

HALB6-1942

## A LISBON BANKER TRIES TO COLLECT OLD DEBTS

1807-1813

(Contributed by H. Hallam Hipwell)

«Banking exercises a powerful influence upon the morals of society. It tends to produce honesty and punctuality in pecuniary engagements».

This dictum will be found in the introductory pages of James William Gilbart's «Practical Treatise on Banking», published in 1827.

First and in some respects greatest of the many great bankers who have «passed the chair» of management in the Westminster Bank, Gilbart is little read nowadays. More's the pity; even if certain observations in Section VIII, dealing with the Moral and Religious Duties of Banking Companies, will raise a smile, clenched though every argument is with an apposite quotation from Holy Writ! Yet one paragraph may in reason be quoted here before trying to set forth certain difficulties besetting an old-time Lisbon merchant-banker who in 1813 — incidentally the very year that saw the entry of James William Gilbart, as a junior clerk, into a London bank — was still trying to collect what one assumes to have been an advance in Current Account made previous to the arrival of Junot in Lisbon in 1807. Here then, is the text :

«Some there are who fail to realize the banker's high mission, but we assume at the commencement of our enquiries

that mankind, as individuals, are moral agents, having had laws laid down for their government by a Superior Being, to whom they are responsible for their actions. They who deny this proposition (if such there be) are not the persons for whose perusal these pages are designed; therefore we will not ask them to accompany us any further in our enquiries».

Having to a certain extent thus disarmed criticism, attention may be directed to the transaction recorded in the letterbook of Messrs E. Power & Co., the source whence I have already obtained material published in previous Reviews of the Historical Association, Lisbon Branch, more specifically, «At the Turn of the Tide», in the Fourth Annual Review.

According to the list of British Consuls in Lisbon, included in Walford's «British Factory in Lisbon», when the dispersal of British residents occurred in 1807, the consular duties were discharged by one, James Gambier, who left either in October or early in November of that year, Junot's arrival being towards the close of November. It is recorded, says Walford, that Consul Gambier took with him to England a large portion of the books and documents of the Factory and that these were reported lost by shipwreck. Naturally enough, everything connected with that troublous time suffers from a certain confusion. Nor, in view of similar happenings in 1940 and all that, are we nowadays disposed to judge our forbears too severely. *Tout savoir c'est beaucoup pardonner*, and this merciful adage may well be applied to what follows. That proviso laid down, one can go ahead and point out that from the correspondence of E. Power & Co., whose principal partner was Edmund Power, it is quite clear that James Gambier sailed from the Tagus leaving his current account with that firm substantially in debit.

In a letter dated Lisbon, 19th October 1807, addressed to Sampayo & Co. of Cork, it is noted that «there are very few British now remaining here... our E. P. (Edmund Power) is determined to remain until the last moment having yet many dependencies to arrange on his departure».

Which seems to have occurred shortly after the 4th November, together with the Envoy and the Consul General.

The interregnum does not come within the scope of this record. Yet one may say that there is reason to believe Edmund Power visited both London and Cork. In the metropolis his chief financial movement was transacted with Richard Power & Co., while in Cork, where his interests seem to have been more specifically mercantile, his connections were Sampayo and Co. In both these firms there appear to have also been family ties linking Lisbon, London, and Cork. One wishes that it were possible to find correspondence dated between November 1807 and May 1809 but that seems to be a vain hope. What one does know is that Edmund Power was back in Lisbon by May 1809, busy to establish new trade connections, a little uncertain as to the future course of the war though on the whole feeling that Wellington had the situation in hand, and doing everything that he could to rake in outstanding accounts, some of which ran into big figures. It is in the course of these activities that we find him addressing the following letter to «Sir James Gambier».

1st December 1809.

«It has given me infinite pleasure to hear from some «friends of you and your family enjoying perfect health «in that part of the world that you are now in, which I «most sincerely wish you a continuance of. Being at present in want of money in consequence of the unfortunate «change that has taken place in this country I have this «day taken the liberty to draw on you for 1.600rs at «30 days, payable to order of Richard Power & Co., which «you'll please to honour with your acceptance. I place the «same to your credit against the Balance of Account «furnished you on your departure from here, which bill «I recommend to your protection. With my best «compliments to your Lady, I remain etc.».

Now, writing as an ex-bank man, there are some interesting points to be gleaned from this letter. In the first place it is obvious that nothing has been paid in to credit since everybody concerned left Lisbon; in the second place, Gambier has evidently not advised subsequent changes of address and Power has only heard from chance information that the late

Consul General is still afloat, though just where he may be opinions seem to differ. As a matter of fact about this period he seems to have been in Brazil. He certainly did not come back to Lisbon, for in 1809 the Consul was John Jeffery. Incidentally, why «Sir James»? For Gambier does not appear to have had the honorific before he left these shores.

