

Pages from  
The Diary of a Philadelphia Lawyer

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No. II.

*The Counterfeiter*

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“There’s nought so monstrous, but the mind of man,  
In some conditions, may be brought t’ approve.  
Theft, sacrilege, treason and parricide,  
When flattering opportunity enticed,  
And desperation drove, have been committed  
By those who once would start to hear them named.”  
*Lillo’s Fatal Curiosity.*

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It is a sorrowful fact, that in this country, as in England, the system of roguery and public depredation has arrived to a state of perfection that renders it, in its various branches and classifications, as regular and methodical as almost any one of the various occupations to which mankind, in civilized communities, are devoted.

As in the law, there is the barrister and the sergeant, the advocate and the counsellor, the clerk and the conveyancer; or in medicine, the apothecary and the prescribing physician, the Thompsonian and the Morrisonian, the homoepathist and the regular faculty, the surgeon and the dentist,—so in the prosecution of crime, there is a distinct branch of the community, known to the police, in all the principal cities of our union, who pursue their course of depredation with a system and individuality of department, that is as peculiar for its boldness and method, as it is appalling to the progress of civil and moral reform.

The veteran officer of the police, when the intelligence of a recent crime is made known to him, seeks first to ascertain precisely in what form the injury has been committed, and then refers to his catalogue of names of those who are devoted to that particular branch of offences, to fix his suspicions, and to predicate his scrutiny. His correspondence informs him when any name upon his list in any department, is suspended, by temporary removal from the scenes of action, by virtue of the *pulling* of its owner, and if intelligence is given to him of the propinquity of any of the *genus*, who belong to the character of the offence that has been committed, by directing his energies upon them, and ferreting them closely, he seldom fails to make some discovery that brings him near to his ultimate object.

In crime, there is the bank robber and the housebreaker, the highwayman and the pickpocket, the wholesale forger and the retailing publisher, and other varieties, as separate, independent, and distinct in their various branches as the members of any two different occupations or professions to which honest men are educated and devoted. It has afforded me, occasionally, no little amusement to observe the indignancy with which the practitioner in one of the higher branches of crime receives the intelligence that he has been accused of an offence *out of his line*, and I

have often smiled to hear the reply to the allegation, when a forger has been accused of picking the pocket of a neighbor, or a housebreaker or burglar has been arrested for passing counterfeit money, that “the police might have known him better than to believe that he would have been guilty of such an act.” Such however is the prevalence of that strong characteristic of human nature—the pride of aristocracy.

Thomas Brown, at one time a notorious forger and counterfeiter, was one of the proudest and most aristocratic of his kind, I have ever been made professionally acquainted with. His personal appearance gave him many advantages over the rest of his species, and his natural intelligence, improved by early education, and a former association with a highly respectable class in the community, well fitted him for a distinguished career of vice. No man of his age, perhaps, had as much experience in the servitude of the law, and the regimen of prisons throughout the United States, as Brown. He freely discoursed upon the advantages and disadvantages of the prison discipline of the several States, and often ventured his strictures and suggestions with a sincerity and earnestness, that would have induced a stranger to have believed him a disinterested philanthropist, solely bent upon the moral amelioration of his unfortunate and deluded fellow beings.

After his discharge from two years’ confinement in the State Prison, at Cherry Hill, I recollect to have asked his opinion of solitary confinement as a means of punishment and reform. In reply, with such *sangfroid*, he gave his approval of the treatment, especially as it relieved the criminal from the necessity of associating with every one who had occasion to become a temporary inmate with him, but repudiated to derision the idea of the architect in believing that he had accomplished the fullness of solitary confinement in his closest cell in the plan of his erection. “If,” said he, “you want a man to be entirely solitary, why build your cells square, as they are? If I grow tired of looking at the plain blank wall that laterally surrounds me, I have a beautiful prospect and relief in turning my eyes upon the rich variety that is offered to the mind in beholding the angles formed by the corners of my apartment. Build your cells round if you want their inmates to be solitary.”

Some of the leading incidents in Brown’s life, as imparted to me by him, I have deemed worthy a record. As there is always something romantic in the dawn of every career of virtuous or vicious distinction, so was there in that of the notorious counterfeiter. Educated for a highly respectable sphere of life, and fitted in personal exterior for some accomplishment in society, Brown had no plea of pinching penury, or refuge from the gripe of impending want, to palliate his secession from the paths of honesty. But there was a more than ordinary inducement—a great object that first led him from the text of his ancestry. In early life he had become deeply enamored of a lovely and confiding girl of very tender years, whose parents had evinced a most decided opposition to all communication or intimacy between him and their only child.

