

A FORMIDABLE WEAPON

P. H. Woodward

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In the summer and fall of 1875 circulars were scattered broadcast over the country, and advertisements appeared in the weekly editions of several leading papers of New York City and other large towns, setting forth the rare merits of a weapon of destruction called "Allan's New Low-Priced Seven-Shooter." As a specimen of ingenious description, the more salient parts of the circular are herewith reproduced:—

"In introducing this triumph of mechanical genius to the American public, it is proper to say that it is not an entirely new article, but that it has lately been improved in appearance, simplicity of construction, and accuracy, having new points of excellence, making it superior in many respects to those first made. The manufacturers having improved facilities for making them cheaply and rapidly, have reduced the price to one dollar and fifty cents; and while the profits on a single one are necessarily small, this price places them within the reach of all.

"We wish it distinctly understood that this is no cheap, good-for-nothing 'pop-gun'; and while none can expect it to be 'silver-mounted' for \$1.50, they have a right to expect the worth of their money, and in this new improved seven-shooter a want is supplied.

"Great care is taken in the adjustment of EACH, so that ALL are equally good and reliable. In their production no trouble or expense has been spared. An elaborate and complete set of machinery and gauges has been made, by means of which all the parts are produced exactly alike, thus insuring great uniformity in the character of the work produced."

This remarkable implement, equally useful for peace or war, is offered to an eager public at the low price of \$1.50 each, or \$13 per dozen. On the score of cheapness, the inventor greatly prefers the mails to the express as a vehicle for the transport of his wares. In fact, he declines to patronize the express companies at all, unless a prepayment of twenty-five per cent, accompanies each order as a guaranty of the "purchaser's good faith."

At first the enterprise succeeded even beyond the most sanguine expectations of its projector, letters with the cash inclosed pouring in by the hundred. For several months, however, after the first publication of the advertisement, "this triumph of mechanical genius," though "not an entirely new article," existed only in the comprehensive brain of the gentleman who had the greatness to discern in the imperfect work of predecessors the germs of ideal perfection. Having no seven-shooters to send, he was compelled to dishonor the requisitions of the expectant "traveler, sailor, hunter, fisherman, etc." While careful to lay aside the inclosures, he entirely forgot even to so far remember his patrons as to make a record of their names.

In due time, however, the "factory" went into operation, and the seven-shooters were actually produced. The mechanical "triumph," rudely made of a cheap metal composition, is a duplicate of a toy long used by boys to the delight of each other, and to the annoyance of their elders. The propulsive power resides in a steel spring, which has force enough to send a bird-shot across a good-sized room. The outfit would cost perhaps six or eight cents to the manufacturer. A portion of the orders were now filled, the greater part being still thrown unhonored into the waste-basket as before.

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Curses both loud and deep began to be showered on the head of the swindler. Complaints having reached the department, special agent C. E. Henry started to hunt for "Wilcox & Co.," of Windsor, Ohio, for such was the direction in the advertisements and on the circular. Proceeding several miles from the nearest railroad, he found the rural settlement where the factory was supposed to be located.

Guided by various inquiries, he finally drove up to the small farm-house where the parents of Wilcox & Co. resided. On entering, the officer said, "I am in search of Mr. Wilcox, of the firm of Wilcox & Co."

"I am your man," remarked a youth, perhaps twenty-two years of age, whose countenance at once suggested acuteness and cunning. "What will you have?"

"I would like to take a look about the arsenal and gun-factory located here," replied the detective, leisurely surveying the landscape.

"The works are in Cleveland," answered the great inventor. "You can see them by calling there."

"But where is the arsenal? I understand it was situated here."

"Your information is correct," replied the young man. "That is it, across the road."

Casting his eye in the direction indicated, the officer saw a rickety woodshed about seven feet by nine in size.

Observing the smile of amused incredulity that played upon the features of his questioner, Wilcox reiterated, with an air of half-offended dignity,—

"That's it. We keep our seven-shooters there. But look here; before this thing goes any further, I want to know who you are."

