

(Written for the Flag of Our Union)  
*The Returned Convict*

by An English Attorney

IN the year 1820, a gentleman of middle age took up his abode in a cottage in the vicinity of the town of St. Omers, in the department of Calais, France. He was an Englishman, and unmarried, apparently pretty well educated, and possessing the appearance and manners of a gentleman, although there was something special about him—as the French phrase goes, a certain *je ne sais quoi*—which impressed most persons with the idea that he had not been born and bred to the position in life he now occupied.

The cottage was an ancient, dilapidated structure, which had once been the residence of a Paris banker, whose heirs—he having been dead several years—had let it go to decay. The windows were shattered, the roof was leaky, and the once pretty and extensive garden which surrounded it was a wilderness of weeds, when the Englishman, whose name was George Wilson, took a lease of property for twenty years.

In a brief space of time, the cottage was thoroughly renovated, within and without, the apartments elegantly furnished, and the gardens brought under excellent cultivation. At that period, so soon after the peace, the travellers on the continent of Europe, from England, were comparatively few, and mostly men of rank and fortune. It was not until many years later that it became the fashion for every lawyer's clerk and linendraper's shopman to indulge in a trip to Paris, or at least to Boulogne and Calais, during his summer holliday, consequently every Englishman who visited France was supposed to be rich, and hence the title given to them by the shopkeepers and innkeepers, of *Milord Anglais*.

When, therefore, it became known in the little town of St. Omers that Mr. Wilson intended to take up his permanent residence at the cottage, much pleasure was manifested by the tradespeople of the neighborhood, who, believing in the conventional idea that the English are a race of *gourmands*, anticipated a good run of custom from *milord*, and as *milord* was a bachelor, and very good-looking, albeit he had nearly attained to his fiftieth year, many a smart young French maiden pleased herself with the hope that *milord* would ere long be looking around him for a young French wife to take care of the cottage which he had fitted up so prettily.

However, both shopkeepers and maidens were doomed to disappointment. *Milord*, as Wilson was usually termed, lived quietly and soberly—not in a niggardly, but in an economical manner, having for his sole domestic an old French *bonne*, or nurse, and taking charge of the garden himself—and yet it was abundantly evident that Wilson's income was large, very much exceeding his expenditure, for economically as he lived and plainly as he dressed, he gave away large sums annually, though not in ordinary charity, for the beggar was always sent away empty-handed from his door, and the poor of the town and neighborhood, and the public charities, were none the better for his money. His charity took a strange turn, and his benevolence found its sole scope in providing counsel for prisoners charged with criminal offences, who were too poor to provide for themselves the services of adequate counsel to plead their causes.

In this regard, the charity of Wilson knew no bounds; and more than this, he was in the habit of attending the courts when the assizes were held, not alone in St. Omers, but for miles around, and sometimes, when any case of special interest was on hand, and when there appeared to be doubts of the strength of the evidence against the accused, he even went to Paris. Many a prisoner who would otherwise have been convicted, was cleared by his money; and while the trials were proceeding, he was in the habit of sitting throughout the entire day, all his attention occupied in the case, which he listened to with as much interest as if he were himself on trial, or the prisoner were a relative or friend of his. In consequence of this singular direction of his philanthropy, he acquired the sobriquet of *l'ami des prisonieres*, the prisoner's friend.

In 1829, Mr. Wilson died at his cottage, leaving by his will a pension to his old French domestic of one thousand francs a year for life, and sufficient money to the corporation of St. Omers to inter him decently—a last office of friendship, which he did not inquire whether or not they were willing to undertake, but one, nevertheless, which they were very glad to perform, for no one knew whether he had any friends and it was therefore necessary to dispose of his corpse somehow or other.

As no one in France knew from what source Mr. Wilson's ample income was derived, nor indeed anything about his money affairs, with the exception of the banker at St. Omers, who received semi-annually a considerable sum of money, placed in his hands by the Englishman himself for safe keeping, from which he drew such checks as he required during the six months, at the termination of which period the sum was usually all withdrawn, and an equal amount placed to his credit for the next half-year; it was a puzzle to the busybodies to surmise what had become of the fortune he was supposed to have left. But as there was at the period of his decease only a sufficient balance in the hands of his banker to defray the afore-mentioned funeral expenses, and pay the old *bonne's* annual pension, it was generally conceded that this was all he had to bequeath, and that his large income had died with him.

A few days after Mr. Wilson's interment, the Rev. Mr. Colton, at that period the ordinary of Newgate received a letter, which ran as follows:

“St. Omers, Dep. Pas de Calais, France, }  
June 8, 1829. } ”

“REVEREND SIR:—Inclosed you will find the duplicate of my will drawn at this place, St. Omers, De., Pas de Calais, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March last, a copy of which is also lodged with Messrs. Hoare & Co., bankers, Fleet street, London, from which you will learn that I have bequeathed the interest of forty thousand pounds in the funds (3 1-2 per cent console), amounting to £1400 per annum, to the prison of Newgate, to be devoted to the purchase of the service of skillful counsel for such poor persons charged with criminal offences who are unable, on account of their poverty, to procure them for themselves.