To avoid him, and to obviate an attachment which they perceived was rapidly becoming mutual, Rosa was sent to a distant relative, to form new associations and to become estranged to the predilections of her home.

Some time elapsed before his resolve was made to follow her. The conclusion, however, was made, and with a determined spirit, Brown so arranged his business as to beguile the direction and object of his travel, and to excite no suspicion in the breasts of the parents or his friends. A few days placed him at the side of Rosa. Here beholding, in all the freshness of young beauty, the object of his love, only more ripened by the lapse of time, and rendered more interesting from the apprehension of having lost her, he made himself known with a resolution to accomplish his purpose, and to secure his prize before the intervention of assiduous opposition could reach him. He practiced his first deceit upon Rosa, by telling her he had come, with the consent of her parents, to return with her to them as man and wife.

Rosa loved him, but the surprise was too great for her heart so readily to realize. She had left her parents, with the last breath at parting impregnated with filial obedience, and knew the cause of her exile from her home. How to account for so sudden and so happy a change, she was unable, and while she gave token of the joy which such intelligence had given her, she yet claimed the privilege of so much caution, and the relief of so much assurance as she could obtain by a formal communication with her parents. That she should address them by letter immediately, and learn from the hand of her father the confirmation of what had been represented to her, was readily agreed to. She accordingly addressed her parents, expressing her happiness at the alteration of their spirit towards the object of her early attachment, and requesting their formal approval of the denouement she was in heart so easily prepared for.

This letter was written, and, she believed, speedily dispatched to them. But the vigilance of Brown had intercepted this communication. After the lapse of the necessary time, an answer was received, and all the representations of her lover were attested by the hand of her father, which was as familiar to her as her own. The requisite preparations were speedily made, and, amid the congratulations of surrounding friends, the happy pair were united in the holy tie. The next day they set out for a tour to the fashionable resorts, which the season had thronged with the gay and light hearted; and Rosa, losing sight of the world around her, seemed to live only in the hopes and happiness of her union.

In the mean time, Brown's resources had failed him, and he knew no way to replenish them without giving at home the intelligence of his location. A friend of the father of his wife lived in the neighborhood of ----- Springs, where he was then staying. To him he made himself known, introduced his wife, and exhibiting a letter of credit, given in case of emergency, succeeded without difficulty, in borrowing a sum large enough to answer his purposes for some time, upon the credit of the father. It soon became necessary, to avoid the danger of discovery, to remove from this quarter to some place of greater retirement. Brown, with his wife, next proceeded to B-----. In the interim, however, the intelligence of the marriage had reached the parents of Rosa, and her father, distracted almost to madness, had started in pursuit of the fugitive pair. From the place of his daughter's exile, where he learned the imposition that had been practiced upon his unsuspecting child, he pursued them through a course of fashionable and extravagant gaiety to the last place of their public announcement. Here he received from the hand of his friend, the acknowledgment of the son, for a sum of money of considerable amount, paid, in case of necessity, at his written request, and upon his credit. If despair could add another pang to the phrenzy of the parent, the father had it here. His suspicions of the character of the man that had cheated him of his child, were now realized; and to the unwilling separation of the idol of his

heart, was added the fearful apprehension of irretrievable infamy and shame. Beyond this, his search was fruitless; and in the agony of his bereavement, he returned to the solitude of his home, to commune in cheerless dejection with the partner of his misery and deprivation.

A year elapsed, and brought no tidings of Rosa to her parents. On a dreary day in the succeeding winter, a miserable female stood at the door of the hospitable mansion of the heartbroken father, and begged admission. It was, as usual, given. But what were the feelings of the inmates, when, feebly tottering in, dressed in the wretched habiliments of poverty, and deeply marked with the lineaments of wo, they beheld the miserable wreck of their once beautiful and buoyant Rosa. The scene of recognition was one of almost unearthly horror. The child had preserved one remnant of her bridal possessions only, from her general destitution, and she stood speechless before them, holding it with a trembling hand, for the acceptance of the father. His palsied hand could scarcely reach it, as he sought to receive the proffered mystery. He opened a soiled envelope, and enclosed, he read a page of parental admonition to his child, written in a hand so much like his own as almost to make him doubt its fallacy himself, and concluding with a direction to celebrate her nuptials with Brown, at the house of her friend, whither she had been sent by him, with all proper and convenient haste. The letter was signed with his own name, and the signature so exact in the resemblance of his own peculiar chirography, as to be calculated to deceive those most intimate with it, on the most rigid scrutiny.

