

Jack Canter
by Allan Pinkerton

THE subject of this sketch, who is still living and occupying a felon's cell through the efforts of my detectives, has been one of the most brilliant of professional criminals.

I am unable to give my readers any idea of the circumstances leading to his becoming what he has been, which to me, of all criminals and especially those of the better class, as studies of human experience and the yielding to human temptations, always prove intensely interesting.

Canter is supposed to be of American parentage, and, as nearly as I am able to learn, was born in some little village of Central New York. He is, at this writing, forty five years of age, is five feet seven inches in height, of slight, spare frame, has a dark complexion, dark hair and black beard, usually worn after what is termed the "Burnside" fashion, and altogether is possessed of a remarkably *distingué* appearance. He is probably one of the oldest counterfeiters and forgers in the United States, and has served nearly twenty-five years of his life in various prisons, principally at Sing Sing, where he has been incarcerated during three terms, one of which was for fourteen years.

I wonder if any of my readers ever endeavored to impress their minds with the actual duration and effect of such a period and kind of existence.

Whatever Jack Canter might have been before his first prison experience, when he passed out from the walls of Sing Sing he was a confirmed criminal, and never since has seemed to have an aspiration for any other course of life.

He has been arrested by the Secret Service authorities, under Colonel Whitley, numberless times, on the charge of counterfeiting; but whenever apprehended he invariably had one or more engraved plates, generally valueless, which he would turn over to the Government authorities on the condition that he secured his liberty, which was too frequently accorded to him.

His acquirements, for one, who had passed so many years in a prison, were really of a brilliant nature, and certainly show him to have had an exceedingly thorough education in his youth, or to have been one of those singularly constituted persons that can instantly acquire and always retain whatever they get their minds upon.

He is a great linguist, a very perfect and correct one, having the French, German, Spanish, Italian, and many other languages at thorough command. He is a splendid phonographer and an expert penman; is a well-informed chemist, and graduated with high honors as a physician, is, or has been, one of the most exact and artistic line-engravers in America, and line-engraving requires the highest nicety and proficiency in the art; and is a man of so general good attainments and fine ability that he has very frequently given the press scientific articles of rare vigor and merit. When one considers how great the possibilities of such an able man are, and then see to

what base uses these accomplishments are put, it causes a genuine pang of regret in the heart of every well-wisher of society.

Canter was always received at Sing Sing as a distinguished guest, and granted favors to an unlimited extent.

Concerning his service there, it is related that he was made book-keeper of the prison, and, through his expert knowledge of the pen and extensive knowledge of chemicals, drove a thriving trade with convicts who were fortunate enough to have wealthy friends. His system of “raising the wind” was to hunt up the anecdotes of notorious professional criminals there incarcerated, and boldly offer to reduce their term of service for a certain stipulated sum of money.

For instance: a convict had received a ten years’ sentence. Canter would ascertain how much ready cash the prisoner’s friends could or would advance for a reduction of the term for one or two years or from one to five years, and then, after securing the money—which rumor alleges was generously divided among certain prison officers—he, by and with the aid of certain chemicals, would alter the prison records, so that the paying parties would be able to secure a discharge on a greatly reduced term.

Through these favors and irregularities, which the prison officials must have been cognizant of, Canter carried a “high hand” at Sing Sing. He supported several “fast” women; went out and in the prison as he liked; drove the fastest team in the place; and it is alleged, on the best of authority, was frequently seen at New York, where he mingled with his friends at leisure.

In other words, while he was at Sing Sing he was “boss” of the prison; and he either carried so high a hand on his account, or had so many of the most influential officials there mixed up in his counterfeiting affairs, that he had everything his own way.

But his star of success waned when he fell under the influence of honest detectives, as represented by my Agency.

He was arrested by my officers, in 1874, for his connection with the gigantic forgeries committed in September of that year; and those influences he had been so enabled to make use of whenever he so wished were wholly withdrawn when I had secured his committal to the Eastern Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, at Philadelphia, for one of the shrewdest forgeries he had ever been known to commit.

In February, 1873, an insurance company was formed in Philadelphia, under the name of the “Cental Fire Insurance Company,” of which W. D. Halfman, a gentleman said to have been worth nearly a million dollars, was elected president, and W. F. Halfman, a convenient relative, as treasurer. The secretary and directors were John Nicholson Elbert, W. J. Moodie, C. A. Duy, P. Thurlow, W. H. Elberly, and others.

