



The Strange Death of Mr. Dayton

by Serge Noirsain

(adapted in English by Gerald Hawkins)

William Lewis Dayton was born at Baskinridge (New Jersey) on February 17, 1807. In 1825, he graduated from Princeton and five years later was admitted to the bar of his native State. In 1837, he was appointed Judge Supreme of New Jersey and from 1838 until 1842, he sat in the Legislative Council of this State. From 1842 until 1851, he represented his State in the U.S. Senate. By 1856, the Republicans presented him as their vice-president candidate for the presidential elections but they were defeated by James Buchanan's Democrats. Then, he occupied the post of Attorney General of New Jersey until Lincoln's election to the presidency.¹

When Lincoln passed through New Jersey on February 21, 1860, en route to Washington DC, he and Dayton met on the train and the new president was so impressed with the New Jersey judge that he took the decision of appointing him to a diplomatic post in Europe. In Lincoln's mind, Dayton was perfect for London and John C. Fremont for Paris because the latter spoke fluent French.² However, Secretary of State William H. Seward had another man in mind and he insisted upon Lincoln that Charles F. Adams be appointed in London and Dayton be shifted to France, although he knew no French. Some Republican diplomats like Henry S. Sanford in Brussels spoke several languages, among them French. Thus, it would have been sensible to take into account Dayton's inability to understand his French interlocutors when these did not converse in English. Nevertheless, Seward had another good man in Paris, the journalist John Bigelow who spoke perfectly French.³ When Bigelow offered his services to the Government, he was appointed Consul-General in Paris. His activities and competencies were so useful at times that those of Minister Dayton frequently appeared

¹ "Who was Who in America - 1607-1896", Chicago, 1963.

² *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, R.P. Basler, vol. IV, p. 281, New Jersey 1953-55.

³ *United States and France, A Civil war Diplomacy*, Case & Spencer, Philadelphia (Pa), 1970.

superfluous. However, Dayton needed him because he spoke French and had many personal acquaintances in France. Moreover, he was the man of Seward and of Senator Charles Sumner.

Dayton arrived in May 1861 to take the succession of Charles J. Faulkner, the Southerner who represented the past Buchanan government in Paris. In his book *“John Slidell and the Confederates in Paris”*, Beckles Willson describes Dayton as *“a man of character and ability but prosaic, timid and lacking in magnetism”*. Joined by his wife, Margaret Van der Weer and their elder son (they had seven children), Dayton rented an apartment at 25 rue Circulaire, near the *“Etoile”* where he established his legation.

The Dayton-Bigelow duo worked well and the ability and pugnacity of both men defeated all the Confederate ventures in France. By December 1864, all was quiet on the “French front”; the ships and ironclads built for Bulloch in Bordeaux by Lucien Arman had been seized and sold to Prussia, Peru and Denmark under the supervision of the French authorities. Even to that date, the American Legation in Paris had still not been informed of the sale of one of Arman’s ironclads (the *CSS Stonewall*) to the Confederates.

On the evening of December 1, 1864, Dayton and his wife felt serene. They had eaten fine French cooking and no bad news had disturbed them. Dayton was no ascetic man and he was on the verge of sipping a good Old French Cognac when a member of the legation handed him a letter that an unknown person had left at the caretaker’s lodge. The letter was signed *“An outraged American”* and her content was about to ruin the cozy evening of the Representative of the United States in France.

“Sir : This is to inform you that your Secretary of Legation, Mr. Pennington, is jeopardizing your prestige and the honor of the United States by his scandalous liaison with the former Sophie Bricard, now known as Mrs. Eccles, a rebel spy. The undersigned knows for a fact that Pennington will be spending this evening alone with this “lady” at her apartment at the Louvre Hotel. This ought to be stopped. It is your duty.”

Since quite a while, the honorable William Dayton had noticed that his secretary was frequently disappearing during the night. He had made no investigation on this because he imagined that the nightly “operations” of Pennington were motivated by social obligations in the interests of the United States abroad. The purpose of these so-called diplomatic missions was nothing else than a “loose woman”!

On the other hand, the U.S. Minister was well aware that John Slidell, James Bulloch, Caleb Huse, Colin McRae and other Confederate agents in Paris kept clear of the well known actress mentioned in the letter because her lifestyle was not compatible with the code of honor of these Southern gentlemen and the Southern Cause. Such hypocrisy seems incredible today but it would have been in the spirit of a time when the secret services were still correlated to gentlemanly manners.

Imagining the scandal that could arise from a social relationship between such a woman and an honorable gentleman of the US diplomatic corps, Dayton decided to take instant action. As his son William was about to leave for the theatre, he accompanied him, explaining that he had someone to see at the Louvre Hotel.

In those days, the apartments had high ceilings and the staircases between floors counted many steep and straight flights of stairs with high steps. Mrs. Eccles lived on the third floor. For a man like Dayton, it was like going on an assault course. When the colored servant of Mrs. Eccles opened the door, she was most surprised to see a man

with a crimson face who was panting for breath and who was asking with difficulty if Mr. Pennington was there. When the servant inquired who he was, Dayton refused to decline his identity and replied that he just wanted to say a few words to Mr. Pennington. At the same time, a woman could be heard singing but then suddenly, Mrs. Eccles, alias Sophie Bricart, appeared in the salon.

