

IS A LIE EVER PERMISSIBLE--SOME FAMOUS CASES

By a Veteran Diplomat.

Is a lie ever permissible? It is a question constantly cropping up, and one that has never yet received a wholly satisfactory answer. It engaged the attention of St. Augustine, the greatest of all the Fathers of the Christian Church, in the fourth century of our era. The problem presented itself to Montaigne, who in his Essays waxed eloquent on the subject; to Shakespeare, to Sir Walter Scott, and even to the immortal George Washington, the legend of whose memorable encounter with his father on the subject of the historic cherry tree is destined to endure to the end of all time.

A few years ago President Hadley made it the subject of his Baccalaureate sermon at Yale. Henry Labouchère, when in the House of Commons, on one memorable occasion asked that a royal commission should be appointed by the Crown to consider the question of permissible lies; and more recently still, the controversy was brought once more upon the tapis through the assertion made by Lord Guthrie, the most eminent jurist of Scotland, a member of the Supreme Court of the northern kingdom and its representative on the Royal Divorce Commission, to the effect that a lie was "unconditionally reprehensible."

This statement was made at a meeting of the commission in question, organized for the purpose of revising the antiquated divorce laws of the United Kingdom, and was at once vigorously contested by the Rev. Dr. James Alexander Patterson, one of the most eminent divines and learned theologians of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

When some one present, reading from a treatise on the Sermon on the Mount, quoted this passage: "It can hardly be denied that there are cases when untruthfulness in word becomes a duty, owing to the evil that verbal truthfulness would involve, and that any man would think it right to lie to would-be murderers in order to save life." Prof. Patterson expressed his approval of the plea therein set forth, while it was denounced by Lord Guthrie.

Though we may hesitate to admit it openly, there are far many more of us who in our heart of hearts will be tempted to side with Prof. Patterson than with Lord Guthrie, and so difficult is the task of drawing the line between the permissible lie and the one that is wholly black, so great the divergence of views on the subject, that Prof. Hadley in his sermon on "Truth," which he delivered at Yale, declined to discuss what he described as "the unedifying considerations which may in extreme cases justify a man in departing from truthfulness."

The advice about this matter by a mentor enjoying such world-wide experience and so much universal respect as the eminent President of Yale would have been extremely instructive, and not without considerable use to young men starting out in the world on the completion of their course of studies.

The fact of the matter is that few men of distinction among their fellow-citizens, and enjoying the respect of the latter, care to place themselves on record as the champion of any form of untruthfulness, no matter how excusable the lie.

Equally few, however, are the men who are so uncompromising in their views on the subject of untruthfulness as Lord Guthrie.

One of the most notable that I have known was Gen. "Chinese" Gordon, the hero of Khartoum, and it was his scruples on this score that led the various Governments which employed him to regard him as so utterly impracticable. He was more fitted for the ancient times of the Crusaders and of Christian martyrdom than for the life of the present, and gave a curious illustration thereof on the occasion of his odd quarrel with the late Marquis of Ripon, when Viceroy of India.

Lord Ripon, who was a most deeply religious man, of the highest honor and integrity, on being appointed Governor General in 1880, had induced Gordon to accompany him to the Orient as his private secretary.

The private secretary of a Viceroy of India is a far more important personage than his title would indicate. He is the alter ego of his chief, his principal lieutenant, and the power indeed behind the vice-regal throne. As such he draws large pay and allowances.

