

A Bogus Baronet and His Victims by Allan Pinkerton

THE good people of the city of Boston were greatly exercised, at a certain period during the war, over the doings of one *Sir* Henry Mercer, Bart., who came to the surface, made a ripple of excitement, and then passed from sight and thought, giving place to the next sensation, as will be the way of the world until the end of time.

The particular interest centering in Sir Henry Mercer lay in the ease with which he secured his rank, the remarkably good time he had while he held the title, and the general luxurious way in which he enjoyed the prerogatives of rank and wealth including of course several first-class scandals while he was supposed to be their rightful possessor.

Great men frequently spring from humble surroundings, and Mercer was no exception to this desirable way of getting on in the world, which used him rather shabbily at the start, for at the breaking out of the war himself and wife were found making a very questionable living in a very questionable way in a then very doubtful locality on Sudbury Street, Boston. In fact, Mrs. Mercer enjoyed the reputation of being one of those accommodating business ladies who can conduct a cigar-store so as to make it more profitable than the best of men, although the actual sale of cigars would not have supported so modest a salesman as Silas Wegg, before he met old Noddy Boffin, and became avaricious, for she had a way of making appointments for parties, both ladies and gentlemen, who imagined they had not their affinities. Added to this business basis was the employment of two slinking fellows, who were called "private detectives," and who employed their time taking notes on callers and parties in general who met here, following them, learning all that was possible concerning them, and then, after a little time, taking occasion to call on them at their offices, if they had any, remind them of their "little indiscretion," and secure whatever might be got, which usually was and usually is in proportion to the cowardice of the victim.

This was the business of Mrs. Mercer, while her husband had rather precarious employment as a city "drummer" for the drygoods house of Laught & Co. and was in every way qualified for adventure, possessing a fine appearance, a large amount of self-assurance, and had several languages at his tongue's end, so that after a time he was not only able to bring a large amount of business to his employers, but considerable custom to the Sudbury Street cigar-store, where he had no trouble in inducing country merchants to go wild in their laudable endeavors to study the zoological department of society usually described by that generic phrase, "seeing the elephant."

While matters were progressing in this manner with the Mercers, Laught & Co., in their haste to become rich, in 1864 began shipping largely to Nassau, for Florida, goods that would suit the Southern market. They did not run the blockade, but they forwarded the material that was to run it. The shrewd Mercer shortly discovered this secret, and he was not long in using it to advantage; and while acting as agent for the firm, he informed the government of the acts of his employers, and finally obtained the double position of drummer and government detective.

His first disclosures led to the arrest of Laught, who was lodged in jail. While lying there, by some treacherous arrangement Mercer so imposed on his employer that he obtained a power-of-

attorney to collect all the debts of Laught & Co. at Nassau; and there, as well as in Boston, after this brilliant move, he was recognized as a partner in the firm.

On his arrival at Nassau, Mercer, who now blossomed out as a genuine English Sir Henry Mercer, a partner in the firm of Laught & Co., was received by Mr. Henry Adler, the great blockade-runner and agent for the Confederate States, with the most distinguished marks of esteem. After he had concluded his business, and just before leaving for Boston, Mr. Adler introduced him to a very attractive young widow, a Northern lady, who had lost her husband, a Southerner, running the blockade. He was of course introduced as a live baronet, and the widow naturally felt proud of such noble society; the result of which was that on the voyage from Nassau to Boston Sir Henry wooed and won her, which wooing and winning was continued after the couple had arrived in Boston, notwithstanding the trifling obstacle remaining in the way behind the cigar stand on Sudbury Street.

When this shadow presented itself, Sir Henry urged that a little matter like that was hardly to be considered. All English noblemen were accustomed to such incumbrances. A trifling annuity would take the cigar stand party back to England; and it is a fact worthy of record that she did go there, whatever the inducement offered.

It appears that the widow was worth nearly half a million dollars in her own right; and as this was too tempting a capture to permit escaping, Sir Henry pressed his suit with greater vigor than ever, and the day for the proposed marriage was finally set, while the happy baronet succeeded in quartering himself at the widow's elegant mansion.

The lady's friends made a bitter fight against the man, but she seemed completely infatuated, and not until the most powerful efforts were made would she consent to even seem to doubt him by a visit to his "bankers," which was proposed as a test of the man's being all he professed. When the baronet heard of this proposition, he acceded to it in the blandest terms, giving his lovely bride-to-be a letter, over which was beautifully printed an embossed coat-of-arms in bronze and gilt, to his "bankers" in New York.