“Messrs. Hoare & Co. will receive the semi-annual payments from the Bank of England; and I herewith desire that the chaplain and the governor of Newgate, *pro tem.*, be my executors for the expenditure of the legacy, accepting a sum of not more than five per cent for their services.

“I, the legator, have for ten years past lived a secluded life in France. Prior to that period I passed fourteen years of my life in the penal colony of Botany Bay, having been convicted of being accessory, inasmuch as I was adjudged to have been cognizant, of a large burglary which occurred twenty-five years ago. He who was deemed the real thief was hanged innocently, for I hereby declare that John Smith was innocent entirely of the crime imputed to him—but to have confessed so much at the time of the trial, would have sealed my own fate.

“I longed to do so, but I had not the necessary courage, and I basely and coward-like allowed an innocent man to suffer the extreme penalty of the law in my stead. Had he, at the time of the trial, had proper counsel to plead his cause, I have no doubt that his innocence would have been proved; but he was poor, and so was I, only for the proceeds of the robbery. With a portion of them I bribed an eminent counsel to defend me; and I hereby swear that that counsel—long since gone to his final account, to answer for his perfidy before a justly offended God, and the innocent victim of his special pleading—was perfectly aware of Smith’s innocence, as I was.

“I have suffered intensely for my crime. May God accept this suffering and my sincere repentance as an atonement. In prison, before I was sent to the penal colonies; on board the ship in which I sailed, a convict; during the fourteen years that I remained in Botany Bay, and during my residence here in France, not a night has passed that I have not seen palpably before me, pointing with his finger, in a threatening attitude, and with a frown upon his features, the innocent victim of my treachery. I have lived for twenty-four years a life of bitter remorse, feeling myself unfit to associate with my fellow-men, living the life of a hermit, fancying that men shrank from me, as I passed them on the street or on the road, and finding my sole relief in attempting to prevent the innocent, who have been charged with crime, from suffering unjustly, by providing fitting counsel for prisoners in France who were unable from poverty to secure such assistance for themselves. On such occasions, I have fancied that the sp’rit of my murdered victim looked less angrily upon me during his nocturnal visits.

“I was afraid, while living, to take this course in my native land; but I feel now—thank God for the great mercy!—that my days are numbered. When you receive this letter and the duplicate of my last will, I shall be no more. May I find in heaven the pardon and peace of mind I have not found on earth.

“In the name of humanity, I pray that this, my last request, may be carried out according to my desire. My true name I shall not disclose. To do so would benefit no one, though I am not aware that I have a relative living, or that there is any one living whom I knew twenty-five years ago.

“The person who was plundered of this large sum of money has been dead nearly twenty years, and his heirs were not his lineal descendants, therefore as I do not consider that they have any claim upon property which was stolen before the will by which they have inherited was drawn, or to them would I have made restitution. This being the case, I have thought the best use I could make of my ill-gotten gains would be to employ them as I have done, and I wish them so to be employed after by death.

“I am, reverend sir, yours faithfully and respectfully, a repentant sinner,     GEORGE WILSON.”

When this strange letter was received by the ordinary of Newgate, the reverend gentleman's first impression was that it had come from an insane man, but upon making application at the banking-house of Messrs. Hoare & Co., he found that it was exactly as stated in the letter. The bankers had a duplicate of the will, and they stated that for over ten years they had collected on account of a Mr. George Wilson, of St. Omers, whom they had never seen, the sum of £700, semi-annually, being the half-yearly interest of £10,000 in the three and a half per cent consols.

This strange bequest became known, and it naturally led to a great deal of curiosity and to an endeavor to trace out the particulars of the robbery and discover the true name of the thief, and of his alleged victim, for it was considered that the common name of John Smith was, as well as that of Wilson, assumed, and not the correct name of the person alluded to.

It would seem that it would have been no difficult matter to trace back a robbery of such a large amount, especially where two persons had been charged with the crime and convicted, while one had suffered death, yet two or three years had elapsed, and the legacy had been duly applied to the specified purpose, before the particulars of the case became known. Indeed, many persons believed that the first impression of the chaplain was correct, and that the testator had been some insane philanthropist or some monomaniac, who had lived a secluded life in France, imagining that he had acquired his wealth by means of a robbery which had never occurred, and had died in the same belief. At length, however, a keen detective, who for the sake of mere amusement had taken the matter in hand, made the following discovery, proving that the explanation of the reputed George Wilson was true to the letter.

In 1818, George Megrum was butler to a gentleman of ancient family and princely fortune, whose town house was in Cavendish Square, London. The under-butler in the same family was one John Smith—a lad of eighteen years. The butler, George Megrum, had been in the family since boyhood, having passed through all the gradations of male domestic service until he was elevated to the chief post, and, consequently, the utmost trust and confidence was reposed in him.

