, my Lord,

Your Lordship's

Most obedient humble servant,

H. ELLIOT.

Right Honourable Earl of Suffolk.

The robbery had taken place three days before. Mr. Liston, who in early days had been Elliot's tutor, was at this time attached to the embassy at Berlin. Elliot sends him to London with the papers he has copied, ordering him to give a verbal account of the means by which they were obtained. By great good fortune I discovered in the autumn of this year, in a country house occupied by a descendant of Hugh Elliot's, the narrative which was taken down from Liston's lips for the information of the king and ministers, and which has hitherto eluded the curiosity of historians. It runs as follows :—

Mr. Elliot having, by the activity and address of a German domestic, gained the servant at the inn where the rebel agents lodged, and having heard that Lee had long entered in a journal at night the transactions of every day, determined if possible to possess himself of that journal. He was informed that Lee kept it in a portefeuille which was sometimes locked and sometimes not, but that the door to the chamber was always locked when Lee was about. His next step was to get false keys made both to the door and to the bureau. Hearing now that both Lee and Sayre were going to M. de Launay in the country, where they generally stayed till eleven at night, he sent the German servant to bring off the papers, but strangers were just arrived and the man could not get in at the door. He therefore entered the room at the

window of the first floor, opened the bureau with his key, found the portefeuille with the key in it, and brought it away out of the window without being seen except by one of the people who were gained. This was about four o'clock, and Mr. Elliot was at dinner with Sir Trevor Corry, Mr. Bernier, Mr. Liston, and Mr. Harvey, member for Essex. They were all enjoined the most sacred secrecy, and set to copying instantly: and Mr. Elliot went about to pay visits and show himself, which he did till eight in the evening, when he called at the inn on the pretence of visiting Lord Russborough, son of Lord Milltown. He found Lee and Sayre that moment arrived, and with Lord Russborough, and knowing the papers not to be yet replaced, had nothing left for it but to join them and to endeavour to amuse them with conversation, which he did for near two hours (without any introduction or acknowledgment of each other's names, but merely as men happening to meet who spoke the same language). About ten o'clock Lee got up and said he must go to write. Soon afterwards Mr. Elliot heard a violent clamour in the house of 'a robbery, the loss of papers, &c.' He now drove home, and finding the most material papers copied, resolved to send back the whole parcel immediately. They were accordingly delivered (by Mr. Elliot himself, disguised) late that night to the mistress of the house, who was in the plot, and said they were brought by a porter who left them and ran off. The instructions from the congress were accidentally left behind, and were sent afterwards, from which circumstance it was supposed that this was the only paper that had been read.

Lee now made his complaint to the Governor of Berlin, and to the lieutenant of the police. The waiter of the inn and Lee's servants were seized and examined. They confessed that a servant of the English minister had tampered with them, but to no purpose; this was reported to the king, and Mr. Elliot learnt that M. de Hertzberg was to desire him to give up his servant to be examined. This, however, he had guarded against by directing the man to fly out of the country, and he is now with Mr. Matthias at Hamburg. He then went himself to MM. de Schulemburg, Finckenstein, and Hertzberg, and attributed the whole to the indiscreet zeal of the fugitive servant.

I have in my possession the copies of nearly all the documents carried by Liston, but, what is more important, I am able to give the list of the whole.

1. Letter from Schulemburg to Franklin and Deane at Paris.
Dated Berlin, March 15, 1777.

2. The Answer. Dated Paris, April 19, 1777.
3. Letter from A. Lee to Count Schulemburg. Dated Paris, May 8, 1777.
4. Note to Count Schulemburg from A. Lee. Dated Berlin, June 5, 1777.
5. Letter to Count Schulemburg from A. Lee. Dated Berlin, June 8, 1777.
6. The Answer. Dated Berlin, June 9, 1777.
7. A. Lee's Reply. Dated Berlin, June 10, 1777.
8. A. Lee's Answer to a Letter of Count Schulemburg's of June 18. Dated Berlin, June 20, 1777.
9. A. Lee's Memorial to his Prussian Majesty.
10. A. Lee aux Ministres du Congrès.
11. Letter from A. Lee to the Right Hon. the Secret Committee of Congress. Dated Paris, April 13, 1777.
12. A. Lee's Letter to Señor Don Diego Gardoqui, Madrid. Dated Paris ———.
13. A. Lee's Letter to Señor Don Diego Gardoqui, Madrid. Dated Paris, May 13, 1777.
14. A. Lee's Letter to Señor Don Diego Gardoqui.
15. Postscript from Mr. Grand to Arthur Lee at Strasburg. Dated Paris, May 16, 1777.
16. A. Lee to M. de Grimaldi, at Rome. Dated Berlin, June 21, 1777.
17. A. Lee to Dr. Franklin. Dated Vienna, May 28, 1777.
18. The Instructions of the Congress to their Commissioners.
19. Mr. Arthur Lee's Journal of all that passed among the Commissioners with the French Ministers, the Congress, Holland, from December 16, 1777.