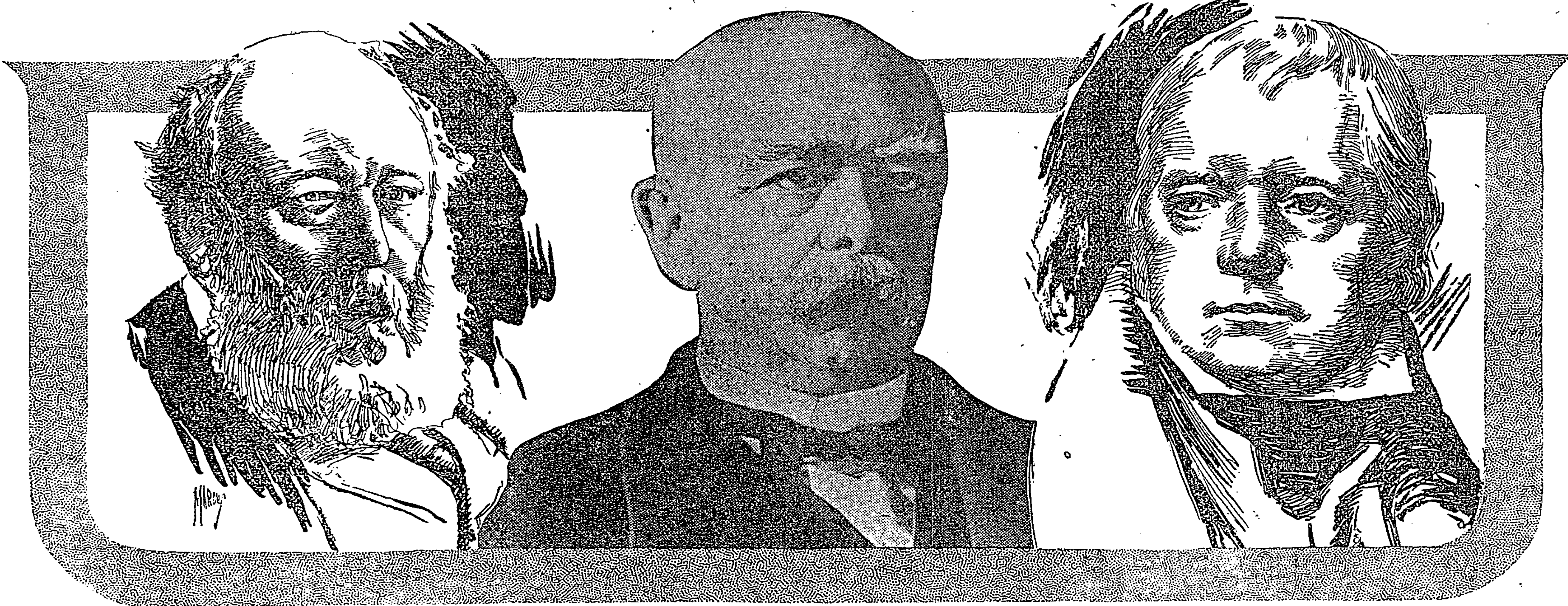
On landing at Bombay to assume the reins of government Lord Ripon received a voluminous pamphlet, written by some local marmite whom it was necessary to conciliate and to keep in good humor. Lord Ripon turned it over to Gen. Gordon, with the request that he would write a reply to the man, stating that the Viceroy was much indebted to him for the screed, which he had "read with the greatest interest."

Gordon pointed out to Lord Ripon that, inasmuch as the pages of the pamphlet had not been cut, it was impossible to describe the pamphlet as having been "read with great interest." On the Viceroy arguing that this was a mere figure of speech, and that he had neither the time nor the inclination to read all the voluminous printed matter sent to him from various sources, Gordon declared that he could not reconcile his conscience to state that the Governor General had "read" the pamphlet and "enjoyed it" when it was untrue, and that sooner than be a party to such a deception he preferred to resign his lucrative and important appointment.

This he did then and there, sailing for China by the next steamer, and leaving Lord Ripon not only in a great quandary through the lack of an efficient private secretary, but likewise under the public imputation of having quarreled with one of the most popular heroes in England by attempting to force him to write a lie.

Had it not been for this dispute,

Lord Guthrie's Statement That It Was "Unconditionally Reprehensible" Contested by Clergy and Others--President Hadley's Views--"Chinese" Gordon's Attitude.



Lord Salisbury's Career was Marred by a Diplomatic Lie.

Bismarck Sometimes Used the Truth to Mislead.

Sir Walter Scott Used Verbal Juggling.

Gen. Gordon would probably have served out his term of office in India with Lord Ripon, and might never have been sent to Khartoum and to his death there at the hands of the Dervishes five years later.

Sir Walter Scott entertained the same conscientious objections to lies, no matter how innocent they might be, and resorted to all sorts of verbal juggles to escape telling them. When, for instance, an ugly baby was brought to him he knew full well that he was expected to admire it. Therefore, in the kindness of his heart, he invariably exclaimed, as though overwhelmed with a sudden blaze of infantile beauty, "Well, I am sure, that is a baby!"