It was represented by this company to the Insurance Commissioner of the State of Pennsylvania that they had a capital of two hundred thousand dollars, invested in various railroad and other securities, and that their stock had been subscribed for as follows:

P. Thurlow,	900	shares	representing	.....	\$45,000
C. A. Duy,	200	“	“	.....	10,000
W. H. Halfman,	100	“	“	.....	5,000
W. D. Halfman,	800	“	“	.....	40,000
W. J Moodie,	200	“	“	.....	10,000
Moodie, Gross & Co.,	40	“	“	.....	2,000
W. D. Halfman,	1,560	(in trust)	“	.....	78,000

All of the above officers and stockholders were well known citizens of Philadelphia, reputable business men and capitalists of moderate resources, and, as far as could be publicly known, were able to purchase and own the stock, as listed for inspection by the Insurance Commissioner.

The company opened out in fine style, had elegant offices, and were supposed to be doing a very prosperous business; but, in time, J. M. Foster, one of the Insurance Commissioners of the State, becoming suspicious that the concern was not all that it purported to be, caused an overhauling of its business.

The examination developed the fact that all of the assets of the company consisted of forged railroad stocks as follows:

500	shares	Phila. & Reading R. R. Stock
500	“	Lehigh Valley.
500	“	Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Stock.
300	“	Central Railroad of New Jersey
100	“	Pennsylvania Central
4,000	“	Lebanon Paper Company
130	“	Westend Railroad of Phila.

All of which the company claimed to own absolutely.

Investigation developed the fact that all of these stocks, so far as their assumed value was concerned, were forgeries. They had originally been issued for one or two shares, and afterward, by a chemical process, their numbers had been erased, and they were each then made to represent three hundred or five hundred shares, as occasion required.

This alarming condition of things leaked out, and the Philadelphia and Reading Railway Company, in order to protect its stockholders, secured my services to thoroughly ventilate the

matter. After considerable trouble I caused the arrest of one J. II Elbert, from whom I secured a confession to the effect that he had employed a man named Charles Ripley, of New York, to make the alterations on the certificates. He had been introduced to this Ripley at a hotel in Jersey City, by a person named Louis W. French (afterward convicted in New Jersey for the frauds committed by the “Palisade Insurance Company” of Hoboken, N.J.).

Elbert had paid Ripley twenty-five thousand dollars for making the alterations. The former also stated that he addressed letters to Ripley at a saloon, No. 303 Bridge Street, Brooklyn. Inquiries by my most careful operatives at this place developed the fact that the letters addressed to Charles Ripley, at that number, had been delivered to a man known by the name of Charles Ostend. Upon securing this much, I placed men so that every person arriving at or leaving this place, if not then known, could be followed and their identity established. The result of this was that I had shortly effected the arrest of Ostend, whom I immediately recognized as the notorious Jack Carter.

He was at once removed to Philadelphia, where he and W.D. Halfman, the president of the bogus company, were tried, and on January 2, 1875, Canter was sentenced to nine years and six months’ solitary confinement in the Eastern Penitentiary, at Cherry Hill, Philadelphia, and Halfman to seven years and six months imprisoned at hard labor.

At the time of my arrest of Canter, he had been out of Sing Sing only about two years. A curious illustration of the negligence of the police surveillance is shown in the fact that, when I captured the fellow, he had been living *within one block* of the First Precinct Brooklyn police-station; and, on searching the room there were found a very fine nickel-plated press for counterfeiting purposes, a full set of the finest quality of engraver’s tools, and a fine plate for use in counterfeiting two cent bank-check stamps—a perfect imitation of the genuine.

There were also found in his room several poems which this strange man had written while a convict at Sing Sing. Many of these possessed rare merit not showing, perhaps, the fine polish of eminent writers, but still indicating the great degree of natural ability and poetic genius which were certainly his.

Probably the most pretentious of these poems was one called the “Tale of a Cell,” which I have reason to believe is a partial history of the man himself, and an impulsive, passionate outpouring of his own bitter prison reflections.

Some portions of the poem are only mediocre, many grammatical and metric errors exist; but there are frequently seen the indications of real genius, while occasionally there occur passages worthy of the best authors. The following is the poem complete:

TALE OF A CELL

Ah, me! how many years have flown,
My wearied mem'ry scarce can tell,
Since, piece by piece, and stone by stone,
They wrought me in this dismal cell.
Through storm and calm, and sun and rain,
Six thousand years since I had birth,
On yonder hillside I have lain,
Soft in thy bosom, Mother Earth!