"Oh, certainly, sir," answered the stranger. "You will find nothing about me that I care to keep concealed. I am a special agent of the post-office department, and my business here is to arrest you."

"Why, what have I done to warrant such a visit?" queried youthful innocence.

"I shall be happy to make that point clear to you," replied the detective, "though I am afraid the enlightenment will come too late to prove of much service to you. In using the mails for the purpose of swindling, you have violated the laws of the country, and must suffer the penalty."

"But where does the swindling come in?" expostulated Wilcox. "I advertised a seven-shooter. I didn't say anything about a revolver. It will shoot seven shot, or twice that number, if you only put them in. If anybody is green enough to suppose I meant a revolver, that's his lookout, not mine."

"We are not called upon to decide the point," said the special agent. "The question is one for the court and the jury. But you must go with me to Cleveland. So get ready."

Finding persuasion, argument, and remonstrance alike useless, the great mechanical genius packed his satchel in preparation for the journey. Once fairly on the road, he became communicative, and explained the reasons which led him to embark in the enterprise. "In the first place," said he, "I read Barnum's Life, and accepted the doctrine that the American people like to be humbugged. I planned the shooter myself, and, in wording the circular, aimed to cover the points and keep within the law. I think I have succeeded."

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"I beg leave to differ," argued the special agent. "Aside from the general falsity of the description, there are specific claims which you cannot make good."

"I don't see the matter in that light," replied the champion of the seven-shooter. "I say, 'Wherever introduced, they advertise themselves.' Well, don't they? Whoever gets one will be apt to tell his neighbors. Isn't that advertising itself? I also say, 'The sale of one opens the market for a dozen in any neighborhood;' but observe, I don't claim that any more will be sold in that neighborhood, even if the market is opened. So far as my guaranty is concerned, I only warrant them to be as good after three years' use as when first purchased. Will you, or will any court, call that in question?"

"It is charged," said the officer, changing the subject, "that you neglected to fill a good many orders. How do you explain that?"

"Why, to furnish the shooter and pay the postage cuts down the profits terribly," was the unique and characteristic reply.

Orders began to arrive in response to the circular nearly five months before the first shooter came from the hands of the manufacturer; and as none of them were ever filled, or even recorded, it is impossible to estimate how many dupes long watched the mails in anxious expectancy, and perhaps attributed their disappointment to dishonesty among the employees of the department.

Of course the papers which printed the advertisement would have spurned the impostor and exposed the fraud, had they discovered the facts. The most scrupulous and careful publishers are often deceived in the character of advertisements that come through the regular channels of business, and appear plausible on their face. In fact, the religious journals are the favorite vehicles of the swindlers. The solicitude felt by the newspapers, not only for their own reputation, but for the interests of their patrons, was illustrated in the correspondence found on the person of Wilcox. An influential western journal had addressed him two notes which ran thus:—

GENTS: We receive frequent letters from subscribers, saying they receive no answers to letters they send you containing money for '7-Shooters.' How is it? Are you swindlers?"

Wilcox, though fully able to answer the conundrum, did not see fit to do so; and hence, on the 3d of November, the same parties deployed their forces to renew the charge.

"—, Nov. 3, 1875.

"WILCOX & CO.:

"We have written you once before, that our patrons complain to us that you do not fill their cash orders, and will not answer their letters of inquiry as to why you don't. We have received so many such that we suspect there is something wrong, and, unless you explain satisfactorily, we will have to expose you."

As the special agent arrived on the same day with the inquiry, the young man had no opportunity to make the desired explanation. Indeed it is doubtful if one so modest and reticent on matters of personal merit, would have answered the question even if permitted to take all winter to do it in.

The United States commissioner, while fully recognizing the ingenuity of the circular, differed somewhat from its author in interpreting its legal construction, and accordingly placed him under a bond of fifteen hundred dollars to appear for trial.