

"A Trip to the South"

by

Allan Pinkerton

-from A Spy of the Rebellion  
(1883)

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I was summoned for consultation with General McClellan. Upon reporting to his office immediately I found him awaiting my arrival, and in a few minutes I was informed of his wishes. He wanted to ascertain the general feelings of the people residing south of the Ohio River, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana; and requested that measures be at once taken to carry out his purposes.

It was essentially necessary at the outset to become acquainted with all the facts that might be of importance hereafter. No time offered such opportunities for investigations of this nature as the present, while the war movement was in its incipiency and before the lines between the opposing forces would be so closely drawn as to render traveling in the disaffected district unsafe, if not utterly impossible.

As this mission was of a character that required coolness and tact, as well as courage, and as most of my men had been detailed for duties in other sections of the rebellious country, I concluded to make the journey myself. At once I stated my intention to the general who received it with every evidence of satisfaction and approval.

My first objective point was the city of Louisville, Kentucky. Representing myself as a southern man, a resident of Georgia, I had no difficulty in engaging in conversation with the prominent men of Louisville. I decided then, from my own observations, that Kentucky would not cast her fortunes with the south, but that after the bubble of unnatural excitement had burst and

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expanded itself, the loyal heart would be touched and "Old Kaintuck" would eventually keep step to the music of the Union. Results proved that I was not mistaken, and not many weeks elapsed before Union camps were established within her domain and the broad-shouldered Kentuckians were swearing allegiance to the old flag and shouldering their muskets.

Passing on undisturbed, but everywhere on the alert, and making copious notes of everything that transpired that I considered at all material to the furtherance of the loyal cause, I reached Bowling Green.

At this place I found a very decided Union sentiment. The Stars and Stripes were floating from the various buildings, and the Union men were largely in the majority. I purchased a splendid bay horse, intending to make the rest of my journey on horseback. By this means I would be better able to control my movements than if I were compelled to depend upon the railroads for transportation. I would also be able to stop at any place where I might find the necessity or a favorable opportunity for observation.

I reached Nashville, Tennessee, in due season and resolved to devote several days to my investigations. Here the disunion element was more united and outspoken. But even here, I detected evidences of Union sentiment which was none the less profound because of the danger which its utterances would have incurred. There could be no doubt that this state had resolved to cast her fortunes with the Confederacy, and the rebel General Pillow had been for some time engaged in fortifying the city of Memphis. At Nashville I met a number of officers of the rebel army, all of whom were full of enthusiasm and whose bombastic utterances in view of the eventual results seem at this time almost too absurd to be repeated. Here also I came in contact with an army surgeon whose head was full of wild quixotic schemes for destroying the northern armies by other processes than that of legitimate warfare.

One of his plans I remembered was to fill a commissary wagon with whiskey, in which had been previously mixed a generous

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quantity of strychnine. The wagon was then to be broken and abandoned and left upon the road so as to fall into the hands of the Union soldiers. Of course the liquor would be consumed by the finders, and the valiant doctor with evident satisfaction to himself, but to the equally evident disgust of his companions, loudly vaunted his death-dealing and barbarous scheme. This brave warrior, I learned afterward, had fled in terror at the first fire and was afterwards dishonorably dismissed from the service he was so well calculated to disgrace. So as far as I was able to learn, this grand project for wholesale slaughter of the valorous doctor received no sympathy or support from his more honorable associates; and the soldiers were able to drink their whiskey untainted with any other poisonous influences than is naturally a part of its composition.

Leaving Nashville, I spurred on in the direction of Memphis, and in due time reached the city which now presented a far different aspect than when I visited it only a few years before. Then the country was at peace. The war cloud had not burst with all its fury over a happy land, and the people were quietly pursuing their avocations.

Now the streets were filled with soldiers, some of them fully armed and equipped and others provided with but ordinary clothing and furnished with such inefficient arms as they had brought with them from their homes. A most motley gathering they were, and their awkward and irregular evolutions at this time gave but little promise of the splendid army of which they were destined in the near future to form so important a part. The work of fortifying the city had been progressing in earnest; earthworks had been thrown up all along the banks of the Mississippi, and batteries whose guns frowned threateningly upon the river were already in position.