But rude men sought my resting-place,
And with a sudden, fearful shock,
They tore me from thy strong embrace,
The wreck of a once mighty rock.
They formed me in this living grave,
A thing abhorred, a loathsome den;
Here am I now, man's wretched slave,
To guard and rind his fellow-men.

I recollect the time as well
As if it were but yesterday,
When I was but a new-made cell,
My naked walls cold and gray,
For then I had not been o'er-reached
By sad and never-ceasing care;
Long years of misery have bleached
My sombre sides like whitened hair.

'Twas summer time, and hill and dell
And plain with loveliness were strown,
When my first inmate came to dwell
Companion of my silence lone.
The earth was redolent with life
Of all that's beautiful and fair,
With birds and flowers and foliage ripe
That sang or bloomed and budded there.

The setting sun's departing ray
Just pierced the darkness lone and drear,
When strange men came from far away
And brought the trembling captive here.
He was a stripling still, and one
Who ne'er had tasted grief till then;
Poor child! he had but just begun

To live his three-score years and ten.

Upon the threshold of the door
He shrank as if from the touch of death;
His heart beat faster than before,
And hot and hurried was his breath.
I saw him shudder and grow pale
When clanged the door—poor captive bird;
He sighed, and then a low, sad wail
Of speechless agony was heard.

He leaned upon his prison-bars
And gazed until the sun went down,
While one by one the twinkling stars
Glowed bright in night's imperial crown.
But the broad sky as shut from view;
A glance upon the rippling wave
And one small strip of heaven's blue,
Were all his narrow window gave.

Yet there one little star appeared
On which he gazed until it wore
The semblance of a face endeared
By ties that he could know no more—
The ties of mother and of son;
No stronger ties on earth are riven;
Perhaps it was this same dear one
That beckoned her lost child to heaven.

A recollection sad, but sweet,
Stole o'er his senses like a thief,
While he, unconscious of the cheat,
Forgot his shame, forgot his grief,
His thoughts were far away from here,
'Mid scenes where once he used to roam
With friends and kindred fond and dear,
Within his childhood's happy home.

There were his sisters young and fair,
And there his brothers stout and tall,
And there his aged sire, and there
His mother, dearest of all.
Again he lived his childish hours,

So gay, so good, and yet so brief,
So strewn with pleasure's blooming flowers
He scarcely saw the thorn of grief.

Where'er he moved, whate'er he saw
His mother's form was ever there;
With her, in reverential awe,
He knelt at morn and evening prayer,
With her, each holy Sabbath day,
He listened to God's sacred word;
Twas she who taught his lips to pray,
And his young heart's devotion stirred.

And when he stretched his weary form
Upon the couch he used to share,
That little bed, so soft and warm,
Was made by that fond mother's care.
He saw her wasted, wan and pale,
But with that faith that never dies,
Admitted, through Death's shadowy vale,
To life eternal in the skies.

Before the last of life had fled,
As he stood weeping by her side,
"I'm going home, my child!" she said,
And bade him meet her there, and died.
He saw her borne to her last bed,
By fellow-travelers to the grave,
The sweet "City of the Dead,"
Where mourning yew and cypress wave.

And ere he well could comprehend
A mother's love, a mother's worth,
He saw her coffined form descend—
"Dust unto dust," and "earth to earth."
He saw his home deserted, bare,
Bereft of all that made it dear;
His kindred gone; no thing was there
Of all he used to love, revere.

And then he wandered forth, apart
From all that blessed him when a child—
Untutored in the world's black heart,

Temptation his young heart beguiled.
The crime, arrest, confinement, shame,
The trial, sentence, felon's cell,
Passed through his mind like withering flame;
'Twas conscience—first crime's fiercest hell.

Dim grew the little star's bright beam,
A dark cloud o'er the heavens crept;
The captive started—'twas no dream;
And then he turned aside and wept.
'Twas his first crime, and guilt and fear
Had pressed him deeply, darkly down;
No penitential grief could cheer
No tears his crying conscience drown.

Though night advanced and darkness stole
With midnight blackness o'er the skies,
No hope had soothed his troubled soul,
No sleep had closed his weeping eyes.
A sudden thought his bosom thrilled,
A hope by memory long delayed,
His grief subdued, his passion stilled,
And on the ground he knelt and prayed.

