

Sheridan, the Forger
by Allan Pinkerton

THERE was born, near Sandusky, Ohio, in the year 1838, an adventurous lad named Walter Eastman Sheridan. His people were plain but intelligent farmers, and, while not possessed of an over-supply of means, had considerable pride in the boy, gave him a liberal education, and destined him, as fond parents usually do, for some very bright career in life.

He remained at home until about fourteen years of age, when its restraints became too irksome, and full of an adventurous spirit, and feeling able to take care of himself in the world, he did what thousands of boys did before him with various results—he “ran away” from home to seek his fortunes in the then brilliant and fascinating city of St. Louis.

Here he secured employment; but, being without a home and its healthful influences, soon fell into bad company. He was a bright, pleasant-faced fellow; but as he was “too independent” to return to his friends or accept their advice, little tricks were soon resorted to, and the boy readily saw that it was an easy matter to win the confidence of those with whom he came in contact, and before he had become eighteen years of age he was an adept in the art of living genteelly from forced public contributions of a varied character.

His first crime, or rather the first crime for which he was tried, was for horse-stealing at St. Louis, in 1858. He was convicted, and, while awaiting sentence, broke jail and escaped to Chicago.

Being a dashing, rosy-cheeked fellow of elegant address, after he had been in that city for a time, he became the pupil of Joe Moran, a noted confidence man and hotel thief, the couple doing a neat and thrifty business from the beginning.

Sheridan proved so pat about everything he did, and exhibited such aptness and delicate judgment in everything he undertook, that the pair continued in partnership nearly three years, working the hotels of Chicago and neighboring cities, but in the early part of 1861 were arrested in the act of robbing the guests’ rooms at the old Adams House in that city. They were both convicted, and given three years each at the Illinois Penitentiary, then located at Alton.

The two men, after serving this term, returned to Chicago together, Moran soon dying of some disease brought on by prison exposure, while Sheridan resumed the same class of operation with the then notorious men of the same ilk, Emmett Lytle, Matt Duffy, and John Supple.

But Sheridan, being a young man of good mind, somewhat cultivated tastes, and large ambition, notwithstanding his reprehensible calling, soon tired of the low associations necessary to this standard of villainy, broke with his old companions, and took a step higher in the profession, becoming the “brains” and leader of “bank-sneaks,” consisting of the notorious Joe Butts, Tom Parrell, *alias* “Pretty Tom,” and others, and for some time the party did a very successful business, the elegant and refined Sheridan acting as “stall.”

As many of my readers may not be very familiar with criminals and their modes of procedure, I will explain what a “stall” is in connection with the neat work of “bank-sneak gangs.”

To begin with, the “gang” is the party generally consisting of about three to five persons working together. As a rule, these persons are gentlemen of elegant leisure, secure large plunder, and have plenty of time to devote to becoming acquainted with the workings of a bank, familiar with the faces and habits of its officers, also of many of the heavier depositors; and when ready for work have quite as much knowledge of the interior arrangements of the bank as many of its employees. Though there are numberless modes of accomplishing the same thing, the following instances will serve as illustrative of them all.

A gentleman who has business stamped in every line of his face and article of his clothing, steps into a bank about noon, when the officers and several of the clerks are generally at lunch, and either presents a forged letter of introduction or in some other manner compels the respectful attention of the cashier, or teller, as the case may be.

He will very probably produce a figuring-block or tablet upon which are various memoranda and figures, and, while asking questions very rapidly and interrupting them quite as abruptly, conveys to the teller, who has already become somewhat distracted, the information that he, as the trustee for something or somebody, has, we will say twenty thousand dollars in five-twenty bonds to invest in different securities, and desires five thousand dollars in gold, five thousand dollars in seven-forties, five thousand dollars in ten-twenties, and five thousand dollars in some railroad stock or other.

This affords the cashier, or teller, a series of delicate, if not difficult, calculations, and all this time the businesslike “trustee”—who is none other than the “stall”—is annoying him with questions, suggestions, and *probably* other orders as to the character of the investment desired, so that the teller’s whole attention is absolutely required to follow the customer’s whims and his own calculations.

This is exactly what has been striven for by the “stall,” and his eminence in his profession is in just the proportion to his ability to accomplish this, whatever be the means he may employ in doing it.