Armed with this reassuring document, the lady proceeded to New York, to find Sir Henry unknown there; and, thoroughly alarmed, swiftly returned to Boston, only to find that the bogus baronet had left on the very next train, taking with him twelve thousand dollars of her money, together with all the silver plate, and that he had started for England, *via* Quebec, in which city he was arrested. But the fair widow, afraid of the scandal and exposure it would bring about, let the scamp go with her money, plate, and honor; and Sir Henry Mercer, as a sensation, soon passed from public attention, and eventually from sight, but came back again, like a bad penny, in a way which, through my efforts, shut the doors of a prison upon him.

Just four years later, Mr. J. M. Ballard, then division superintendent of one of the express companies running in and out of Chicago, called upon me at my chief office in that city, and in a very excited manner told me that only an hour or two previous he had become convinced that an embezzlement, amounting to two or three thousand dollars, had occurred on their route between Chicago and a large city further west.

With what slight information I could secure, I immediately detailed several of my best operatives, and within a short time had secured a happy result to my work, which brought out the following facts:

About six weeks before, J. R. Wilson, a pleasant-faced, boyish fellow of about twenty, and a messenger of the express company between Chicago and the city referred to, one of the most important express routes in the country, was introduced by another messenger to one W. S. G. Mercer, proprietor of a Randolph Street saloon and restaurant. Mercer cultivated Wilson's acquaintance assiduously—so much so, in fact, that the two were firm friends within a week or two, and, when Wilson was in Chicago, were constantly in each other's society.

About two weeks previous to the call upon me by Mr. Ballard, Mercer, who was none other than the bogus Sir Henry, and who had degenerated from a live baronet to a Chicago saloon-keeper, gambler, and ward politician—about as low as it is possible for one to get—took a trip to the western city with his young friend, and the two had a very gay time of it, during which the crafty Mercer praised Wilson's good qualities, fine appearance, and splendid business abilities, cunningly coming around to delicate insinuations that the boy was having too hard a time of it for one of his good parts, and finally, with devilish ingenuity, hinting at the ease with which a good haul could be made from the company.

This subject was hinted at over wine and cigars, at the theater and at places where the very devil in men is most easily awakened, until, before leaving on their return, the two had agreed upon a plan by which Wilson should secure all that was possible, without awakening suspicion, on two "runs," or trips to Chicago, when the money should be divided and the two should fly to Canada, and from there proceed to Europe on a tour of pleasure.

According to arrangements, on Monday morning, March 30, 1868, Wilson returned from his trip, and, while getting his money-box and books into the express wagon, a business-like looking gentleman stepped up to the car and inquired:

"Is there a valise for me, from J. A. Walters?"

"Yes," replied Wilson. "You can get it over to the office in a few minutes."

"Can't you let me have it now? Here's the receipt."

"All right, then. Fifty cents charges."

The stranger signed the messenger's book, paid him fifty cents, and walked away.

That valise contained three thousand dollars taken by Wilson, and the party who carried it away so nonchalantly was the ex-Sir Henry.

It was on the next day that Mr. Ballard called, and all that I could learn then was that inquiries had been made for amounts by business men which had not come to hand, and for a total sum so large that its non-arrival alarmed him; so that my men were on hand at once to follow and

observe every movement of each messenger that might by any possibility have been the guilty party.

Consequent upon this arrangement, I discovered that on Wednesday morning, as the train bearing Wilson on his "out-trip" was about leaving, a certain gentleman brought a well-filled valise to the express car, gave it to the messenger, who consigned it on his way-bill to "J. A. Walters," a mythical personage of course, and on paying the charges, and taking a receipt in a most businesslike manner, walked off whistling;—but not alone, for wherever the man, whom I soon found to be Mercer, went, there was an invisible though remorseless attendant beside him.

A certain Chicago gentleman also took a trip on the same train with Wilson, who at every station where the train halted saw that the messenger did not leave it, and after he had arrived at his destination, that he never made an unobserved move.

The reports of the two operatives, condensed, were "Wilson: restless; excited; has something on his mind worrying him. Sports a brand-new suit of clothes, a handsome gold watch, and a diamond pin."

"Mercer: neglecting business; pretty full of liquor; constantly borrowing money right and left."