Constantly taxed with the authorship of the Waverley novels, the anonymity of which he was anxious, for a number of reasons, to preserve, he had recourse to similar sophistry; with so much success that his non-committal replies were generally construed as a denial. Indeed, he never formally admitted the authorship of the Waverley novels until 1827, when he accepted the responsibility for their parentage in a memorable speech at the Charitable Fund Dinner in Edinburgh, thereby divesting of much literary credit a number of unscrupulous persons who had taken advantage of his reticence to encourage the authorship to be ascribed to themselves.

Of course Sir Walter Scott cannot, in the matter of truthfulness, be put in the same class as such stern moral-

ists as Gen. "Chinese" Gordon and as Lord Guthrie. For if he did not actually tell a lie, he at any rate managed to convey a wrong impression.

In yet another category belong people such as the great painter Constable. The latter had expressed his opinion that a certain landscape artist's pictures looked like putty. This criticism came to the man's ears, and some time afterward, on meeting Constable, he exclaimed, "I am told that you say my pictures look like putty!"

If the Royal Academician had adhered strictly to the truth, he would have said "Yes, and I will explain to you exactly what I meant," and would have told him his objections to the painter, of a singer, with a look of hypocritical rapture in the eye, in lieu of telling him that his daub is execrable, and that the song to which we have just listened has inflicted pain in lieu of giving pleasure.

True, we have not yet reached the stage where a man can boast of his successes as a liar, where he can taste the sweets of fame by touching one of his victims and saying, "You think me an honest and respectable man. I am not. I am an accomplished liar. Gaze at me and admire!" But we are getting there, and the translation of the solemn words, "Requiescat in pace," which figure on so many tombstones, are gradually acquiring a new significance, since a double meaning can be applied to the phrase "Let lie undisturbed."

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tations we should be forced to accept did we not have at our beck and call the conventional lie with regard to a "previous engagement."

How, when demanded by your host for your opinion with regard to his children, his wines, or his cigars, can you tell him the plain, unvarnished, and in nine times out of ten intensely disagreeable truth?

In fact, our success in the world and our popularity in society end by depending to a great extent upon the talent which we display in artistically and agreeably disguising the truth, in pretending enthusiasms which we do not feel, in squeezing the hand of a painter, of a singer, with a look of hypocritical rapture in the eye, in lieu of telling him that his daub is execrable, and that the song to which we have just listened has inflicted pain in lieu of giving pleasure.

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President Hadley, in the Baccalaureate sermon at Yale referred to above,

wound up his address by declaring to the graduating class, "From your fathers and mothers you have inherited instincts of truthfulness." Scruples for truth may be said to be imbibed with the mother's milk among the English-speaking races, and the slightest scruple of truth is fatal to the perfect lie. While these scruples may disappear in the space of the next two or three generations, it will take considerably longer before we can ever hope to rival the Orientals in the art of lying.

Asiatics, and, in fact, Africans as well, may be set down as born liars instead of being merely addicted to untruth, as in our case. The Persians, for instance, lie even when the truth would serve their purpose equally well. But they do it so glibly, so artistically, and so agreeably that they actually win one's admiration and esteem.

The Oriental's lying presents a striking analogy to Oriental embroidery. In each case the foundation is of the flimsiest character. But so profuse is the application and so intricate the design thereof that one loses sight altogether of the unsubstantial character of the original fabric.

Orientalism exemplify above all others the highest type of liar, and when they tell a fib they are prepared for all that its creation entails, namely, the necessity of being ready with two or three dozen more with which to prop it up, and for each of these subsidiary lies they may have to coin still others, a task which they never shirk, and

through which they go with supreme grace and consummate skill. To accomplish this demands constructive talent of no mean order, and when this is absent the strain upon the mind and the imagination is so great that the person is liable to break down and to make that false step which brings down the whole edifice to the ground.

Possibly it is because there is a strongly developed touch of the Oriental in their composition that Russians enjoy the reputation of being the most accomplished liars of Europe.