Here to be known or suspected as a Union man was to merit certain death, and to advocate any theory of compromise between the two sections was to be exiled from the city. Rebelism was rampant and defiant. I had some difficulty in evading the suspicions of the watchful and alert southerner who regarded all strange civilians with doubtful scrutiny, and whose "committee of safety" was ever on the *qui vive* to detect those whose actions savored in the least of a leaning towards the north. Fearlessly, however, I mingled with these men, and as I lost no opportunity

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in pronouncing my views upon the righteousness of the cause of secession and belief in its certain triumph, I obtained a ready passport to the favor and confidence of the most prominent of their leaders. I talked unreservedly with the private soldier and the general officer, with the merchant and the citizen, and by all was regarded as a staunch southern man whose interests and sympathies were wedded to rebellion.

General Pillow was in command at this point, and almost every citizen was enrolled as a soldier whose services would be cheerfully and promptly rendered whenever the call should be made upon them.

Even this redoubtable chieftain was not proof against my blandishments. Little did he dream when on one occasion when he quietly sipped his brandy and water with me that he was giving valuable information to his sworn foe, and one to whom every idea gained was an advantage to the government he was attempting to destroy.

It is needless to relate the valuable items of information which I was enabled to glean upon this journey. Information which in later days was of vast importance to the union commanders, but which at this time would only burden a narrative of the events which they so ably assisted to successful results.

Here, as in many other places, I found that my best source of information were the Negroes who were employed in various capacities of a military nature which entailed hard labor. The slaves were sent by their masters, without reserve, to perform the manual labor of building earthworks and fortifications, in driving the teams, and in transporting cannon and ammunition. Led by my natural and deepseated regard for these sable bondmen, I mingled freely with them and found them ever ready to answer questions and to furnish me with every fact which I desired to possess.

Here and there I found an unassuming white man whose heart was still with the cause of the Union, but whose active sympathy could not at this time be of service to the country as he dared not utter a voice in defense of his opinions. From all these sources, I was successful in posting myself fully in regard to the movement and intentions of the rebel authorities and officers.

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On the third evening of my sojourn in Memphis, my dreams of fancied security were suddenly dispelled, and I was brought face to face with the reality of danger.

I had retired early to my room, according to my general custom, and had scarcely been seated when I was disturbed by a faint but quick and distinct knocking at my door. I arose hastily, as it was something unusual for me to receive visitors after I had retired. Throwing open the door, I was somewhat surprised to see standing before me in a state of unmistakable excitement the Negro porter of the hotel.

Before I had time to question him, he sprang into the room and closed the door behind him. Jem's countenance indicated a degree of terror that immediately filled me with alarm. The news was that I had been identified by one of the Confederate soldiers who at that very moment was off to inform the general.

This was too important to be ignored. I had no desire to be captured at that time, and I had no doubt of the correctness of the porter's story. I resolved to act at once and make good my escape before it was too late. My admonitory friend was fearfully in earnest about getting me away. He quickly volunteered to procure my horse which I had quartered in close proximity to the hotel and to furnish me with a guide who would see me safely through the lines and outside of the city. Bidding Jem to make all possible haste in his movements, I gathered together my few belongings and descended the stairs and made my exit through the rear of the house. Through the faithfulness of Jem and the careful guidance of the watchful Negro he had provided me with, I was soon riding away from threatened danger. When morning broke I had proceeded far upon my way. How much service these faithful blacks had been to me I did not fully learn until some time afterwards. One of my employees, Timothy Webster, had arrived in Memphis following my departure and had learned the full particulars of the exhausting pursuit of one of Lincoln's spies who had mysteriously disappeared from the chief hotel while a guard was being detailed to effect his arrest.

I met the faithful Jem several years later when he had worked his way as a refugee from his native state and entered the Union lines in Virginia. He was soon afterwards attached to my force where he proved his devotion in a manner that was quite convincing.

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After a long journey, I entered the state of Mississippi. Here rebellion and disunion were the order of the day, and a widespread determination existed to fight the cause of the south to the bitter end. Stopping one night at Grenada, I pushed on my way to Jackson, and here I resolved to remain a day or two, in order to make a thorough investigation of the place and its surroundings.

Putting up my horse, I engaged quarters for myself at the principal hotel in the city. Feeling very much fatigued by my long journey, I retired early to my room and passed a long night in refreshing sleep.

In the morning I arose about 5 o'clock, as is my general custom. I was feeling in excellent health and spirits; my journey had thus far been fully as successful as I could have desired; and safely concealed about my person I had items of value that would amply repay me for the fatigues I had undergone and the dangers I had passed. I had plans of the roads, description of the country, a pretty correct estimate of the troops and their various locations and conditions, and altogether I felt very well satisfied with myself and with the results of my mission.