Rosa had been the victim of fraud and deception, and her parents received her to their arms again.

Brown, in the meanwhile, had become engulfed in crime, and associated with a band of the most hardened offenders, had deserted his home, after having rendered it miserable from destitution, and cheerless from his brutality. Rosa had not deserted him, however, until she learned the certainty of the doom which had been pronounced upon him, consigning him, for the first time, to the penitentiary.

A virtuous love can survive almost any shock in the breast of a noble woman, and honest adversity seems only to strengthen her affections under the trial—but let her confidence in the object of her affections be once destroyed, or let him mantle himself in the cloak of infamy and crime, and the bonds which united him to a partner in his destiny, even in the very arms of death, will fall like ashes to the ground around him.

Brown served the time of his commitment in the state prison. On his release, he stepped into the world alone, like one on whom the fiend had set his mark, that all the world might know him. He felt he had the execrations of an honest community upon him, had sold his shadow to the king of sin, and that he was recognized as *the convict* wherever he exhibited himself. He gave up the prospect of returning again to the world, and turning his back upon honesty, bent his energies, with a demoniac perseverance, to the study and perpetration of crime. His accomplishments of person, and intelligence and general skill, made him a prize to the *bevy* who gathered around him, and an acquisition to the oldest and most aristocratic of the community of crime. Brown was a finished penman, and his successful forgery of the signature of the parent, by which deception he had made one lovely being his wretched victim, and his after success upon the

friend of the parent of his dupe, in obtaining, upon a forged letter of credit, a large sum of money, readily afforded a seductive inclination to the course of his vicious propensities.

At this period, Brown was taken in hand by a *nest* of the most daring and finished counterfeiters that have even been discovered in this country. After being well supplied with money by them, and undergoing a scrutiny and probation of nearly a year's duration, he was at last prepared for his initiation into the mysteries and privacy of their secluded eyry. The description of this place, as given to me, was startling to the unsuspecting honesty with which we are accustomed to behold all things around us, and, under other circumstances than those in which it was revealed to me, would have excited a hesitancy in my faith.

Brown was arraigned, in the presence of three of the principals of the *horde*, and after some desultory conversation, was placed under the most solemn, diabolically conceived, and most fearful oaths ever uttered from the lips of man, administered to him by the eldest of his *triers* that stood around him. He was then taken by the hand by the man who had sworn him in, and led, accompanied by the others, through an apparently interminable labyrinth of alleys and windings, until he was halted at the door of a frail and dilapidated old building, that seemed to have been built and deserted by the aboriginal inhabitants of the country, centuries ago. A shrill, but suppressed whistle, and a peculiar cough, was answered by a magic opening of the door from the inside, without the apparent assistance of human agency. The room into which the door led, if such a term be applicable to such a place, was a dreary, half-floored apartment, entirely unfurnished—the remnant of plastering that once had been thrown over the walls, was hanging from above and on all sides, in ragged and crumbling mockery of misery, and a few cross pieces in the apertures in one side of the building, gave evidence that there once had been an attempt at windows. “Surely,” thought Brown, as he related his feelings to me, “this must be a mockery through which I am passing, to prepare me for the final introduction into their place of occupation.”

In a moment he was bade to follow his companions, by dropping himself through the gaping joist of the floor, and trusting himself, in a darkness as of the deadest night, to their future guidance.

A trap door was sprung, and with a cautious, yet unflinching step, he descended after his leader, step by step, until he had reached the bottom of a long flight of stairs. Here a light was struck, and all parties seemed to breathe as if a heavy responsibility had been removed, or a great accomplishment achieved. Brown, with the advantage of the little light that was now afforded, looked round him; he beheld nothing but the rough damp walls of the cell in which he stood, without a sign of the artisan, or business about it. He was soon, however, led through another small opening in the side of the wall, which was discovered by removing a stone or two from one corner, and another long flight of steps was disclosed, which gave evidence, on looking up them, of leading him again into daylight.