One of their most famous diplomats and statesmen, the late General Count Nicholas Ignatieff, actually earned for himself, while Ambassador to Constantinople, among a population that presents the greatest aggregation of liars in the world, the nickname of the "Father of Lies."

The late Czar Alexander III, who was the most straightforward and truthful man of the great Russian Empire, on one occasion taxed the Count with this, and asked him how he had managed to acquire such an unenviable sobriquet. To this the Ambassador replied, with a low bow, "Au service de votre Majesté."

English and American diplomats, on the contrary, in former times at any rate, were renowned for their lofty regard for veracity. True, their frankness was often brutal, sometimes even cruel. Yet it formed a source of strength, a valuable asset; and though foreigners might sneer at what they described as their noisiness, they respected their candor.

We were reputed disagreeable, what the French so picturesquely describe as "mauvais coucours," but our word was accepted as being as good as our bond; and the distinction between American diplomats and English statesmen, such as Pitt, on the one hand, and those of foreign countries, on the other, was that it was possible to credit implicitly the assurances of the former, while in the case of the latter it was generally advisable to believe just the contrary to what they asserted.

No one realized this to a greater extent, nor took advantage thereof in a more amusing manner, than the great Prince Bismarck. Unlike Machiavelli of old, he made a point of generally blurring out the truth, even when he might have remained silent, thereby successfully misleading diplomats reputed the shrewdest of their day. For they could not realize that he really meant what he said, and persisted in acting on the mistaken theory that, like themselves, he used the gift of speech merely to conceal his thoughts and plans, and usually placed an interpretation upon his utterances directly opposed to their meaning.

Whether the English-speaking races are destined to retain this reputation for truthfulness in the future is a matter which is extremely doubtful. Thus, in England, as in all the constitutional countries of Europe, where the Cabinet officers occupy seats in Parliament, the legislators enjoy the right of interrogating the Government with regard to its policy and its administration of the affairs of the nation.

Frequently these inquiries are of an extremely indiscreet and awkward nature, and if addressed by the Opposition are usually intended either to embarrass the Ministers or to entangle them by making statements of a compromising character.

The result is that those representatives of the Government who constitute its mouthpieces in Parliament devote a considerable amount of labor, as well as ingenuity, to answering these questions in such a manner as to mislead those by whom they are put and to misrepresent what is the truth.

Indeed, the promotion of Parliamentary Under Secretaries, Junior Lords of the Treasury, and of other building statesmen depends in a great measure on the cleverness which they display in "answering questions" in the two houses; and thus an official premium is practically set by the highest authorities in the land upon equivocation and a distortion of the truth.

The late Lord Salisbury was the very soul of honor in private matters. But on a memorable occasion in 1878, in response to an indiscreet question in the House of Lords, in his capacity of Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, he gave a most solemn assurance that no secret agreement existed between Great Britain and Turkey in connection with the problems that formed the subject of the discussions of the impending International Congress of Berlin of that year.

Yet on the 8th of July the English and foreign nations were made aware of the circumstance that some days previous to Lord Salisbury's pledge to Parliament that there was no secret understanding with Turkey he was in possession of a secret agreement, signed, in accordance with his instructions, by Sir Henry Layard, the British Ambassador at Constantinople, and Saffet Pasha, the Ottoman Premier, by the terms of which England secured the surrender of the Island of Cyprus on the part of the Sultan Porte.

