

A Brilliant Confidence Swindle in High Life
by Allan Pinkerton

IN looking over the events of my most eventful life, as the frequency of criminal occurrences of similar often compels me to do, I cannot but reflect over the strange gullibility of the general public, and wonder at the great fertility of schemes and successful conspiracies on the part of criminals. Every day of the year some apparently new development in the way of criminal ingenuity is apparent, and the best detective of the time are constantly kept at their keenest friction to devise some means and expedients to cope with the advanced and apparently cultivated brains that are forever busy with fresh devices for living a life of elegance and ease without honest labor.

And yet to one who has spent the greater part of his life, as I have done, in conscientiously studying the philosophy of crime and the peculiar traits and characteristics of criminals, there appears to be nothing startlingly new in all these matters. There is change in manner of operation, there may be fresh method in execution, but the main principle of crime, as well as of its detection, always remains the same; and with the thousands upon thousands of warnings and public lessons coming to light every year, it would almost seem that respectable citizens refuse to profit by the bitter experience of others, and by their apparent implicity and unguardedness really invite upon themselves the manipulations of keen rogues and educated rascals; and so true is this of people of all grades of society, that frequently, while doing everything in my power to assist those who have been almost ruined by their own foolishness, I could not resist the reflection that they had been served as they deserved.

An instance of carefully-prepared planning, neat work, and successful swindling of this kind came under my notice in Baltimore, a few years since; and whenever it is recalled to my mind I am in doubt whether I shall more admire the handsome manner in which the scheme was done, or condemn the foolishness of the educated victim, who, after I had unearthed the scoundrels that had cruelly deceived and swindled the party, refused to prosecute them, out of some mawkish sentiment or fear of public ridicule.

In 1868 an old gentleman—whom I will call Willet—died in Baltimore, leaving behind him a young and charming widow and a big fortune. After a year's becoming retirement and mourning, Mrs. Willet reappeared in society, and was warmly received within her circle, as her accomplishments were apparent and her wealth well known. Her grief was very easily drowned in a moderately gay society life, and consequently many real admirers and more genuine adventurers came in contact with her.

Among those with whom she became acquainted was one Henry Halliot, a son of a retired officer of the Union army during the rebellion. He was at one time, and was supposed then to be, a young gentleman of promise, wealth, and good connections, and, being a handsome, pleasant sort of fellow, he possessed just those traits and habits to easily captivate impressible women.

Halliot had been introduced to Mrs. Willet by a French lady, named Mlle. Villiers—a recent arrival in the society in which Mrs. Willet moved, but reputed wealthy and as being very select in her society. This Jeannette Villiers was unmarried, vivacious, witty—in fact, fascinating as

only spirited and handsome French women can be. She was a charming brunette, full of blood, vitality, and positiveness, and soon began to exercise a certain magnetic influence over Mrs. Willet, with whom she soon became very intimate, and who was a dreamy-faced blonde, with but little strength of character.

Perfectly charmed with the young and volatile French woman, Mrs. Willet, after an acquaintance of three months, took her to her home as a guest, to remain there just as long as she pleased, and share the luxuries of the splendid house, the servants, the plate, and the rich wine of the cellars, which Mrs. Willet had previously had all to herself.

Of course young Mr. Halliot called occasionally to visit the widow and her charming *protégée*. But his attentions were for a purpose, as will be shown, most marked toward the wealthy widow. It was not long before the handsome fellow made an impression upon the heart of Mrs. Willet; and it was not much longer before it became evident that two years would not pass and leave Mrs. Willet a widow. Strange as it may seem, Mlle. Villiers appeared to look favorably upon the suit of the young soldier. Indeed she had been instrumental in forwarding the courtship, but had done so rather undercover, so that no complicity could appear between herself and young Halliot.

In the meanwhile the splendid French woman had gained a complete mastery over the rich widow. She was her inseparable companion. She guided her in all things, even down to the last minute of going and coming. She selected her books. She managed her servants, and what was more to her purpose, advised her regarding the disposition of certain large and valuable pieces of city real estate in the hands of a joint executor. In fact, the wily girl—for she could hardly be called a woman—so wound herself about the widow's affection that, if it is possible for one woman to be in love with another, Mrs. Willet was in love with Mlle. Villiers.

Mrs. Willet imagined that all her troubles were removed whenever her friend was at hand; and Halliot, the handsome young ex-officer, who still paid his devoted attentions to the widow, often jokingly remarked that he had but one rival in all the world to fear, and that one was the dear little French woman who had brought them together.

