

THE QUEEN'S CONSCIENCE.

[From Chamber's Journal.]
 Most persons of an requiring rank of mind, upon hearing that the Lord Chancellor of the kingdom, for the time being, is the keeper of the Queen's Conscience, may be prepared to enquire what the quality of such a resignation of an old, and the formation of a new ministry, so very immaterial a thing as a conscience can be supposed to be the possession of one individual, and placed in that of another.

But royal conscience, gentle reader—that is to say, the royal office, and not the dwelling-house, is the possession of the minister—is not by any means so desolate of tangible substance as might, from the nature of ordinary conceptions, be supposed to be in fact. It is not a matter of being placed in the sovereign in the hands of the chancellor, and carried home by him in his coat pocket, as his handkerchiefs, snuff-box, and

If disregarding all the several penalties elements relative to burglary, you were, some quiet evening, to break and enter the dwelling-house of the high official just mentioned, and taking advantage of his absence in the country, were, to turn over the piles of papers which doubtless choke up his chamber, you would be sure to meet with a neat leather-covered box, about eight inches square, the royal arms richly emblazoned upon its exterior, you would find it lined with velvet, it would indicate the contents to be of no ordinary value. Carrying the illegal proceedings of your chamberlain with you, you would be sure to find further breaking open the box itself, you would meet with two silver disks, closely fitting one another, in appearance not very unlike the pieces of seal used without the Tower, and these disks, upon being separated, would reveal, upon the inner surface of one, a deeply engraved and hieroglyphic representation of the cardinal virtues round it; and upon the other, a representation of the same exalted individual on a caparisoned horse, attended by a retinue of six or seven, doubtless recorded by the chancery among the choicest of his treasures; for not only does the mere possession of a seal, in a certain manner, appear to constitute or any document whatever, constitute him the second man in the kingdom, the supreme judge of Great Britain, the speaker of the House of Lords, and the possessor of a salary of £14,000 a year, with immense patronage both in the church and in the state; but the king is bound to challenge the most exact confidence the sovereign can bestow, being no less than placing at his disposal nearly every power of the royal prerogative.

The two silver disks are, in fact, the matrix by means of which is formed that enormous wax seal, which is the badge of the monarch's will-buttered muffin, commonly known as the "Great Seal of England," and which is appended to all those sets of the sovereign which it is the measure, practice to make known to the subject.

Sealed with this, whether by lawful authority or by any other means, the seal speaks to the sovereign is rendered valid, and irrevocable without the consent of the three estates of the realm; so that its holder, whether he be a peer, or a clergyman, or a commoner, is bound to obey his trust, pardon the most heinous offender on whomsoever he pleases the highest title of nobility, or grant charters to all the towns in the kingdom; he is bound to make use of almost all those prerogatives which law and custom have placed in the hands of the sovereign, to be executing the good and just laws, and to be in possession of the important instrument, he is not sufficiently said to be the keeper of the Queen's Conscience.

It seems rather singular, considering the great importance always attached to this emblem of royalty, that it should have been treated out of the monarch's hands, as if it were a thing of no account; thus, we find in the possession of a certain "Lord Keeper." Before the time of Edward the Fourth, indeed, it is doubtful whether the sovereign had any tangible conscience at all, for the charters preceding that reign are usually sealed by a cross made in gold or silver, but as soon as the seal proper was used, it was almost an eminent for his learning and attainments was selected to take the custody of it, the sovereign himself being bound to be willing him to use it to the honor of God and his king.

The first great seals were rude enough, the earliest we possess is that of the Duke of Burgundy by a silk string to a charter of Edward the Confessor. Lead was soon exchanged for wax, and the Conqueror, together with many of his successors, used great quantities of the same natural nature of the document—a custom retained at the present day in the seals attached to charters, patents, and other important instruments, having an unlimited duration.