And ere he could that prayer repeat,
"Or echo answer from the hill,"
"A still, small voice," divinely sweet,
Said: "Peace! thou troubled soul, be still!
He slept—the tranquil sleep of those
Who feel no guilt and fear no hell—
The weary sinner's sweet repose
When danger's past, and all is well.

He woke when morning's purple beams
Along the hill-tops richly glowed;
And, as he rose from his sweet dreams,
And gazed around his grim abode,
O'er his fair face there came a shade,
And in his eyes a strange light burned.
He looked bewildered, lost, afraid,
Till, one by one, his thoughts returned.

Bringing his terrors back again

In all their darkest hues arrayed;
But faith and hope sustained him then
Again he wept, again he prayed,
And then, unseen by mortal eye,
In that bright morn serene and still,
With heart and hand uplifted high,
He vowed to do his Maker's will.

And when they took him forth that day
Among his brotherhood in sin,
To toil with them he went his way,
Cheerful without and calm within;
And night, returning, brought no change
He knew the justice of his lot,
And to its mandate, harsh and strange,
He meekly bowed and murmured not.

Thus by day, each morn and night,
Sad, but resigned, he went and came;
Still mourning o'er his wretched plight,
He buried hopes and early shame.
Thus months, like ages, passed away;
A change came o'er the convict lad;
Sometimes his heart was almost gay,
And sometimes very, very sad.

And often by the night-lamp's flame
I saw his youthful features wear
A vengeful look that ill became
The face of one so young and fair.
I knew not what it was that made
His heart grow colder day by day;
I knew not why his hope decayed,
Nor why at length he ceased to pray.

But, something in his absent moods,
With flashing eye and actions strange,
He muttered long, like one who broods
O'er bitter wrongs and sweet revenge.
At length he came not back again—
One winter's evening black and chill
I watched and listened to it all in vain—
The doors were closed, and all was still.

The morning went and came again,
And went and came for five long weeks,
Ere he returned sick and in pain,
With sunken eye and sallow cheeks,
His haggard face and matted hair
With dungeon and with damp defiled—
The hate, the anguish, and despair
Seen in his glances fierce and wild;

The muttered curses deep and long,
That bubbled up at every breath
And told a tale of ruthless wrong,
Of smothered ire, revenge, and death.
Again he knelt, but not in prayer,
And called on God, but not for grace,
But with blasphemous oaths, to swear
Undying vengeance on his race.

Calmly he laid down, as lies
The weary tiger in his den;
Calmly in sleep he closed his eyes,
O'er his fell purpose brooding then.
But, even while he slumbered there,
His injured spirit scorned repose,
And other scenes, in form of air,
Around the restless sleeper rose.

That night the mystery which draped
The convict's fearful fate was broke,
And, in his feverish sleep, escaped
From lips that all unconscious spoke.
I saw the secret of his heart
By slow and sure degrees unfold,
As, night by night, and part by part,
His sad and cruel tale was told.

The slave of men* who bought and sold
Their brother fellows for a price;
Whose creed is gain, whose god is gold,
Whose virtue is another's vice;
Who live by crime, and rave and storm
At those who hate their hellish lust,

Curse God, religion, and reform,
And all that makes men good and just;

Who seemed to think him born to be
The slave of a contractor's will,
To doff the cap and bend the knee
To keeper's manner, viler still.
In vain he sought by gentle tones,
Respectful speech and humble air,
To please the pompous, senseless drones
Employed to drive him to despair.

In vain he toiled with all his might
His grinding masters to appease;
In vain he wrought from morn till night,
Heart-sick and wasted by disease.
He could not sate their thirst for gain,
And when exhausted nature's store
Of strength and health began to wane,
They never ceased to cry for more;

But dragged him forth, I know not where,
To scenes from which the thoughts recoil,
Till death should free, or strong despair
Should lend him energy to toil;
Or torture's keenest, fiercest pains
Should grind his very soul away,
To swell a grasping miser's gains
Or swell a tyrant jailor's sway.

He spoke of dungeons where no light
Can ever pierce the noisome gloom,
Whose icy chill, and long, long night
Outlive the horrors of the tomb;
Where time appears so loth to leave,
Each moment seems an age of care,
And noon and night, and morn and eve,
Are all alike to dwellers there;

Where the lone wretch in terror quaked
While madness darkened o'er his brain
And naught the deathless stillness waked
Save the dull clank of his own chain,

As, blindly, fearfully, he groped
In solitude complete, profound;
Or, half-unconscious, sat and moped
Upon the cold and slimy ground.