Three other despatches were also conveyed by Liston, which once existed in the Foreign Office archives, but which, as I have said above, exist there no longer.

(Most Secret.)

Berlin : July 1777.

My Lord,—I am happy to inform your lordship that the inconveniences I apprehended when I wrote last from my having possession of Mr. Lee's papers are not like to take place. Mr. Liston will set out immediately to carry copies of them to England, and will give any further accounts that may be wished of the transaction. I hope the interesting nature of the information acquired will excuse the irregularity of the mode adopted. As Mr. Liston takes purposely

a roundabout road, he may probably arrive some days later than this letter. I have the honour to be, with the utmost truth and respect, my Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient humble servant,
H. ELLIOT.

Berlin : July 2, 1777.

My Lord,—I have the honour of inclosing several papers of importance I have obtained copies of at considerable risk and some expense. Mr. Liston, the bearer of this letter, will give your lordship an account of all the particulars relating to them. I have the honour to be, with the greatest truth and respect, my Lord,

Your Lordship's most obedient humble servant,
H. ELLIOT.

(Most Secret.)

Berlin : July 2, 1777.

My Lord,—As Mr. Liston will have the honour to deliver this letter, I shall not enter into any minute detail of the transaction mentioned in my two last. He can give every information your lordship may require with respect to the manner of acquiring the papers. I shall only mention the conduct I have held since.

Such strong suspicions had fallen upon a servant of mine who was actually employed in bringing them to me, that I thought it my duty to take a step I had previously resolved upon in case a discovery was likely to be made. I waited upon the minister, and declared that what had happened had been occasioned by my imprudence in having shown too great inquisitiveness concerning Mr. Lee and Mr. Sayre ; that a person employed to give an account of their motions had from over-officiousness committed this unwarrantable action ; that though the papers had been sent back as soon as I knew what had been done, yet I felt myself so much to blame that I could not help begging leave to represent to his Prussian Majesty, either in person or through the minister, that my court had no knowledge of this affair, that I alone was in fault, and that if his Prussian Majesty chose, I was ready to ask my recall, and to submit to any decision he might think proper to give.

The day after, I received for answer that the king could not help looking upon what had been done as *fort vif, fort précipité*, that as I had declared my court was totally ignorant of this affair, *il ne la rèleveroit pas*, but advised me to take care that nothing of this kind should happen for the future.

If I might be allowed to express to your lordship what appears to me becoming of his Majesty's dignity upon this occasion, I

should not hesitate to beg that I might be ordered to tell either the King of Prussia himself or his minister, that although the King of England is sensible of the indulgence shown me by his Prussian Majesty, yet he disapproves of my conduct in this business, and his Majesty offers to nominate another in my place if I have made myself disagreeable to his Prussian Majesty. Whether this will be accepted or not I cannot determine with certainty, though I am rather inclined to think it will not. I make no apology to your lordship for having risked everything when I thought his Majesty's interest so essentially concerned. I knew that by the sacrifice of an individual every public inconvenience could be prevented ; and as I have not scrupled to make that sacrifice when called upon, I flatter myself I have not forfeited your lordship's protection or my sovereign's approbation.

Mr. Liston will inform your lordship, that matters were so arranged as to make it appear that I had not had time to peruse the papers, and will explain in full every circumstance of this affair.

I am much obliged to Sir Trevor Corry, Mr. Bernier, and Mr. Liston for their assistance in copying the papers. The expense incurred by gaining some, silencing others, and different articles, amounts to five hundred pounds.

I have the honour to be, with the utmost truth and respect, my Lord,

Your Lordship's most devoted humble servant,

H. ELLIOT.

Carlyle has told us that Elliot was induced to undertake this work by Lord Suffolk against his will. There lies before me the original letter of Lord Suffolk's upon the subject, which tells an entirely different story. The part which concerns Elliot runs thus :—

Charleton : July 14, 1777.