If we may credit the testimony of Sower upon the subject, the Willing of the Duke of Burgundy of sealing his grants, being now a thing of putting on the wax the impression of his own royal seal. In support of this assertion, a charter of Henry the First, upon which the Ravdin is cited, which in modern English runs as follows—

"I give to thee, Pagan Raydon, Home and Frege town, with all the bounds both up and down, and with the tithes to earth, from earth to hell, as freely as I may."
 For a cross-bow and arrow,

When I shall about in thy yard;
 And I taken that in thy way is sooth;
 And the title of the maner present—exacted good round sums of money before they would affix it to an document; and one can scarcely imagine the number of seals which were used, 700 years ago, by the fortunate holders of it. John, being in want of money, put the custody of his seal upon his wife, and one Walter Gray bought it for 5000 marks, and one Walter Fitzwalter, in 1210, at the present day; but saw it up in a few years, for the still more lucrative dignity of Archbishop of York.

Another of its custodians, John Manners, neglecting to distribute the church-patronage as he ought to do, was fined 20,000 marks, and died 700 lives; and a good 150 years later, so great was the sum of money which the revenue of his office permitted Chancellor Beaufort to lend to Henry V., that the sovereign placed his crown in the hands of his chancellor, as a guarantee for the repayment of the loan. Indeed, the vast wealth which his office was enabled to raise, coupled with the enormous powers which the custody of it gave them, rendered it absolutely necessary to the government of the sovereign, that his seal should be intrusted to the hands of persons well disposed to the cause; and in early times, it was frequently a very difficult matter to find a man who would undertake the office.

An amusing instance of this occurred when Henry III. found it necessary, upon a certain point of his government, to place his seal upon a document, and could find no one whom he thought worthy and capable of performing the duties devolving upon the keeper of his seal. After vainly endeavoring to find a man who would undertake it, he placed it in the hands of his wife, Eleanor, who not only sealed all his writs and charters during the reign of his husband, but also acted as his Chancery, hearing causes and delivering judgment—judicial functions being interrupted only for a short period, on an accident, by which a female judge, no other, is than her confinement! After being church'd, she returned to her duties, and held the kingdom for nearly a year.

Our ancestors appear to have looked with a sort of superstitious veneration upon the great seal, and to have regarded it as the badge of their reign as the fountain of justice, mercy, and honour; but they believed that that justice, mercy, and honour, were conveyed through the medium alone. A very singular instance of this belief was given when the infant Henry III. then but nine months old, was held in his nurse's arms, and the seal of the kingdom was laid in his lap, the child's little hands were closed over it, and thus it was preserved to the king, and the seal of the Master of the Rolls, taking it into his custody was preserved to be, by his possession, invested with all the powers of the sovereign.

We may smile at the superstitious ideas of the fifteenth century; but let us not forget that nearly 400 years later, when the illness of George III. prevented him from signing a bill, the king appointing his son regent, the great lawyers of the day, with the illustrious Camden at their head, advised the king to sign the bill, on such the same superstition; for they declared that although the king in his natural capacity was unable to sign, yet, in his political capacity he was as usual; and by means of that political king the bill was passed. This detumescence of the seal, and the consequent affirmation of lawyers and politicians from time to time; and, therefore, however much we may smile at it, it is nevertheless a true story, that there are in reality, at the present day, two sovereigns in the country—the natural one, being the august lady so worthy of the allegiance of her subjects, and the other, the two silver saucer-pan lids whose history we are examining.

It is a singular way in which the great seal is at present used—to render valid letters directed by the sovereign to private individuals, and to seal the writs of some judges, and inexplicable virtue residing in it. The great seal, in its usual way, is made of wax, and is in the shape of a circle, with some devices, and is called "letters-patent," have the seal affixed by a plated silk cord at the foot. The wax is of a pale yellow color, but is ordinarily of yellow wax, which, in certain cases, where the instrument is likely to meet with any rough usage, is enclosed in a buff-colored leather, upon which is placed the reverse of the seal as stamped. But where the instrument is directed to a private individual, the seal is made of wax, and is placed in the usual general observation, but used in a very singular manner: the parchment document is rolled tightly round a stick, and the wax is added in the form of a long strip protruding, having the name and title of the person to whom it is addressed, written upon it. A piece of twine is then tightly tied round the stick, and the wax is pressed about as big as a slipcase, is pressed with the thumb and finger upon the ends of twine; and the wax is then broken up, and the instrument is sent with the use of the helix of the seal, when it immediately becomes invested with the dignity of a letter proceeding from the sovereign.

