

## “Old Patch” the Famous Forger

From *Household Words*

In 1789, so considerable was the circulation of spurious paper money, that it appeared as if some unknown power had set up a bank of its own. False notes were issued, and really passed current, in hundreds and thousands. These were not to be distinguished from the genuine paper of Threadneedle Street. Indeed, when one was presented there, in due course, so complete were all its parts; so masterly the engraving; so correct the signatures; so skillful the watermark, that it was promptly paid. From that period forged paper continued to be presented, especially at the time of lottery drawing. Consultations were held with the police. Plans were laid to help detection.— Every effort was made to trace the forger. Clarke, the best detective of his day, went, like a sleuthhound, on the track; for in those days “blood money” rewarded success. Up to a certain point there was little difficulty; but beyond that, consummate art defied the ingenuity of the officer. In whatever way the notes came, the train of discovery always paused at the lottery offices. Advertisements, offering large rewards were circulated; but the unknown forger baffled detection.

While this base paper was in full currency, there appeared an advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* for a servant. A young man, who had been in the employment of a musical instrument maker, wrote an answer to it. The next day he was called upon by a coachman, and informed that the advertiser was waiting in a coach to see him. The young man was desired to enter the conveyance, where he beheld a person with something of the appearances of a foreigner, sixty or seventy years old, apparently troubled with the gout. A camlet surtout was buttoned round his person, and even over his mouth; a large patch was placed over his left eye; and nearly every part of his face was concealed. He affected much infirmity. He had a faint hectic cough; and invariably presented the patched side of his countenance to the servant. After some conversation—in the course of which he represented himself as Mr. Brank, of 29 Titchfield Street, Oxford Street, guardian to a young nobleman of great fortune—the engagement was concluded.

Brank frequently inveighed against his whimsical ward for his love of speculating in lottery tickets, which, he told the new servant, it would be his principal duty to purchase. Brank kept his face muffled whenever he had occasion to give orders to his servant. In a day or two, he handed the latter a forty and twenty pound banknote, and directed him to buy lottery tickets at separate offices. The youth fulfilled his instructions, and, at the moment he was returning, was suddenly called by his employer from the other side of the street, congratulated on his rapidity, and then told to go to various other offices in the neighbourhood of the Royal Exchange, and to purchase more shares. Four hundred pounds in Bank of England notes were handed to him, and the wishes of the mysterious Mr. Brank were satisfactorily fulfilled. These scenes were continually enacted. Notes to a large amount were thus circulated; lottery tickets were purchased; and Mr. Brank—always in a coach, with his face concealed—was ever ready on the spot to receive them. At last the servant’s suspicions were aroused; but, had he known that the period he left his master to purchase the tickets, one female figure accompanied all his movements; that when he entered the offices, it waited at the door, peered cautiously in at the window, hovered around him like a

shadow, watched him carefully, and never left him until once more he was in the company of his employer—those suspicions would have been greatly increased.

At last the Bank obtained a clue, and the servant was taken into custody. The directors imagined that they had secured the wholesale forger; that the flood of forged notes which had inundated that establishment would at length be dammed up at its source. Their hopes proved fallacious, and it was found that “Old Patch” (as the mysterious forger was, from the servant’s description, nicknamed) had been sufficiently clever to baffle the Bank directors.—The house in Titchfield Street was searched; but Mr. Brank had deserted it, and not a trace of a single implement of forgery could be found.

Some little knowledge of “Old Patch’s” proceedings was, however, established. It appeared that he carried on his paper coining entirely by himself; his only confidant being his mistress. He was his own engraver; his own inkmaker; his own papermaker, and with a private press he worked his own notes; and counterfeited the signatures of the cashiers with his own hand. But these discoveries had no effect; “Old Patch” had set up a press elsewhere. Although his secret remained as impenetrable, his notes became as plentiful as ever. Five years of unbounded prosperity ought to have satisfied him; but it did not do so. His genius was of that insatiable order which demands new excitements, and a constant succession of new flights. The following is from a newspaper of 1788:

“On the 27th of December, ten pounds were paid into the bank, for which the clerk, as usual, gave a ticket to receive a banknote of equal value. This ticket ought to have been carried immediately to the cashier, instead of which the bearer took it home, and curiously added an 0 to the original sum, and returning, presented it so altered to the cashier, for which he received a note of one hundred pounds. In the evening, the clerk found a deficiency in the accounts; and on examining the tickets of the day, not only that but two others were discovered to have been obtained in the same manner. In the one, the figure 1 was altered to 4, and in another to 5, by which the artist received, upon the whole, nearly one thousand pounds.”

To that princely felony, “Old Patch” added smaller misdemeanors, which one would think were far beneath his notice; except to prove himself and his mistress the unbounded facility of his genius of fraud.

At that period the affluent public were saddled with a tax on plate; and many experiments were made to evade it. Among others, one was tried by a Mr. Charles Price, a stockjobber and lottery office keeper, which, for a time, puzzled the tax gatherer. Mr. Charles Price lived in great style, gave splendid dinners, and did everything on the grandest scale. Yet Mr. Charles Price had no plate. The authorities could not find so much as a silver spoon on his magnificent premises. He was too cunning to possess plate; he borrowed it. For one of his sumptuous entertainments, he hired the plate of a silversmith in Cornhill, and left the value in banknotes as security for its safe return. One of these notes having proved a forgery.—Mr. Charles Price was sent to; but Mr. Charles Price was not to be found at that particular juncture. Although this excited no surprise—for he was often absent from his office for short periods—yet in due course, and, as a formal matter of business, an officer was set to find him, and to ask his explanation regarding the false note.

After tracing a man whom he had strong notions was Mr. Charles Price, through countless lodgings and innumerable disguises, the officer (to use his own expression) “nabbed” the gentleman. But, as Mr. Clarke observed, his prisoner and his prisoner’s lady were, even then, “too many” for him; for although he lost not a moment in trying to secure the forging implements, after he had discovered that Mr. Charles Price, and Mr. Brank, and Old Patch, were three gentlemen in one, he found the lady had destroyed every vestige of the forging implements. Not the point of a graver, nor a single spot of ink, not a shred of silver paper, nor a scrap of anybody’s handwriting could be found.—Despite, however, this paucity of evidence to convict him, Mr. Charles Price had not the courage to face a jury, and eventually he saved the judicature much trouble and expense, by hanging himself in Bridewell.

The success of Old Patch has never been surpassed; and even after the darkest era in the history of Bank forgeries—which dates from the suspension of cash payment, in 1797—“Old Patch” was still remembered as the Cæsar of Forgers.

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