He spoke with agonizing cries
Of tortures pen can ne'er depict,
That none but demons could devise,
And none but hell's foul fiends inflict;
Now writhing as in mortal pangs,
Now grasping hurriedly for breath,
Now trembling like the wretch that hangs
Suspended o'er the brink of death.

Defiant now, and now dismayed,
Now struggling with an unseen foe,
He smiled and frowned, and cursed and prayed,
In accents piteous and low.
So day by day, and week by week,
His bed the grave-cold granite stones,
While hunger gnawed his pallid cheek
And almost bared his aching bones.

Debarred the sweet, reviving air,
The shining sun and azure sky,
The pale, pale victim, in despair,
Outlived the death he longed to die.
Thus, often, when the night unrolled
Its sable screen o'er land and sea,
The all-unconscious dreamer told
His cruel wrongs to God and me.

And while he muttered in his sleep
His tale of sorrow and distress,
I knew he suffered pains too deep
For pen or pencil to express.
I knew it by the sunken eye,
Distorted face and blood-stained lip,
The sweat, the tear, the groans, the cry,
Convulsive grasp and death like grip.

I knew it by the heart's hard beat;
I knew it by the bursting brain;

I knew it by the fever heat
That burned and blazed in every vein;
I knew it by the fearful lines
That mortal woe and anguish;
I knew it by the thousand signs
Of great and meaningless despair.

How changed since they brought him here,
A timid, trembling, weeping boy—
No foes to hate, and none to fear,
No friends to grieve, and none to joy!
Respectful, willing, meek, benign,
He toiled as for a royal crown—
Rejoiced by an approving sign,
Disheartened by an angry frown.

As pliant as the potter's clay,
They might have moulded him at will
For honored happiness, had they
The wish, the justice, or the skill;
But those who should have taught his mind,
By precept and example loud,
Were stone-blind leaders of the blind,
Base, overbearing, lawless, proud;

Exacting, cruel, harsh, and grim,
In Christ no hope, in heaven no share,
They went not in, and hindered him
Who gladly would have entered there,
With no kind, Christian friend to steer
His drifting bark to ports above,
No eye to pity, tongue to cheer,
Or loving, kindred heart to love.

Condemned to herd with those who sought
His purer nature to defile,
Whose every word, and deed, and thought,
Was vile, the vilest of the vile;
To them, the vicious and depraved,
In his extremity he turned;
With them he sought the cheer he craved,
The sympathy for which he yearned.

They welcomed him to darker shame,
A baser life, a deeper fall;
And once the child-like youth became
The vilest, sternest of them all—
Rebellious, scornful, fierce, profane,
Vindictive, stubborn, void of fear;
Well might I marvel and exclaim,
How changed since they brought him!

Time went as time has always went—
In pleasure swift, in sorrow slow;
And soon, unfettered and unspent,
He would be free to come and go.
Enraptured thought!—ah, would it be?
He scarcely dared believe it so.
But time rolled on, and he was free;
Was he then truly happy?—Now!

No! life had nothing left for him;
No joy to lend, no boon to give;
He could not sink, he could not swim.
But struggling, dying, doomed to live!
Yes, live, though life's bright sun has set;
He cared not how, he thought not why;
He knew that he must live, and yet
Forget, alas! that he must die.

I saw him, when, in after times,
With nothing left of sin to learn,
He came again, for darker crimes,
A bearded ruffian, hard and stern.
He mocked at those who brought him back
And laughed to scorn their idle threats
What torture from his frame could rack
The sum of his unmeasured debts?

He laughed to think how many times
He sinned unpunished and uncaught;
What nameless and unnumbered crimes
That red right hand of his had wrought.
He laughed when he remembered how
His wrongs were soothed in human woes,
And he but one lone captive now

To his ten thousand thousand foes.

He cursed the faithless hopes that first
His too confiding heart beguiled;
He cursed his innocence, he cursed
The dreams that mocked him when a child
He cursed his lonely prison den,
And death, hell, and the grave defiled;
He cursed himself and fellow-men;
He cursed his Maker, God—and died.

The world will never know the wrong
That drives its erring children back
To deeper crime and those who throng
Destruction's broad and beaten track.
'Twill never know the trusts betrayed,
The worth its wolfish tools devour;
'Twill never know the prices paid
To sate the cruel pride of power!

JACK CANTER.

SING SING, Oct. 31, 1870

* Contractors

Allan Pinkerton, *Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches*. New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1878.

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