She was taken aback at the presence of Dayton but quickly recovered and bade him to enter. Sweating profusely and breathing heavily, the US Minister repeated "*Is Mr. Pennington here? I would like to speak a moment with him*". When the hostess replied that she was alone, Dayton became increasingly indisposed. "*I beg your pardon*" he muttered, but his words dropped from his lips with such difficulty that he barely avoided tottering. As he was about to fall, the young lady and her servant helped him sit in one of the chairs of the salon. After Dayton had drunk a glass of brandy, he apparently recovered somewhat, sufficiently at least to pursue his mission to the end. He went straight to the point, speaking frankly about the compromising character of the relationship between her and his secretary, the more so since she was a known rebel spy.

Dayton was most surprised when she asked him if he had consulted his colleague, Mr. Bigelow on that matter. Then it was her turn to speak freely. She at first admitted having invested in the Southern Cause because the Yankees in Paris had given her a bad reputation and that she had expected a better treatment from her own people. She declared that she became rapidly disappointed by the attitude of contempt displayed towards her by the chivalrous gentlemen of the South. She went on by adding that they were utter flatterers and hypocrites who turned her over because she was an artist who did not comply with their narrow social code. Indeed, in one of his letters to Slidell, Secretary of State Judah Benjamin had recommended that the Confederate agents in Paris stand aloof from her because she was a "*young woman of dubious morale, whose companionship would compromise the Cause*". The content of that letter is most astonishing when one knows about the private life of Nathalie St. Martin, Judah Benjamin's wife, in Paris...! The narrow-mindedness of some Confederate diplomats abroad was stunning, they were really convinced that being a gentleman was sufficient to adequately carry out their mission.

Perceiving that Dayton suspected her of being unscrupulous and putting on a show or devising a stratagem to entrap him, Mrs. Bricart took a handful of letters concealed in a drawer. They bore the seal of the United States Consulate, some were signed by Pennington, others by Bigelow. Clearly, she was a rebel spy turned over to the Union for the reasons she alleged. The US Minister then felt that he had done her great injustice.

The events that followed are still obscure. According to the colored servant's story, a bottle of Champagne was opened and Dayton and his hostess chatted in a friendly manner. At one time Mrs. Eccles went to the piano and begun to sing an air from *Florian*, a play in which she had made her *débuts* on the Paris stage three years before. Dayton probably did not feel well while she was singing because when she stopped, she suddenly noticed that he had fallen from his chair and was lying on the carpet. From the look of his tensed face, he had had a stroke. As she could be of no assistance, she sent her servant running for a doctor and waking up the concierge.

At that precise moment, Secretary Pennington entered the apartment of his mistress and was stunned by what he saw. He immediately realized that a public scandal was unavoidable in these circumstances, moreover in the apartment of a woman dubbed by an abolitionist the "*Jezebel of the Rebellion*"! There was no time to be

wasted and Dayton had to be transferred discreetly to the Legation of the United States. But was he still alive?

As in the French vaudevilles, many people suddenly criss-crossed in the narrow staircases: Pennington who was descending, the concierge who was ascending followed by the black servant who was accompanied by a French doctor. The latter saw immediately that Dayton had passed away. Together they propped his body in a chair and fastened it with a neckerchief while the concierge went looking for a cab. It was no easy affair to carry Dayton to the street because he was heavily built. Fortunately, the driver of the cab was a strong man and he helped the trio to deposit the body inside the vehicle. Removing a dead body from a house without notifying the police was a serious offense but it had to be done for the prestige of the Union. Pennington explained to the driver that the Minister had had a stroke and that it was necessary to drive him to the Consulate to take proper care of him. No doubt, a handful of golden Napoleons helped the Union Cause.

The next day, the French press announced in its conventional notices of regret that William L. Dayton, Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States in Paris, had died suddenly at the Legation as a result of an apoplectic stroke.

The essential of the story of Dayton's death was taken from the brochure "*The True Account of the Death of Minister Dayton*", in possession of Judge Walter Berry. It was inspired or written by Sophie Bricart herself. Henry Vignaud, a collaborator of John Slidell and Henry Hotze in France certified that the story was probably exaggerated but true as a whole. In his work "*John Slidell and the Confederates in Paris*", Beckles Willson relies extensively on this source in his account on the death of William Dayton.

Some questions however remain unanswered. One may well wonder why Dayton went to Sophie Bricart's apartment on that particular night? Why didn't he simply request some explanations from Secretary Pennington on the following morning at the Legation. Apparently, it was not the first night that Pennington had spent with Sophie Bricart and nothing leads to think that a scandal was imminent nor pending. Was the compromising attitude of Mr. Dayton motivated solely by patriotic feelings? Could it be possible that the story should be inverted, that Sophie Bricart called Pennington for help because his "friend" Dayton had passed away in a crucial moment? The Dutch Mata-Hari and the more recent British Christine Keeler are examples that the two versions are plausible.