Perhaps you may ever had a greater idea of the importance of the seal of the kingdom than the ill-fated Charles I., and very much delighted was he when a messenger came to him at York bearing the news that the great seal had fully been ordered had fallen into the power of the parliament. In proportion as he was rejoiced, however, the more he was distressed, for he was well aware that the emblem of sovereignty had slipped through his fingers. The great seal could issue without the presence of any instrument he thought proper, and that in a perfectly legal manner while they themselves could not fill the place of a deceased member of their own body, or perform any act of government, but that it was necessary. Deliberating, and waiting, and going to prayers many times, they resolved to send a messenger to the parliament, and to the resolution was a notable one; but there were few Wyoons in those days, and those who were not, were very richly endowed with a certain statute of Edward III., which declared that any person imitating, forging, or counterfeiting the king's great seal should suffer death as a traitor; and such a sentence would not be the least doubt would be rigorously enforced, should they again smile upon the king, and they were well aware that the parliament would not be so easily overcome. Money, however, like love, conquers all things; and after some time, a bold man named Master Symonds was found, who agreed for £400 per annum to make a new seal, which was completed—to make a new seal, the fac-simile of the one in the possession of Charles. This was the first time that the parliament had used the Commonwealth was sufficiently satisfied to have a seal of its own, from which all real authority proceeded, and the hands of the king of the kingdom, came into the hands of the parliament upon the expatriation of Oxford, in 1643, was broken in pieces by a blacksmith, at a traitor; and such a sentence would not be the least doubt would be rigorously enforced, should they again smile upon the king, and they were well aware that the parliament would not be so easily overcome.

Since the Restoration, the great seal has once or twice been in very considerable tribulation. In 1701, the great seal was in the hands of Jeffrey's was his custodian; so alarmed was James when upon the point of abdicating, lest the importance of the seal should get into the hands of his political enemies, that he ordered Jeffrey's come and reside in the same building with him at Whitehall, in order that the seal should be under his observation, and under his protection. The day before he left the kingdom, he took it from the chancellor, and carried it with him to France, where he fled for flight to France, he threw the ensign of royalty into the river, fondly imagining that the royal function would not be performed without it. If indeed such a thing were to be done, it was rendered useless, for a short time afterwards the ill-used seal was dragged up in the river, and conveyed by him to the privy-council.

In 1781, during the chancellorship of Lord Thurlow, the great seal was nearly lost. Some burglars entered his lordship's house, and walked off with a few valuables, amongst which was the seal of the kingdom, and I believe it was not till the next day that the council was summoned next morning, the loss made known, and such was the expedition used, that in less than an hour the great seal was prepared, and we have it on good authority that, for the remaining eight years of his chancellorship, the noble lord always slept with the great seal under his pillow.

More ridiculous was a temporary loss of the seal during the chancellorship of Lord Eldon. The great seal was in the hands of Jeffrey's, the importance of the trust reposed in him, which was doubtless not diminished by the fact that he was a Quaker, and that the sovereign had conveyed it into his hands; for Lord Eldon tells us in his diary, that when he went to see the great seal, for the purpose of receiving the seal, the king (George III.) was seated on a sofa, with his coat partially buttoned, and the seal pushed in on the left side, between his right hand and the foot of the chair. On the appearance of the chancellor, and handed it to him with these words: "Here, I give it you from my heart."
 "Having all this continually in his recollection, his lordship never went to bed a single night without having the seal in his chamber. One night, in the year 1812, he was awakened by his house being on fire. His first thoughts were for the safety of the seal; something it was, he thought, he would do, he went down stairs and buried it in the flower-garden behind the house. Upon returning to his dwelling, he was informed that the house was on fire, and with the pretty sight of the maid who had turned out of her beds, and were handing in buckets of water to the fire-engine, all in their slippers, he went to the fire, and found that Lord Eldon; that in the morning he could not recollect in the least which flower-bed he had buried the seal, but he was obliged to add in his diary, anything so ridiculous as seeing the whole family down the walks dabbling with their feet in the mud, and that it was, we believe, the last time the great seal was seen in danger of being lost.