Sir Everard T—, the gentleman in question, whose annual income from landed property was computed to an amount of £50,000, and who was consequently one of the wealthiest men in England, had gone one autumn, according to custom, to his country seat to spend the shooting season, leaving at his town house the whole rations of servants employed therein, as he had another set of domestics who were permanently employed in his country mansion. The butler alone was in the habit of going backwards and forwards from town to country and *vice versa*, with his master's family. On this occasion, however, he had remained in London, as Sir Everard and his family were intending, at the close of the shooting season, to spend the winter and following spring in Florence, where Sir Everard also owned a villa residence.

The family were absent from England until the following June, when they returned to London, to discover, according to the butler's account, that several large chests of gold and silver plate were missing, besides a vast quantity of jewelry and money which had been entrusted to the butler to deposit in the bank, amounting altogether to considerably over sixty-five thousand pounds in

value. The under-butler, John Smith, had also disappeared from the house, and was, in consequence, suspected of the robbery.

However enormous may be a man's wealth, the loss of sixty-five thousand pounds is not likely to be easily taken, especially when the family plate, much of which had been descended from remote ancestry, and was therefore considered invaluable, was among the missing property. Sir Everard did not suspect, but he severely blamed the butler for his negligence, and used every endeavor to discover the under-butler—the suspected thief.

Smith was at length discovered in a remote part of Ireland, where he belonged, residing with his parents in a style of opulence far above their condition. It is said that the under-butler was a lad of weak intellect; but however this may have been, he was arrested, and on searching his father's cottage a considerable sum of money and several trifling articles of plate and jewelry bearing Sir Everard's crest were found in the dwelling. On being questioned, the under-butler replied that the butler had told him that he was discharged by Sir Everard's order, and that at the same time his master had presented him with one hundred pounds and a few trifling presents for his parents, on condition of his returning home and remaining at his native village in the extreme north of Ireland. It must be remembered that Sir Everard had not the best idea that Smith was an Irishman, therefore it was entirely through the vigilance of the detective that the lad was traced to his native village.

Actuated perhaps by his alleged weakness of intellect, or by some motive that could not be discovered, Smith had buried a portion of the small articles of plate given him by the butler in a piece of waste land a considerable distance from his father's cottage, without even having informed his parents that he possessed the valuables, and it was only with considerable difficulty that the officers could induce him to point out these hiding-places, and then he would only reluctantly point out one at a time.

Smith was brought to London and confronted with the butler, who of course strenuously denied the lad's statements, which assuredly were very improbable. However, he was arrested, and though nothing could be proved against him, and though he was most ably defended, the evidence of his guilt was so strong that the jury returned a verdict to the effect that he was cognizant of the theft—a strange enough verdict, for why, if he were cognizant, did he allow a fellow-servant to appropriate such an immense amount of property without either denouncing him or claiming his share of the spoils? But the verdict was rendered, and it was in accordance with the ridiculous system of criminal jurisprudence then in vogue.

The result was, as the reader is aware, that the under-butler was capitally convicted, and the butler condemned to fourteen years penal servitude. The latter had no doubt, from his subsequent confession of his fellow-servant's innocence, given the weak-minded lad the money and valuables in order to induce him to go home, and remain there, and thus take upon his own shoulders the onus of the crime, and it was believed that all the plate and money was concealed in the same waste land, or somewhere near the spot where the trifling articles were found. For several months men were employed digging the ground in search of the lost treasure; but nothing was found but two or three small articles, which with singular obstinacy the boy Smith would not acknowledge that he had concealed, and at length the search was given over as useless.

Now comes the singular part of the affair. The butler had deposited several trunks containing this property of such immense value in a warehouse in London for safe keeping, stating that they contained articles of considerable weight, but of trifling value, which he might take away for a few days, or as he was going abroad, they might be in the warehouse for months; this reservation being doubtless made in case, as the butler had anticipated, he should be unable, without incurring suspicion, to make away with the plate and jewelry for a considerable time. They laid in store for fourteen years, without the owner of the warehouse having the slightest suspicion of their real value, and notwithstanding all the talk that such a robbery made, which one would think would have led the storekeeper to suspect that the chests might contain the missing property, and when, at the expiration of fourteen years, the butler returned from Botany Bay, he redeemed the property, which he had deposited in the name of George Wilson (greatly astonished himself to find it all secure), paid the storekeeper his charge for rent, melted the gold and silver, and realized £40,000, with which sum he emigrated to France, and lived and died there as we have shown.

The heirs in the second degree who were still living in 1820, endeavored to substantiate their claim to the property thus bequeathed to Newgate prison; but as they were not lineal descendants nor blood relations, and especially as the robber had expiated his offence according to law, the claim was not allowed, and the interest of the £40,000 is still employed according to the will of the testator, and in other charities for the benefit of destitute prisoners.

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