I have ruminated much on Elliot's adventure, and think it won't end as quietly as he imagines. His secret is in too many hands. I applaud his zeal but I don't mightily affect a dasher ; and though I wish to encourage the former, I by no means wish to encourage the latter. All steps whatever relative to this strange business must wait my return.

When Lord Suffolk returned from the country the matter was without doubt fully discussed between the king and his

ministers, and the result was the following despatch, which is still in its place in the Record Office, and which is eminently fitted to be published in a blue book.

St. James's: August 1, 1777.

Sir,—Mr. Liston arrived from Berlin on the 11th past, the morning of my departure into the country ; but the despatches which you had transmitted by him were immediately laid before the king, and I have now received his Majesty's sentiments on their contents. It gives me real concern when I find it my duty to convey any intimation of his Majesty's dissatisfaction with the conduct of a minister whose zeal in the public service is as little doubted as his ability, and who, by an excess of the former quality, has been induced to swerve from that discreet regard to his own situation and the dignified principles of his court, which ought in every moment and on every occasion to regulate both his actions and his language. You will easily conceive that I allude to the expression which you confess yourself to have hazarded at your table, 'that you would gladly give a considerable sum of money to anybody who would bring you the papers of the rebel agents.' An expression which, however it might arise in the warmth of conversation, and might be in itself without further meaning, was highly improper to be used by the representative of a court which has disdained and will ever disdain to tread the crooked paths of duplicity and treachery. The very wish that suggested the language, so improper in itself, would have been peculiarly improper at a court which was acting on the occasion with the utmost frankness and friendship to his Majesty and his kingdoms, and with a due attention to its own dignity and the royal character in general. It is, however, but justice to you to admit that you are not liable to this part of the charge after having explained that you spoke in reference only to Mr. Arthur Lee's journal of his proceedings, *before* he went to the court of Berlin.

I insist so long on the expression above mentioned from an equitable anxiety to construe and consider that expression unconnected with the violent act which it occasioned ; for that act certainly carries a very different aspect when supposed to originate in your servant's mind from the accidental overhearing of your table conversation, to what it would have done if it had appeared to be a settled plan to obtain the portefeuille, begun by your suggestion and conducted by your contrivances. As, however, in the course of accidental events, there was but too much reason to put the latter interpretation on what passed, the part you took, of stating your own

story, fully and frankly, to the Prussian ministers, was certainly the wisest that your peculiar circumstances would admit. And the reparation which you offered by your proposal to solicit your own recall in case your part in the transaction should have made any unfavourable impression on his Prussian Majesty's mind, was no more than our Royal Master would have been disposed to grant. But the generous answer which was returned to you on the part of his Prussian Majesty prevents this unpleasant consideration; and the caution, to discourage for the future such vivacity in your own language, and so criminal an avidity in the conduct of your dependents, with which the answer was accompanied, comes with so good a grace, that it must, I am sure, be constantly remembered by you. It remains only for you to take some natural occasion of mentioning to the Prussian ministers the sentiments of your court on this business, as I have already done to Count Maltzan. Upon the whole, I may now very sincerely congratulate you on the fortunate conclusion of these embarrassments, every culpable part of which his Majesty will fully forgive, in consideration of the zeal which occasioned them.

I am, &c.

SUFFOLK.

This very nearly completes the story, but it is satisfactory to learn that Elliot was not only forgiven by the king but received an extra 500*l.* as payment for what he had done. Mr. Harris, afterwards Lord Malmesbury, a near relative of Elliot's, was on his way to St. Petersburg in the first week in October. He carried with him the following letter for Elliot:—

St. James's: October 7, 1777.

Sir,—In addition to what I have already written to you with regard to the late transaction respecting the papers of the rebel agents, I use this conveyance to inform you (in further proof that the exceptionable circumstances in that business are entirely overlooked in consideration of the loyal zeal which occasioned them), that the king has been graciously pleased to take notice of the great expenses in which you involved yourself, and has directed the amount to be made good to you. I have accordingly received his Majesty's gracious commands to pay one thousand pounds to your agent, and I sincerely congratulate you on this close of our correspondence upon an enterprise which, as it could not be conducted without your making improper confidences, could never have been justified [but] by the completest success.