One gathers that this polite intimation brought no reply; moreover the banker, on information gathered, begins to doubt the seriousness of his distinguished client. He writes to Richard Power and Co., in his general letter dated 3rd February 1810, «We herewith remit you our bill on James Gambier (note that the «Sir» has disappeared) for.....\$..... being the balance of his account with us, which we hope he may accept altho' we have our apprehensions to the contrary from his irregularity of conduct in most instances».

The formal letter, bearing same date and addressed to James Gambier (*tout court*) reads thus:

«I beg leave to refer you to my letter of the 1st Decr. «which advised my having drawn on you for Rs. «1,600\$000, which I have not a doubt of your having «honoured with your acceptance. I have further drawn «on you this day for 1,600\$000 at 30 D/s to order of «Richd. Power & Co. which I request you'll honour with «your acceptance. It exceeds the balance of y/a/c by «120\$00 without any charge of Interest, the forementioned «sum being what I find necessary to draw on the present «occasion. If in any measure I can render you any «agreeable service in this country I request you'll command «me without reserve, with assurance of my being, with «perfect esteem etc.».

This letter appears to have had just as much result as that of the 1st December, and the name drops out of E. Power & Co's correspondence until 21st September 1811. On that date, writing to Richd. Power & Co. they say:

«We are glad to see that Gambier is arrived with you «from the Rio de Janeiro., p. next packet we shall send «you his Account Current, attested in presence of the

«Vice-Consul, with our Power of Attorney, by which we hope you will be able to compell him to do us Justice. In the interim we now draw on him the enclosed bill for £400, which you will present, or have presented to him with our letter herewith, which we consider a good measure to be taken before demanding in full the balance he is owing us. We hope he will not have the audacity to refuse putting his acceptance to it».

Follows, written more in sorrow than in anger, the letter referred to above; it reads thus:

«Sir James Gambier,

21 September 1811

«I had the honour to write you the 2nd Decr. (sic) 1809 and on the 3rd February last year to the Rio de Janeiro advising my drafts on you for 1,600\$00, 1,600\$000 against the cash advanced you in this city, to which I received no answer, and was really surprized on receiving advice of your having refused acceptance to my said bills being such treatment as I could not have an idea of from a Gentleman whom I held in the highest esteem and whom I would go to the utmost length in my power to accommodate your wishes. You will please to bring to your recollection that on the eve of your departure from Lisbon you told me that on your arrival in London you would pay the balance of your account with my house as I might direct. I am now happy in being informed of your safe arrival in England and have this day drawn on you for £400. at 10 dys sight under the firm of my house at the current exchange of 70d makes 1,371\$420 to your credit, being to order of Richard Power & Co., which I have not a doubt of your honouring with your acceptance. As to the balance still remaining I shall have no doubt of accommodating the payment to your satisfaction on receiving advice of your acquitting my present bill which I have not a doubt of your complying with. I shall be happy to have the pleasure of receiving a few lines from you on receipt hereof and of evincing to you on all occasions my being, with Esteem, etc.».

Apparently the «few lines» sought were not forthcoming. Nor was any acceptance attached to the bill for £400. It presumably was protested in London, for in a letter to Richard Power & Co., dated 1st February 1812, Edmund Power writes, «We herewith hand you Gambier's account with our general Power of Attorney which we hope are in proper order and that you will find the means of compelling him to come forward with the Balance of said account, or at least part immediately by giving him some time for the full balance».

Again there seems to have been nothing doing; he writes again on the 1st August 1812., first referring to the «glorious victorys obtained by our brave Lord Wellington over the French. We are in daily expectation of further information to the same effect. Nothing equal to it has occurred in the present war». Presumably the reference was to Badajos and Salamanca, followed by the entry into Madrid. He comes to earth in the next paragraph, remarking that «I am very anxious to know if you have succeeded in getting anything out of that rascal Gambier. What occurred relative to E. P. & Co's bill on Tyrrell? I have been disappointed in the bills I have been in the expectation of to the extent of about £5,000».

Which last remark gives one some indication of the extent and profit accruing to E. P. & Co's business. Tyrrell's indebtedness was heavier than that of Gambier. He seems to have been in some sort an army contractor, if one may judge from a paragraph in a letter to Richard Power & Co. London, dated 17th October 1812, in which E. P. says, «having an interview with Marshal Beresford some days ago at Cintra, to the best of my recollection he mentioned Tyrrell having gone to the West Indies, in which case I fear we can have little hopes of getting the Ballance he remained owing the House, but I hope you will be able to get something out of that infamous fellow Gambier before his departure for the Brazils».