But before this “stall” begins playing the “trustee,” or other game, three of his companions, or pals, called “pipers,” are on the look out for the approach of any of the bank officers or employees, and are ready to sound a signal at the approach of the slightest cause for alarm; and sometimes other “stalls” are stationed in the bank wherever necessary; while, at a given signal, the “sneak,” who is generally a nimble little fellow, slips behind the partition through some open door, or sometimes through open windows, and thence into the bank-vault, where he secures his plunder, which is usually large, because the thieves have taken time to make the operation a success.

After the “sneak” is well away, the “stalls” draw off, so as not to excite suspicion, and the “trustee,” after thankfully receiving the teller’s calculations and agreeing to return with the bonds

to effect the desired exchange before the close of banking hours, takes his departure. The entire job is done in ten or fifteen minutes, and frequently the loss is not discovered for days.

Another game of the “bank-sneak gang,” but one which requires far more nerve, assurance, and personal bravery though far less tact and skill, is to become cognizant of parties making heavy, deposits at a late hour, when everything is rushing about the bank and the check desks are crowded.

In this instance, the sneak, with a bogus bank book in his hand, and with a business-like air about him, taps some gentleman with a flush deposit in his hand lightly on the shoulder, and politely calls his attention to the fact that he has dropped some money. Looking upon the floor, the latter sees a genuine ten-dollar bill (which the sneak has dexterously dropped there, of course), and bends over to pick it up, leaving his book and deposit upon the check-desk.

In an instant the polite gentleman has the money left upon the desk and is upon the street, while the robbed and astounded depositor recovers himself and gives chase; he is apparently accidentally, but very effectually, impeded by other gentlemen (all pals of the sneak), who run into him and beg his pardon in the most natural manner possible, giving the party—who had invested merely a ten-dollar bill and a little politeness, and who may have secured several thousand dollars—ample time to escape.

I could fill pages with instances of this kind, but will only mention a few of the heavier robberies of late years, which were all committed in this manner, all of which are probably still fresh in the public mind. They are:

The noted Lord bond robbery, where a million and a half dollars were taken; the Royal Insurance Company robbery, over a half-million dollars being taken Cambering & Pine, New York brokers, robbed of two hundred thousand dollars; Litchmere Bank, East Cambridge, Mass., seventy-five thousand; the recent robbery of James H. Young, of New York, by the “Little Horace” Hovan party, of five hundred thousand; the Canal Bank, of New Orleans, in 1872, sixty-five thousand; paymaster’s office of the Grand Trunk Railway, Montreal, twenty-five thousand; Adams Express Company’s office, at Cincinnati, ten thousand; First National Bank, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, twenty thousand; and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Sheridan and his party worked this line of business—robbing banks at Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, and other large cities—until 1865, when he separated from these fellows, seeking more high-toned companions, and was taken on by George Williams, *alias* “English George,” a widely-known thief and bank-robber. Williams had had his eye upon the young criminal for some time, and, admiring his shrewdness, audacity, and tact, took him into his Eastern operations, where he did such good work that in 1867 he was known to be worth fully seventy-five thousand dollars.

A little later he participated in the robbing of the Maryland Fire Insurance Company, of Baltimore, acting as “stall” when his party crowded the office and secured upward of seventy-five thousand dollars in money and negotiable bonds.

Not one cent of this money was recovered, nor were any of the robbers captured.

One of the neatest robberies Sheridan ever engaged in was that of United States Judge Blatchford, at an apple-stand in New York city.

The Judge was sauntering along the street, and feeling like partaking of some fruit, he stopped at a little apple-stand, at the corner of Nassau and Liberty Streets, and in a fatherly manner purchased a few apples of the old apple-woman there. Sheridan accosted him, and so interested him for a moment that, when he turned to take up the wallet, which he had carelessly laid upon the stand, he found that it was gone. A suspicion flashed across his mind that the handsome stranger had had something to do with its disappearance; but he too was gone. The wallet contained seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of bonds, and but a small portion of the plunder was recovered.

One of his first exploits, after becoming a professional, was at Springfield, Illinois, where he was not so fortunate. After the Baltimore robbery, he had come West with Charles Hicks, a Baltimore sneak-thief, and Philip Pierson, *alias* "Baltimore Philly," and their initiatory move was upon the First National Bank, at Springfield.