It is scarcely necessary to make any remarks upon this story, of which we now know the whole truth. If the Americans had been recognised belligerents, and Lee and Sayre their accredited agents, it would have been quite within the rules of international law to treat them as Elliot treated them, although the neutral court might have resented the action of the ambassador in any way that it pleased. It must, however, be remembered that the Americans were at this time not belligerents but rebels, and that Lee and Sayre were in the position of Irish Home Rule leaders at the present day, seeking for the active co-operation, if not the armed interference, of a foreign but friendly power against their own country. At the same time actions like these are to be judged not by definite rules but by the impression they make on the moral sense of mankind. If it be the first rule of an ambassador's conduct that he should on no account exhibit an excessive zeal, Elliot may be judged to have transgressed this precept. He was, however, quite a young man, and his later history shows him to have been, if one of the most erratic, at the same time one of the most brilliant and successful of English diplomatists.

DISCUSSION.

Mr. Fyffe said : All had had their admiration for Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, and it would be a shock to some to find that their glories must be shared with an English ambassador. He saw no use in calling things by their wrong names. Elliot chose to act as a thief ; and the revered George III., with that arch-Pecksniff the Earl of Suffolk, gave him 1,000*l.* for doing so.

The reference to the rights of belligerents seemed to him quite erroneous. When France and Germany were at war in 1870, the French and German ambassadors in London had no more right by international or any other law to steal papers from one another's houses than they had to blow one another's brains out. Then to take the case of rebels. Suppose that in 1861 the Confederate Agents, Messrs. Mason and Slidell, instead of being captured by Commodore Wilkes on board the 'Trent,' had prosperously reached the Langham Hotel ; that

while they were there the United States minister had bribed the waiters and chambermaids, made false keys, and stolen their papers ; and finally that he had been caught, sneaking back in disguise with the despatch-box. Should we ever have heard enough of Yankee blackguardism and the baseness of republics ? Should we ever have been sufficiently thankful for our own highmindedness ? The world would have reeked of it to this day.

He agreed to this, that, low as Elliot's conduct was, Lord Suffolk's hypocrisy was even more disgusting. 'A Court wheel has ever disdained and will ever disdain to tread the crooked paths of duplicity and treachery !' Talleyrand was never more shamelessly cynical. The real excuse, such as it is, must be sought in the fact that all the Courts of that time were about equally unscrupulous in their methods. Any scoundrelism was thought fair (he used this word for want of a better) in diplomacy ; and though Frederick called Elliot a 'goddam Englishman,' and possibly resented his house-breaking in his own capital, he would not in his heart think the worse of Elliot for it,—on the contrary, he probably thought him a sharp fellow. Frederick himself, Joseph of Austria, and Catherine of Russia, habitually employed people to steal despatches and rob mail-carts. There are plenty of allusions to this even in those State papers of the time which have been published. Though Joseph or Catherine robbed from one another on occasion, they actually had an understanding that papers stolen from third parties, if they could not be deciphered by the comparatively dull people at St. Petersburg, should be sent to the more practised hands at Vienna, and an interpretation be there made for the common benefit. References to this will be found in Vivenot's 'Confidential Letters of Thugut,' the Austrian minister ; and he suspected that, if only for lying's sake, Thugut sometimes gave the Russian Court odd interpretations of the papers they had sent to him to decipher—if indeed the Russians did not manufacture bogus papers in order to mislead *him*.

Are thievery and tricks like Elliot's now practised by the British Government ? He believed not. Pitt did a great deal to check this, and to make such words as 'honour,' 'good faith,' which had been mere ridiculous sounds to Suffolk and George III., realities in the action of the English Government. In the long struggle with France, when every base means was employed by successive revolutionary governments, Pitt saw how important it was that there should be one European Power which, in its methods, should hold fast, not only in profession, but in deed, to fair and honourable dealing. Judging from things in the English records of that time, he

believed that Pitt would summarily and for ever have dismissed any English ambassador who should have stolen like Elliot. Pitt was beset by people, refugees and others, who were ready to carry out any enterprise against the French Republican Government, and afterwards against Bonaparte. As the murder of the French envoys in 1799 at Rastadt shows, robbery of papers easily passed into assassination ; and events like this probably strengthened Pitt's natural hatred for the dishonourable ways which diplomacy had hitherto sanctioned. Under enormous difficulties, from 1793 to 1815, the British Government, though often violent and high-handed, refrained from the meaner tricks of political business. He was speaking of its foreign policy, not of Ireland. Of course attempts were made to bribe the enemy's generals. This is a recognised part of the operations of war. In the invasion of France in 1814 a sum of 100,000*l.* was offered, though in vain, to the commander of Strasburg. The only interest attaching to the matter is that the Englishman concerned in it was that model of respectability, the late Lord Aberdeen, whose despatches are the authority for the statement.