As I descended the stairs, I noticed a fine soldierly officer standing in the doorway, and after bidding him a hearty good morning, I invited him to accompany me to the saloon of the hotel where we mutually indulged in a decoction as is the universal custom in southern cities. After I had obtained my breakfast, it occurred to me that before attempting any active measures for the day I owed it to myself to procure the services of a barber for a much needed shave. I had been traveling for a number of days and my face had been a stranger to a razor for a long time. I concluded that I would be more presentable if I consulted a tonsorial artist.

This was an unfortunate idea, and I soon had occasion to regret having entertained it for a moment. I would have been far more contented if I had bestowed no thoughts upon my grizzled beard and allowed nature to take its course.

Entirely unconscious, however, of what was in store for me, I entered the well-fitted saloon of the hotel and patiently waited my turn to submit myself to the deft fingers of the knight of the razor.

In response to the universal and well-understood call of "next!" I took my seat in the luxuriously upholstered chair, and

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in a few minutes my face was covered with the foamy lather applied by the dapper little German into whose hands I had fallen.

I noticed when I sat down that the man wore a puzzled and speculative look, as though he was struggling with some vexing lapse of memory. As he drew the keen edge of the razor across my face, his eyes were fixed intensely upon my features. His manner annoyed me considerably, and I was at a loss to account for his strange demeanor. Whatever ideas I may have entertained with regard to this singular action were soon set at rest, only to give place to a feeling of unrestful anger.

He had just cleared one side of my face of its stubby growth of hair when a smile irradiated his face, and with a look of self-satisfied recognition and pride, he addressed me:

"How do you do, Mr. Pinkerton?"

Had a thunderbolt fallen at my feet I could not have been more perfectly amazed, and for a moment I could scarcely tell whether I was afoot or on horseback. I devoutly wished that I was anywhere than with this Dutch barber whose memory was so uncomfortably retentive.

I had been too accustomed to sudden surprises, however, to lose my self-control, and I replied to him, with an unmoved face and as stern a voice as I could command:

"I am not Mr. Pinkerton, and I don't know the man."

"Oh yes, your name is Pinkerton, and you live in Chicago."

The face of the German was so good-natured, and he appeared quite delighted at recognizing me, but for myself I was feeling very uncomfortable indeed. I did not know the man, nor what he knew of me. I knew, however, that he was perfectly right about my identity, and I knew also that it would be very dangerous for his knowledge to become general.

"I tell you I don't know the man you are speaking of," said I, sternly.

"Oh, Mr. Pinkerton," he replied, in a grieved tone, I know you well. Don't you remember me shaving you in the Sherman House in Chicago, you were a customer of mine.

The pertinacity of the man was simply exasperating. Fearing that his memory would be likely to get me into trouble, as several people were listening to our conversation, I resolved to end the

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difficulty at once. Jerking the towel from around my neck and wiping the lather from the unshave portion of my face, I leapt from the chair, exclaiming angrily:

"I tell you I know nothing of your Mr. Pinkerton, or any other d—d Yankee abolitionist, and if you say another word to me upon this subject, I'll whip you on the spot!"

The barber presented a most ridiculous appearance. He was utterly frightened at my manner, and yet so convinced was he that I was the man he took me for that he appeared more amazed at my denial than at my threats of violence.

Meanwhile, the occupants of the saloon began to crowd around us, and several came in from the adjoining rooms. Turning to them with well-simulated anger, I told them the story I had invented. I lived near Augusta, Georgia, never was in Chicago, and did not know Mr. Pinkerton or any of his gang. Then I denounced the discomfitted barber in round terms and finished by inviting the entire crowd to take a drink with me.

This they all did with alacrity, and by the time they had drained their glasses, every one of the party were strong adherents of mine. We then returned to the barbershop, and so thoroughly was the crowd convinced of my truthfulness that they were eager to punish the innocent occasion of my anger. One impetuous individual wanted to hang him on sight, and his proposition was received with general favor; but finding I had succeeded in evading detection for myself, I interfered in the poor fellow's behalf and he was finally let off.

After another drink all around I managed to get away from the party, and it was not long before I was upon my horse, and traveling away from the possibility of a recurrence of such an accidental discovery. I procured a razor and shaving materials and performed that operation for myself, as I did not care to excite curiosity by exhibiting my half-shaved face to any more inquisitive barbers.

A few miles outside of the town I sold my horse. Concluding that I had obtained as much information as was desirable at that time and had already been absent from headquarters longer than I had intended, I made my way back to Cincinnati by a circuitous route. Reached there in safety, well pleased with my work, and quite rejoiced to find that General McClellan was fully satisfied with what I had learned.