Sheridan called at the bank, and as usual proposed some complicated business, lucrative to the bank, which completely engaged the cashier's attention; while Hicks "piped," and Pierson sneaked into the bank, securing packages containing thirty-two thousand dollars, passing the money over to Hicks.

As Hicks was leisurely leaving the bank the president entered, and observing the huge package peeping out from under his summer overcoat, which was not large enough to cover them, grabbed him, and demanded where he got so much money. He replied that he had just drawn it out. But the president suggested that they had better step into his apartment until he could see about it. The cashier at once saw what had been nearly accomplished, and on some pretext handed a card into the president's apartment without exciting Sheridan's notice, instructing the president to send two men to the front of the bank to detain the person conversing with him, which was done, and which resulted in Sheridan's capture, though Pierson escaped.

Sheridan and Hicks of course claimed that they had never seen each other before, but they were put in different cells and given separate trials. Hicks pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in the Illinois penitentiary at Joliet; but Sheridan played the high moral dodge, gave bail to the amount of seven thousand dollars, which sum he deposited and subsequently forfeited, when the District Attorney set this sum aside towards securing his apprehension, and immediately employed me to use *all* the means at my command to effect his recapture.

I soon ascertained that Sheridan was communicating with Hicks at Joliet, through the latter's brother, who visited him with unusual frequency; and I therefore detailed my son, William A. Pinkerton, with an assistant, to follow out this clue and see what it was worth.

In keeping unremitting watch over this Hicks, my son one evening found himself in the pretty city of Hudson, Michigan, having arrived there on the same train with Hicks.

The latter at once proceeded to the best hotel in the city, still followed by William, who was not long in learning to his surprise that Sheridan owned the hotel, which was being conducted by his brother-in-law, as also a fine fruit-farm in the vicinity of St. Joe, and large tracts of pine and farming lands scattered throughout the State.

Hicks directed the hotel clerk to call him at seven o'clock the next morning, and my son accordingly was put down on the call-book for six.

As great care was necessary to be exercised, lest Sheridan or his friends might learn that he was being so closely followed, William could make only sparing inquiries; but he did succeed in learning enough to convince him that he was not then at Hudson, and, on awakening bright and early in the morning, he decided on making an attempt to accomplish something which might be of the greatest possible assistance in the future.

Although Sheridan had already become famous as a criminal, no picture of him had ever fallen into the hands of the authorities. The public may not be aware of how much service a good picture of a criminal is to the detective. It will do good duty in a hundred places at one time. Accordingly William ascertained the location of the landlord's family rooms, and, while the occupants were at breakfast, committed a small and under the circumstances quite excusable burglary, resulting in securing a capital photograph of Sheridan, which has for several years adorned the rogues' galleries at my different agencies. This picture undoubtedly effected the eventual recent capture of this great criminal, as it was the only picture extant, and was placed in the hands of my almost numberless correspondents both in this country and in Europe.

On this particular occasion spoken of, however, it was of no great importance save to familiarize its possessor with the handsome features of Sheridan, who returned to Hudson the same day.

William wisely concluded that it would be foolish to attempt his arrest in the midst of so many friends, who, if they could not effect his forcible escape, would undoubtedly use every possible effort to secure his legal rescue upon some trivial technicality; and consequently followed him for several days, finally capturing him at Sandusky, Ohio.

As it was, my son had a difficult time in getting the criminal to Chicago, as the splendidly-appearing fellow strongly protested to the passengers that he was being kidnapped, and appealed for aid and rescue in the most impassioned manner possible. Finding this of no avail, although it came pretty nearly being successful, he then shrewdly pretended complete acquiescence, and when for a moment left alone with the operative who had immediate charge of him, offered that person ten thousand dollars in cash merely for the opportunity of being permitted to jump through the window of the car saloon, although well ironed, so that both men were necessarily watched every mile of the remaining distance.

Even after he had been brought to my Chicago Agency preparatory to being forwarded to Springfield, a little instance occurred illustrative of the daring character of the man.