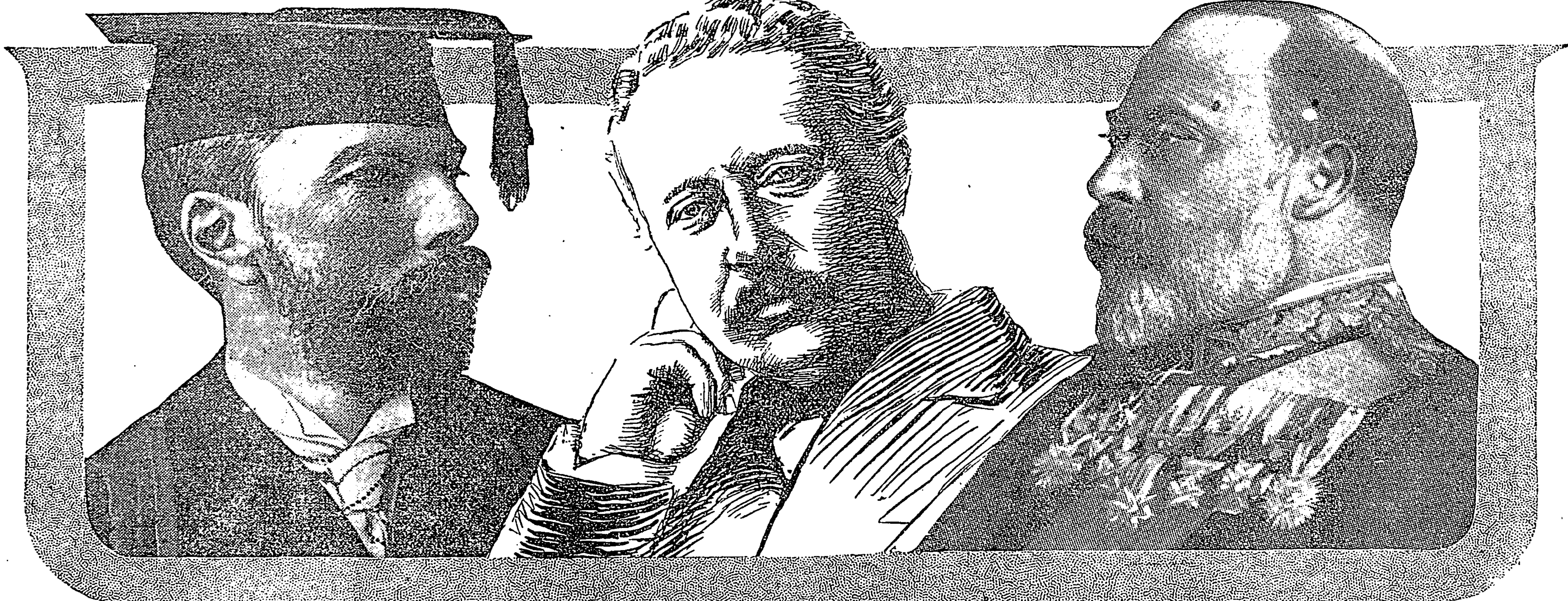
Had Lord Salisbury admitted the Cyprus Convention when asked if there was anything of the kind, in June—that is to say, prior to the Congress of Berlin—the position of Great Britain at the conference would have been seriously impaired, and he felt that patriotic considerations of policy and statecraft compelled him to tell perhaps the only "whopper" of his entire career. But it was a lie which aroused the most extraordinary indignation, both in England and abroad, as contrary to all Great Britain's traditions of truthfulness in her diplomacy.

No one was more indignant about the matter than King Edward, and I recall a display of anger and a passionate outburst of temper on his part, which I witnessed in Paris, when he learned the news, which I have never forgotten. The Prince of Wales, as he was then, had been up to that moment the most popular figure in France of all the galaxy of royalty that visited Paris in that memorable year, and, confronted by the popular indignation which the Cyprus Convention aroused in France, where it was denounced as a most discreditable piece of sharp practice on the part of Great Britain, he complained bitterly of the false position in which he had been placed by the Conservative Government, adding that all that he had accomplished toward establishing closer relations between the two nations had been undone by Lord Salisbury, insisting that the friendship of France was of much greater value to England than an island which had never proved of any use to her since.

It was in discussing the matter in my hearing that he gave expression, in very vigorous language, to the opinion that "honorable dealing is quite as necessary in international politics as on the turf and in social life."

Later on, when he became King, it was because his brother monarchs and leading foreign statesmen were so assured that, while they might fear his diplomacy, they could absolutely rely on his word, and that he would never perpetrate in his official relations with them anything of which he would be ashamed as an ordinary English gentleman, that he acquired so much influence in international affairs.

This universal belief in his honor was an asset of inestimable value to his people, and one which is certain to be maintained intact by his son and successor, King George V.



President Hadley's Views are Told in an Address on "Truth."

"Chinese" Gordon was Uncompromising on the Subject.

King Edward Would Never Sanction the Diplomatic Lie.