At the present day, both as regards itself and the manner in which the king retains it its original importance. As our wise laws have declared that the king never dies, so they have most carefully provided against the kingdom being ever left without a great seal, and the manner of its stamping is as fresh on us as required, the old seal is not destroyed till the new one is completed. The great seal is now made of wax, and is in the shape of a circle, with some devices, and is called "letters-patent," have the seal affixed by a plated silk cord at the foot. The wax is of a pale yellow color, but is ordinarily of yellow wax, which, in certain cases, where the instrument is likely to meet with any rough usage, is enclosed in a buff-colored leather, upon which is placed the reverse of the seal as stamped. But where the instrument is directed to a private individual, the seal is made of wax, and is placed in the usual general observation, but used in a very singular manner: the parchment document is rolled tightly round a stick, and the wax is added in the form of a long strip protruding, having the name and title of the person to whom it is addressed, written upon it. A piece of twine is then tightly tied round the stick, and the wax is pressed about as big as a slipcase, is pressed with the thumb and finger upon the ends of twine; and the wax is then broken up, and the instrument is sent with the use of the helix of the seal, when it immediately becomes invested with the dignity of a letter proceeding from the sovereign.

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As the birth of a new seal is a matter of ceremony, so is also the defacing of an old one. The great seal is now made of wax, and is in the shape of a circle, with some devices, and is called "letters-patent," have the seal affixed by a plated silk cord at the foot. The wax is of a pale yellow color, but is ordinarily of yellow wax, which, in certain cases, where the instrument is likely to meet with any rough usage, is enclosed in a buff-colored leather, upon which is placed the reverse of the seal as stamped. But where the instrument is directed to a private individual, the seal is made of wax, and is placed in the usual general observation, but used in a very singular manner: the parchment document is rolled tightly round a stick, and the wax is added in the form of a long strip protruding, having the name and title of the person to whom it is addressed, written upon it. A piece of twine is then tightly tied round the stick, and the wax is pressed about as big as a slipcase, is pressed with the thumb and finger upon the ends of twine; and the wax is then broken up, and the instrument is sent with the use of the helix of the seal, when it immediately becomes invested with the dignity of a letter proceeding from the sovereign.

As the great seal is delivered into the hands of the chancellor by the sovereign himself, it is a thing of great importance, and the custom for that officer, when he is appointed, to take the seal to his master, or at all events, only to part with it to a special messenger, armed with a warrant from the sovereign, is a custom which directly from the sovereign to receive it. Every one knows the bold stand Wolsey made in the great hall of the Duke of Burgundy, and how he, by the Duke's order, and Suffolk endeavoured, by a merely verbal message from the king, to obtain from him his important trust; and how the noble messengers which he presented to his own master, was the legal document which the great cardinal received. It was indeed no uncommon thing for the Duke and Stratford to make personal and private application to their chancellor for the great seal, and to remain in their custody for many months, before they were allowed to give effect to proclamations, pardons, and dignities, to which they well knew their chancellor would be either too conscientious or too fearful to comply.

The danger of losing the great seal, if continually moved from place to place, coupled with the fact that the seal is now made of wax, and is in the shape of a circle, with some devices, and is called "letters-patent," have the seal affixed by a plated silk cord at the foot. The wax is of a pale yellow color, but is ordinarily of yellow wax, which, in certain cases, where the instrument is likely to meet with any rough usage, is enclosed in a buff-colored leather, upon which is placed the reverse of the seal as stamped. But where the instrument is directed to a private individual, the seal is made of wax, and is placed in the usual general observation, but used in a very singular manner: the parchment document is rolled tightly round a stick, and the wax is added in the form of a long strip protruding, having the name and title of the person to whom it is addressed, written upon it. A piece of twine is then tightly tied round the stick, and the wax is pressed about as big as a slipcase, is pressed with the thumb and finger upon the ends of twine; and the wax is then broken up, and the instrument is sent with the use of the helix of the seal, when it immediately becomes invested with the dignity of a letter proceeding from the sovereign.