For convenience he had been given a seat temporarily in my private office—he being perfectly secure there, and it being necessary for my son to step outside the door for a moment. Scarcely had he done so, when Sheridan espied my snuff-box, and, instantly grasping it, placed himself in a position to fling its contents into William’s eyes as he re-entered, with the intention of bounding by him in the confusion which would follow and attempting to escape—which, however, would have been utterly impossible, owing to constant safeguards in use at my offices to cover similar cases.

But his intention was just as determined, notwithstanding all this, of which he of course was not aware.

My son re-entered the room slowly—feeling that there might be danger, and knowing his man—with the grin muzzle of a splendid English “Trauter” revolver in front of him; and Sheridan, seeing that his captor was as wary as he was daring and inventive, resumed his seat with the manner of a French courtier, took a pinch of snuff, as he replaced my box, and with airy politeness remarked:

“Billy, that snuff of your father’s is a d—d fine article!”

“For the eyes?” asked William quietly.

“Eyes *or* nose,” he retorted. “But I’m very sorry to say that the *noes* have it this time!”

I succeeded in having the man safely conveyed to Springfield; but Sheridan made his money count in another way than upon my detectives. He had the case fought on every legal technicality which could be brought forward, secured a postponement of trial for nearly a year, and finally a change of venue to the city of Decatur, where, after retaining the very best lawyers in the State of Illinois, and—what was quite as useful—a portion of the jury, he was eventually acquitted, expending altogether for this manner of acquiring liberty the snug little sum of twenty thousand dollars, as he subsequently admitted.

After this affair, Sheridan, who was inordinately ambitious to become noted as one of the most successful thieves in America, went East, and organized a party of “bank-bursters,” or bank-robbers, consisting of Frank McCoy, *alias* “Big Frank,” James Brady, James Hope, Ike Marsh, and others, the crowd becoming a terror to the East, until so closely hunted there that its members were compelled to disband; when he assisted at a robbery of a Cleveland bank, where forty thousand dollars were taken. This was followed by a raid upon the Mechanics’ (Hawley’s) Bank, of Scranton, Pennsylvania, where Sheridan and “Little George” Corson appropriated thirty- thousand dollars’ worth of negotiable bonds.

His next exploit of note, and one which struck a very tender chord in the hearts of several citizens of Louisville, Kentucky, was his planning of and participation in the Halls City Tobacco Bank robbery at that city in 1873 when upward of three hundred thousand dollars were secured.

The robbers rented an office immediately over the vault of the bank, and carried on a legitimate business therein for some months before the robbery occurred. My readers will remember the circumstances of the great Ocean Bank robbery, in New York, where Max Shinnburn's party robbed that bank by renting an insurance office immediately *below* the president's apartments, and then sawed through the floor into the bank and blew open the safe. The same kind of tactics were used here, only the robbers went into the bank from above instead of from beneath, and tumbled into the vault direct, instead of blowing open the vault door.

The gang were divided into regular reliefs, and while one party were digging away through the night, the other were posted in a front room over the St. Charles restaurant immediately opposite, from which point a fine but strong silk cord was stretched to the robbers' windows. Attached to the end of this cord, next the windows over the bank, was a pendant bullet, so that the confederates located over the St. Charles restaurant—whose business it was to watch for any signs of approaching danger—could signal the same on their immediate discovery. In this manner the thieves had an abundance of time and leisure, and finally effected an entrance to the vault early in the night, when they carried away almost everything of value the vault contained.

It was Sheridan's generalship and even bravery if one has the right to apply that term to a person of this character utterly devoid of fear, that caused the retirement of this large amount of capital from Louisville circulation; and these instances, showing his wonderful genius for schemes requiring skill, patience, and personal courage, could be multiplied almost beyond number; but those I have already given will serve to illustrate his marked ability, and also the almost exceptional instance of a criminal beginning among the lowest of associates, and by the tact, skill, and frugality which would have made him a millionaire in respectable life, gradually climbing higher and higher in his grade of crimes with his companions as stepping-stones, until he arrives at the very pinnacle of his criminal calling, and has acquired in that profession everything which men ordinarily seek for—respect, admiration, and hosts of friends, as well as great wealth; for Sheridan was worth in 1874 fully a quarter of a million of dollars, while during these later years of his crimes he maintained most respectable social and business relations.