Four months later, in a letter dated Lisbon 13 February 1813, Edmund Power, now a private individual with his commercial affairs in the hands of his successors Power and Norton, returns to the charge. «You have not mentioned to

me», he begins, «what has occurred with respect to the House's claim on Gambier, as well as on Tyrrel, of which I request you giving me information». A couple of months later, on the 24th April, he brings the matter up again, wanting to know whether there is any expectation of getting something out of Tyrrell, adding «I have been in expectation that you «would have been able to compel Gambier to pay some part of «his debt in virtue of the Power of Attorney sent you». It is rather pathetic, this attitude of what one may term the Lisbon Head Office, with its belief in the magic virtues of the Power of Attorney as a means of forcing recalcitrant debtors to disgorge. One must have worked as a bank man to have felt that while, after all, the old legal attachment of the person of a debtor and his confinement in the Marshalsea or the Fleet may have been morally indefensible, there are times, even to-day, when it would be some satisfaction to lay a hard-faced and contemptuously unrepentant debtor by the heels, in a literal sense!

Meanwhile the Peninsular War goes well for the Allies. Not only are the French out of Portugal but, as E. P. writes on 19th June 1813; «the report of the day here is, I believe, to «be relied on, that the Enemy has blown up Burgos, which «strong fortress he was in possession of, and Lord Wellington «is in full pursuit of the Enemy with a Powerful Army. Every «hope is entertained, and I hope will be shortly verified, that «the French will be driven out of Spain». Apparently Edmund Power had not yet received the news of Wellington's decisive success in the battle of Vittoria, fought on June 21, 1813. King Joseph then met with a crushing defeat, the remnants of his army escaped to Pampeluna, and within a few days Madrid was evacuated and all the French forces, except for a few isolated garrisons, had retired across the Pyrenees into France. From the Portuguese government at Rio de Janeiro came the new ducal creation for Wellington of *Duque da Victoria*, while the British government raised him to the rank of Field Marshal. Then began the northward sweep, the continued offensive which, barring that brief pause due to the incident of Elba, was to end on 18 June 1815 at Waterloo!

Nevertheless, satisfactory though the military outlook might be, the same could not be said of Portuguese commerce and finance. Writing to London on the 4th September 1813

E. P. says «I leave entirely to your option in point of making «remittances. Our Exchange continues here at 80 ½ and some «has been done per last Packet at 81. Whether it may continue «at this rate I cannot ascertain. Our market continues in the «same miserable state, every article selling at a heavy loss «without any prospect of improvement. Pray have you any «prospect of getting anything out of John Tyrrell? As to my «demand on Gambier I presume I may give it up as lost for «ever»!

By now the old gentleman's writing is becoming very shaky, yet his interest in affairs continues unabated. One finds him, for instance, writing to John White, of Cadiz, on 23rd March 1814, asking for details of the insurance effected on the «Aurora» in the month of May, 1796, «as I cannot find advice «nor regular entry of it in my books, and others being concerned with me in said vessel with whom I have not finally «closed the dependency is the motive of my requesting your «giving me this information». Incidentally, he asks for it to be sent «by return of post», which argues a reasonably regular and even speedy postal service then extant as between Portugal and Spain. The rough draft of the letter to Richard Power & Co: dated 4th Novr. 1814 is evidently not in E. P's writing, but he is still in hopes of some return from his outstanding debtors, since a Postscript reads, «I request you will mention «in your next whether you have any expectation of getting «anything out of that rascal Gambier, or John Tyrrell».

That is the last reference I can find to the Gambier account, though Edmund Power apparently still took some direct interest in business right down to 1818. The last letter in the book bears date 11th April of that year and is addressed to Richard Power. The writing is so shaky as to be almost illegible, despite a long stay at Caldas da Rainha the previous year. It advises a remittance of £ 584-8-5, to be placed to his credit in due course. He closes thus: «It affords me «infinite pleasure to find that my sister your spouse and children enjoy perfect health, which I sincerely wish she may «perfectly continue».

There the story ends so far as Gambier's unpaid debit is concerned. Edmund Power & Co's address. No. 17 Rua da

Emenda, figures in the list of British Merchants established in Lisbon (1810-1818) and Edmund Power, together with his neighbours and co-nationalists, H. Cussen and E. Walsh, is among those merchants who were requested to act in conjunction with the Gentlemen appointed by the Portuguese Government to frame «a new Pauta or Tariff on all Goods, «Merchandise and Articles whatsoever of the Produce, Manufacture, Industry or Invention of the Dominions and subjects «of His Britannic Majesty agreeably to the 15th Article of the «Treaty of the 19th February 1810». Details these which are taken from «The British Factory in Lisbon» previously cited. Of James Gambier's subsequent career and end I have no information.