This settled the matter in my mind.

Wilson, closely watched by my operative, left on his return Thursday night, arriving in Chicago Friday morning.

After the rush of the departing passengers was a little over, Mercer, who had been waiting between some cars in front of the train so as not to attract attention, walked rapidly down the track, stepped up to the express-car, repeated the same inquiries as on the former occasion, was met by the same answers from Wilson, paid the charges on the valise, and, just as he turned to depart, one of my operatives, who *happened* to be passing, heard him remark in a low tone of voice:

"Meet me at the Sherman House just as soon as you get through. Room 86."

Two men accompanied Mercer to that hotel without his knowledge, with orders to arrest him instantly on his making the slightest sign of an intention to not keep his appointment with Wilson; while two more detectives followed the company's wagon, in a private conveyance, to the express office, with instructions to never permit the guilty messenger to escape them, but in no manner to disturb him if he proceeded to the hotel according to appointment; while I at once dispatched a special messenger requesting Superintendent Ballard to meet me immediately in the office of the Sherman House.

By this means in less than an hour all the parties had been brought together, and helped materially to swell the crowd in the rotunda.

I kept Mr. Ballard out of sight, as I was apprehensive lest Wilson might suspect his mission, and found that this was the wisest plan, for shortly he came hurriedly into the hotel, and, after standing a moment as if irresolute, walked through and through the office, hastily scanning the face of every man in it, not excepting myself. Then, after going out and looking up and down the street in either direction, as if to be doubly assured that he was not suspected and followed, he returned and hurriedly proceeded to the room designated as No. 86.

Telling Mr. Ballard to follow in a few moments, I hastened after the retreating messenger, and arrived at the landing of the floor on which No. 86 was situated just in time to observe Wilson, a few yards in advance, pause before a door, give two quick raps, and enter immediately after.

There were two or three gentlemen in the hall, carelessly conversing together. A stranger to them would merely have regarded them as pleasant, chatty guests, who had met by chance and were enjoying the meeting. They were my operatives; but they paid no attention to me, nor I to them.

Scarcely had the door to 86 closed, when I silently stood beside it, and could easily catch the low, earnest conversation within.

“My dear boy,” said Mercer enthusiastically, “you did splendidly!”

“I feel like death about it!” said the messenger with such a touch of genuine remorse in his tones, that I pitied the deluded fellow from the bottom of my heart.

“O pshaw! d—n them! it’s nothing to them, and in two days we will be out of harm’s way. But we must get out of this lively. My plan is to get a livery team and drive out into Indiana, and there take the Michigan Central train for Canada. They’ll probably have a lot of Pinkerton’s men watching the depots, and we will just learn these smart detectives a new trick,” replied Mercer with a triumphant laugh.

By this time Mr. Ballard was beside me, and, with a slight signal, I had two of the parties in the hall, whom a stranger would have taken for chatting guests, at the door, one stationed silently at either side.

Then I rapped loudly upon the door.

A smothered oath from Mercer, a cry of remorseful surprise from the poor messenger, and a rustle and hurry inside, were the only response.

I rapped again, louder than before, and then finally told the parties that if the door was not instantly opened, it would be forced.

After another rustle and scuffle, Mercer opened the door, and Mr. Ballard and myself quickly entered, I locking the door, putting the key in my pocket.

Mercer looked me full in the face for a moment, and with the one gasping ejaculation, “My God!—Allan Pinkerton!” sank into a chair; while Wilson, white as a ghost, reeled against the wall, looking from me to Mr. Ballard, his superintendent, for a moment, and then, burying his face in his hands, threw himself upon the bed, and moaned in utter agony.

They were at once arrested; and while Mercer was consigned to the county jail to await examination, I had Wilson taken to my office, where a full confession was secured. All the money was recovered, save the few hundred dollars expended by Mercer for the clothing and jewelry with which his dupe was led on to the commission of the second and greater crime.

At the trial which was shortly had, the judge, at my earnest solicitation, mercifully took into consideration the facts of the case, and the messenger, Wilson, was given the least punishment possible; while ex-Sir Henry, whose crime was aggravated ten-fold by his cruel and heartless ruin of a previously honored and respected boy, was consigned to his rightful sphere of action, where, for ten years at least, he remained an honest and law-abiding citizen of the State of Illinois within its penitentiary at Joliet.

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