Mlle. Villiers also seemed pleasantly jealous of Halliot; but, without seeming to do it, she always put in a good word for Halliot, and brought the couple together on every possible occasion. In a few months they had become three inseparables, and the executor, who had been a life-long friend of the deceased husband, looked on with a smiling approval as long as money was not needed and his young charge seemed to be so happily situated.

In September, 1869, Mrs. Willet disposed of a valuable piece of real estate, and received a cash payment of forty thousand dollars. Her husband had left her everything, and she was perfectly free to sell or lease any or all or none of the property, and duly appropriate the proceeds to her use as she saw fit. It was not supposed that the officer-lover knew of the widow's vast wealth, or cared to know the same; but Mlle. Villiers *did* know it, and took good care that Mrs. Willet, who knew nothing of law or business, should not be troubled with details or dry figures, and she generously performed all the labor of looking after the property for her friend. Kind soul! *she* expected no reward. Not she! Had she not plenty of her own? Did she not own an entire castle full of retainers, all in the south of *la belle France*? So she had told the widow, along with other

delightful and bewitching romances of her sunny land beyond the sea; and, besides, her industry and good management of the Willet mansion were proverbial.

“How shall I ever repay you?” Mrs. Willet would ask, with an impulsive, affectionate enthusiasm.

“Oh, *mon amie*, speak never more of so little things!” the handsome French swindler would respond, throwing her arms around her friend’s neck and adding the grace of impetuous ingenuousness to the pretty charm of her bewitching, broken English.

And so the fine French drama went on, with its gushing affection, its pretty wit, and its splendid intrigue.

Mlle. Villiers was always provided with funds from some mysterious bank account, and very frequently dropped, as if by accident, casual remarks concerning Parisian bills of exchange, the rents of her tenantry, and the like, which quite bewildered any of her chance acquaintances, and wholly deceived the poor dupe, upon whose bounty she was almost entirely living.

For all that could be seen by Mrs. Willet, Halliot and Mlle. Villiers were merely friends—*her* friends, and her true and steadfast friends; but if her eyes could have witnessed their secret meetings, and what occurred at them, and if her ears could have overheard the cold-blooded planning and scheming and comparing of notes, concerning the plucking they were soon to give her, there would have been an awakening, and that soon enough to prevent her from suffering great loss.

Soon after the sale of the property in September, where, the forty thousand dollars had been invested in Government bonds, Halliot, who had now become the recognized lover of Mrs. Willet, was taken suddenly ill. He occupied fine apartments at an uptown hotel, and thither Mlle. Villiers and the sorrowing widow proceeded to find the handsome ex-officer terribly emaciated in appearance. No words could express the sorrow of Mrs. Willet and her friend. Ascertaining that a considerable bill was standing against Halliot at the hotel, Villiers only had to hint that his illness had probably caused it, when every penny’s indebtedness was liquidated as well as a month’s advance payment made. While orders were left that every attention possible should be shown the invalid.

Word kept coming to the Willet mansion that the sick man was growing worse and worse; and the little French rascal, Villiers, so artfully worked upon the widow’s fears, sympathies, and love, that she became nearly beside herself with grief as well as utterly helpless and pliable in the hands of her pretended friend.

Soon Mrs. Willet received a message, signed “your dying lover,” summoning her to Halliot’s bedside. She begged and entreated Mlle. Villiers to accompany her. No, no; she could not, she would not; she knew something terrible was about to happen. Finally Mrs. Willet went alone, half frantic at the sudden overwhelming cloud that had fallen upon all she held dear, and nearly fainted at the door of Halliot’s room.

Rushing to his bedside, she took him impulsively in her arms, and, sobbing like a child, I egged that he might be spared to her.

Some touch of pity for the woman's fidelity must have come over the shamming scamp as he lay there upon the white pillows, propped up in a picturesque position, for it was a long time before he seemed to dare to speak of the subject uppermost in his mind; but finally it came, and after the following manner:

While holding the betrayed woman to his heart, he confessed, in a seeming agony of remorse, that he had cruelly deceived her; that he had long loved Jeannette Villiers, the beautiful French woman, and, worse than all, that the woman was his wife!