All of this eminently fitted the man for becoming, as he really was, the author of the gigantic Bank of England forgeries, although the very caution, ability, and skill which first made the scheme possible eventually led to the work being done by other parties; and it is safe to say that if Sheridan had had the management of the affair throughout it would have proved a success instead of a failure.

The members of the original party subscribing to this Bank of England scheme were Sheridan, George Wilkes, Andrew J. Roberts, and Frank Gleason, while McDonnell and Bidwell, now serving life sentences for the crime, were to conduct the English branch of the operation. Sheridan discovered that the two last-named men were lacking in discretion, as afterward proved true, and he consequently withdrew from the scheme altogether. He then organized a party—consisting of Roberts, Gleason, Spence Pectis, and Gottlieb Engels—for a series of the most gigantic forgeries ever known in America, and finally issued bonds, to the extent of five million dollars on the following institutions and corporations: New York Central, Chicago and Northwestern, New Jersey Central, Union Pacific, and California and Oregon Railroads, the Erie Water Loan Bonds, the Western Union Telegraph Company, and other similar great

corporations. The floating of these forged bonds ruined scores of Wall Street brokers as well as private investors.

Their execution was almost absolutely faultless, and an instance is given where some of these forged bonds of the Buffalo and Erie road were taken to the president of the company for examination, having been offered suspiciously low, when he not only pronounced them genuine, but purchased thirty thousand dollars' worth for an investment.

At least half the amount issued was disposed of.

Sheridan now assumed a new character. He became Ralston, nephew of the once great San Francisco banker who committed suicide after his financial downfall. With this name and plenty of money he became a member of the New York Produce Exchange, and at No. 60 Broadway carried on a successful business as agent for the Belgian Stone Company, dealing largely in all manner of fancy marbles.

On the eventual discovery of the forgeries, Sheridan quietly gathered his assets together, and sped to Belgium—that fashionable retreat for Americans having too little honesty and too much brains.

It is not known just how large an amount Sheridan succeeded in disposing of, but it must have equaled all that of the other large operators. "Steve" Raymond sold ninety thousand dollars' worth, and Charles Williams, *alias* Perrin, one hundred and ten thousand, while the American public was mulcted fully two millions in excess of the amount secured from our English cousins in the Bank of England forgeries.

When I sent my son, William A. Pinkerton, to Europe to capture and return Raymond, which he accomplished, he met Sheridan in Brussels, where he was then living like a prince, with the avowed determination of never returning to America. But he did return here; and that mistake eventually led to my capturing him. He could not live without the excitement of scheming, speculating, criminal adventure, and what was to him the genuine pleasure of transacting business on a large scale.

He slipped back to America, and, under the name of Walter A. Stewart, suddenly appeared at Denver, where he established probably the largest and most expensive hot-house in America, did an immense business in supplying that market with vegetables and rare plants, was elected a director of the German National Bank of that city, and soon established a bank of his own at Rosita, in the Colorado mining districts. Here his spirit of speculation took possession of him again, and he began the wildest kind of gambling in mining stocks, which resulted in his losing every dollar he possessed on earth.

About this time I again got upon Sheridan's trail, and, following him from point to point, learned that he contemplated a trip to the East, to discover his old companions and inaugurate some new and brilliant scheme of robbery. In trusting matters at New York to my son, Robert A. Pinkerton, Superintendent of my New York office, I gradually caused the lines to be drawn in about him; and on the night of March 23, 1876, at eleven o'clock, as Sheridan, *alias* Ralston, *alias* Stewart,

was landing in New York city from the Pennsylvania ferryboat, at the foot of Desbrosses Street, my son Robert slipped his arm through that of the criminal's, and quietly said:

“Sheridan, I want you to come to the Church Street police-station with me. I have a bench warrant for your arrest.”

He made no resistance, but seemed to give up all hope and courage at once.

As he was without money, the legal fight made for his liberty was not so bitter as had been anticipated, and in consideration of this, and the sympathy created on account of his rapidly failing health, and though he came into New York with eighty-two indictments hanging over his head, his trial and conviction only resulted in a sentence for five years in the penitentiary; which, under the circumstances, will serve all the ends of justice, as undoubtedly before the expiration of that term he will pass from an infamous life to an infamous grave in the little cemetery just above Sing Sing.

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