Up these he followed his convoy, and finally was introduced into the work-shop of the master spirits of crime. This last place was a small and very confined room, with no visible entrance save the mysterious and complicated one through which they had just passed, and was most singularly lighted by means of ground glass sky-lights in the ceiling, neither of them of a diameter greater than the width of an ordinary shingle.

Here sat a gray-headed veteran, with large iron features, and a grizzly beard, that had not, from appearances, been reaped for months—a small magnifying lens was fastened between the prominence of his cheek bone and the projection of the forehead over his deep sunken eye, and in his hand was a small instrument, with which he had apparently been engaged upon a plate of steel that lay before him. Brown was formerly introduced, and gruffly received by the old man, with a cold expression of a wish that he was no *blow* in his character.

The next subject of attention was the progress and variety of their labors. From various chests and hiding places in the room, dies of every variety, and in unlimited abundance, were produced, from the various combinations of which, the similitude of almost any note in circulation could be impressed upon the copper-plate in little time, while the graver of the old man would soon supply the facsimile of the scrip in the body of the bill.

From another hiding place in the little apartment, was produced a great variety of notes, upon almost every institution in the middle and eastern states, all most beautifully finished, and printed upon paper that could excite no suspicion of the character of the instrument in the mind of scrutiny itself.

Here was the work—the result of the industry of time, and the almost finished assurance of the harvest of wealth that was to repay the seclusion and combined perseverance of active spirits for years. The notes all wanted the signatures of the officers of the respective institutions, and to accomplish this work, had been the object of the solicitude and liberality that had so long been bestowed upon Brown, by the confederates who had gathered around him.

Little ceremony was used, and genuine notes of the various banks being procured, and a desk and every necessary utensil prepared, Brown was left alone to perpetrate this last, most delicate, and skillful accomplishment of the counterfeiter.

In a few weeks, from the large mass of various notes, signed with most successful accuracy of imitation, a portion were selected to test their bearing in the market. They went off well, and promised a rich repay to those engaged in the criminal enterprise. Large quantities were sold at liberal discounts, and disseminated through the country. Such, indeed, was their success, that in a moment of hardiness, one of the principals, who had, at times, been regarded as dangerous, on account of his levity and occasional indulgence in drink, ventured, at the challenge of one of his minions, to attempt the passing of one of their notes at the institution it purported to have proceeded from, and to obtain the change for it. This rashness led to his arrest. He happened to stand at the counter of the bank, by the side of a police officer, who recognized him, and immediately recommended a scrutiny, which detected the counterfeit, and prompted the pursuit which overtook the felon. His arrest was kept profoundly secret, while the detection of the new emission of fraud, opened the intelligence of those interested, in some degree, to the extent of the march which had been stolen upon them.

Every assiduity was used, and every promise held out, which could induce the prisoner to disclose his confederacy. At last, upon the promise of liberation and protection, he consented to

become the evidence of the commonwealth, and, under the escort of the police, to betray the *locus domicilios* of his associates.

Early the next morning after the arrest, accompanied by a selected *posse* of officers, armed to the teeth, the prisoner started on the mission of surprise. At the time of his penetrating their mysterious and deep retirement, Brown was seated at his desk busily engaged in filling up the numerous packages of printed blanks before him, the old man was at his bench with his graver, industriously at work upon a new plate nearly finished, while the others of the gang were carefully classifying and apportioning the finished notes, according to their respective names and denominations. The door was opened before a noise or foot-tread had awakened a suspicion of surprise. In an instant each man was seized and manacled. A careful note was taken of the occupancy of each at the moment—the trunks, dies, plates, tools, notes, and all the paraphernalia of the room were taken possession of, and with great activity and vigilance conveyed to the private office of the mayor. There was no escape, no palliation, no lenity for any of them. Day after day disclosed new evidence of the deep-laid schemes and wide extent of their nefarious designs, and Brown, with his confederates, without a sympathy, or a kind compassion from a single eye, received his sentence, on the various notes he was identified with, to solitary confinement for nearly half a score of years in the Eastern Penitentiary of this State.

For a long while after the conviction, the ingeniously contrived presses, the skillfully devised dies, and the matchless counterfeiting of the signatures of the various officers of the institutions that had been the subjects of the fraud, remained at the office of the mayor, exciting the wonder of the most experienced mechanics, the admiration of the first of our artists, and the astonishment of the whole community that were awakened to the schemes of depredation that had been prepared for them. Thus succeeded the first great public enterprise of the COUNTERFEITER.

*Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* (p. 193), March 1838