He was on his death-bed. He could not die without Mrs. Willet's forgiveness, nor would he give up the ghost unless Mrs. Willet would swear, upon her bended knees, that his wife and soon-to-be-born child should be her care, her wards through life. The broken-hearted woman took the oath, and departed. She meant, in all honesty, to keep it too. She vowed that she should never let this woman suffer, and, in her simplicity and loyalty to an honest friendship, was not altogether displeased that events had so culminated that she could now show, in a practical manner, her kind feeling to the beautiful French girl, who was now, the simple Mrs. Willet thought, in a pitiable condition of dependency, and would soon be in a more pitiable plight with a fatherless babe in her arms.

On her return to the now miserable mansion, there was a sad scene of reproach, forgiveness, and sobbing; but it all resulted in Mrs. Willet's taking Villiers into her heart and affection again, and, although both women were undergoing great anguish and grief, yet both women were happy. Mrs. Willet was happy because she had done a magnanimous act. The French woman was happy because the French drama, of which she was "leading lady," was getting on so successfully.

The next day the young ex-officer died—so Mrs. Willet was informed; and the Baltimore newspapers contained notices of his death, while the obituary editor of the Philadelphia *Ledger* wailed out (at a dollar a line) a fitting stanza of grief. This information and the previous excitement completely prostrated Mrs. Willet, and she did not attend the funeral. But Jeannette Villiers *did*. At least she went where Mrs. Willet supposed the funeral of Halliot occurred, and the charming rascal wore the deepest of mourning and looked more charming than ever. She also evidently mourned deeply and felt keenly the loss of her husband, while Mrs. Willet was simply inconsolable—the whole matter, if it had been real on the part of Villiers, presenting the almost inconceivable instance of two handsome and intelligent women, one the wife and the other the denied lover, both mourning the loss of the same man, and both continuing an ardent affection for each other.

About a month after the supposed death of Halliot Mrs. Willet consulted an attorney, and thence went to the executor of her husband's estate, where she received ten thousand dollars. With this she proceeded to a prominent hotel with Villiers, where, in the presence of witnesses—which had of course all accidentally been provided by the latter—she placed this large sum of money in the hands of the French woman as a free gift. This was, as she said, partially fulfilling the solemn vow she had taken before Halliot on his death-bed.

In three months more there was a birth at the Willet mansion. The sprightly, vivacious, charming Villiers, or Mrs. Halliot, as she was now called, had become the mother of a healthy boy. The heart of Mrs. Willet was further touched, and the strange fascination upon the woman still pursued her and prompted her to still greater generosity. As soon as the mother dare leave the house, she was once more taken to the hotel, and there again, before witnesses, presented with forty thousand dollars in Government bonds.

Jeannette Villiers wept, and protested that her dear friend was too kind; but Mrs. Willet insisted that she had it to spare, and felt that she was only keeping the binding oath she had taken.

Strange to relate, however, one week from the day when the last presentation was made Mrs. Halliot and the child went out in a carriage for an airing.

Mrs. Willet pressed the use of her own *coupé* upon her; but no, she could not think of such a thing, and secured one on hire. Night came, and the mother and child did not return.

“They will surely come tomorrow!” said the deserted widow. And she fairly wept herself to sleep that night for lonesomeness at being separated from her “dear Jeannette.” But “tomorrow” came, and another tomorrow, and a week sped, but no charming little French woman came.

Mrs. Willet was now nearly insane, at least so the story went. Weak and tractable in the hands of a designing French woman before, now she was apparently wild with dread that something terrible had happened to her *protégées*; and it was not until she had consulted her executor that her eyes were opened. He had not been made aware of the last gift of forty thousand dollars in Government bonds. When Mrs. Willet gave the ten thousand-dollar check, he made no objection; but now he was utterly dismayed at the turn things had taken, and at once applied to me for assistance to unravel the mystery, although the widow bitterly protested against such a course.

I felt that little could be done, simply because the victim of the conspiracy was unwilling to take any steps toward exposing the villainy of the rascals who had duped her; and I imagined I could see behind all more than the mere desire to shield persons whom she had once held in high regard, and consequently pursued my investigations with no possible hope of bringing two precious rascals to justice, but with a personal interest in fathoming the *cause* of Mrs. Willet’s peculiar tenderness.

For some time my researches were balked in every particular. To begin with, Mrs. Willet was very chary of giving information. Not only this, but Jeannette Villiers, on leaving the Willet mansion, had taken the precaution to not only remove her handsome photograph from Mrs. Willet’s album, but had also destroyed or removed every little keepsake or article of *virtu* by which some possible clue of her whereabouts might be secured.

I let this feature of the matter drop for a time, and finally turned my attention to Halliot’s rather mysterious death. Quite accidentally (through my extensive acquaintance among army officers) I learned that he had been seen in the West, but my informant could not recollect where or under what circumstances. Being confirmed in my opinion, however, that the dashing ex-army officer

was alive and in the enjoyment of as good health as myself, I next turned my attention to the circumstances attending his alleged death.

Pursuing this line of investigation, a certain hotel clerk was found, who had been discharged for irregularities, and who, for an enticing remuneration, freely confessed to assisting Halliot in pretending to die. He stated that Halliot had represented to him that the sham was necessary to prevent a marriage which he loathed. He had helped him simply as one good fellow would help another out of such a scrape, and had been given a handsome present for his trouble. I further ascertained from this man that Halliot was living in elegance in St. Louis, and had recently married a French widow, who had a very young child; but that Halliot was now living under the assumed name of Hilliers, which, the reader will recollect, bore a striking similarity to Villiers, the name of the charming French woman who had so mysteriously disappeared from Mrs. Willet's home in Baltimore.

I could not but put these names together in my mind, and was now certain that I had found a clue to the shrewd pair, who were probably living in elegance in St. Louis on the proceeds of the generous woman they had both wronged; but still I was unable to wholly account for the singular determination of the wronged widow to let them live in peace wherever they might be; for by this time she was as fully convinced as myself and the executor that she had been coolly and deliberately swindled by the couple.

The executor was determined to probe the matter to the bottom, whether or not any of the fifty thousand dollars could be recovered; and I confess that my professional interest and curiosity made me quite as anxious for the same result.

It was a matter now of no difficulty to ascertain definitely that Halliot, or Hilliers, as he now called himself, was living with the beautiful and fascinating French lady as his wife in St Louis; that the man was in a lucrative business; that the woman was supposed to be a handsome and wealthy Parisian widow, who had smitten the husband while traveling in Europe; and that both were very happy in the enjoyment of their ill-gotten gains; and it was a matter of scarcely greater difficulty to place an operative, a dashing man-of-the-world, in Halliot's society in such a way that he soon won his confidence and compelled the revelation of what is the most interesting, romantic, and dramatic feature of the whole affair, showing that the shrewdness of the two, their boldness, their cunning, and, above all, their supreme assurance, were all supremely incredible.

Piece by piece the revelation was made that Halliot had exhausted the means left by his family, had in the meantime married the beautiful Jeannette Villiers, but had kept such marriage secret, and that both, for purposes of plunder, had pretended in society to being single; that, as soon as the acquaintance of Mrs. Willet was formed by Mlle. Villiers, the conspiracy to relieve the widow of her surplus wealth was arranged; that Villiers then won her confidence and esteem, then introduced Halliot, who won her affection to an overwhelming degree; that then Halliot pretended to die, having made the dying confession and secured the oath that Villiers should remain Mrs. Willet's care, knowing that the latter's generosity would be touched, and that she would do the handsome thing, which she had done to the extent of a ten thousand dollar check; and that then, after this much had been secured, Halliot suddenly came to life, before Mrs. Willet, at a place where Villiers had shrewdly arranged to have the widow so that a scene should

be prevented; and that, though Mrs. Willet nearly died of fright and astonishment, she was so overjoyed at his being alive, that the scoundrel moulded her to his purposes like putty, and then and there again made a confession that he had *pretended to die so that he might relieve himself of Jeanette Villiers*, who had never been his wife, but only his mistress, and that he loved the widow to distraction, and could never be happy without her.

Then, in the joy and happiness of this reunion, the double-dyed scoundrel so worked up the woman's feelings and real love for him, that, before they had left the room where Jeannette Villiers had brought them together, Mrs. Willet had agreed to a scheme to get rid of her little French friend by giving her the forty thousand dollars, which had been given, as already related; and, when the entire fifty thousand dollars had been secured, the scheming and brilliant couple quietly left Baltimore and the doubly-wronged and deceived widow, to begin life in the West under the circumstances previously recited.

But it was all of no use. Mrs. Willet positively refused to prosecute the parties; and the operation, while a success in reaching the parties sought and securing the information desired, failed to bring to justice two of the keenest unprofessional swindlers I have known.

Halliot, *alias* Hilliers, is now a hale, hearty man of forty, well-to-do in the world, while Jeannette Villiers, his wife, is a magnificent-appearing woman of a few years younger; and, stranger than all of the strange things connected with this romantic affair, the Halliot family and the family of Mrs. Willet—who was, a few years since, happily remarried—are on the best of terms and as good friends as though this villainous though brilliant confidence swindle had never been performed.

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